

Fisting intimacy: The sexual scripting of intimacy in gay men's anal fisting

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Abstract

Anal fisting has often been caricatured as an aggressive, if not violent, mode of sexual and erotic practice between gay men, circumscribed by discourses of risk, danger, and even death. In this study, I explore how a sample of 28 South African gay men who regularly incorporate anal fisting into their preferred sexual practices construct and understand the experience of intimacy in the practices and relations of their fist-fucking. Through sexual scripting theory and a Thematic Analysis of unstructured individual interviews conducted with participants, the results highlight a scripting of intimacy with/in anal fisting that is grounded on three recurrent and interrelated themes: *trust and vulnerability*; *connection and communication*; as well as *pleasure and skill*. The results of this study draw attention to the ways in which anal fisting is not only experienced as a deeply intimate form of pleasure and lovemaking for its participants, but, moreover, how the construction and understanding of intimacy in fist-fucking is framed as a queer/er mode of anal sex/uality and erotics that defines and constitutes itself in contradistinction to both hetero- and homo-normative scripts.

Keywords: Anal fisting, fisting, intimacy, gay, sexual scripts

Introduction

Anal fisting, also known as ‘fist-fucking’ or ‘handballing’, is the single or (multi-)partnered practice of having the hand/s (typically up to the wrist) and parts of the forearm/s (up to, around, or just above the elbow) inserted into the rectum and sigmoid colon, aided by copious amounts of lubricant, ‘poppers’¹ and, although not always, other stimulants or ‘chems’². Fisting is a

¹ ‘Poppers’ are a type of recreational substance which are inhaled through the nose before or during (anal) sexual activity. Their active ingredient most commonly includes amyl nitrate which relaxes smooth muscles such as the anal sphincter.

² ‘Chems’, a colloquial shorthand for ‘chemicals’, refers to psychoactive and non-psychoactive stimulants which are used during sexual play and intercourse with the aim of facilitating or enhancing the sexual or erotic

practice accomplished through the gradual relaxation of the anal sphincter muscles by means of the slow insertion of the fingers (or other toys and objects) which then permit passage of the hand/s into and beyond the ano-rectal canal.

It is perhaps the unique degree of anal dilation and form of anal penetration entailed in fisting which not only distinguish it from other ano-erotic practices such as rimming or fingering, but, also, is at hand in prompting the wide spectrum of reactions towards it, including those which range from awe and perplexity to disgust (Taormino, 2006). This is because fisting, much like other forms of kink (e.g. sounding³), confound ingrained conventions which underwrite our understanding of the corpo-erotic possibilities of our bodies and, ultimately, what counts as ‘pleasure’, broadly, and ‘sex’, in particular (Rubin, 1991). This is perhaps most tellingly reflected in how fisting has often been pejoratively cast as a “uniquely unsafe sexual activity” (Denman, 2003, p. 194).

Recently, more affirmative renderings of gay men’s fisting have emerged in scholarly work which take it seriously as a “deeply relational mode of sexual pleasure and intimacy” (Martin, 2020, p. 341). However, although this work has foregrounded intimacy as a core experiential dimension to fist-fucking, the ways in which this sense of intimacy is constructed by fist-fuckers themselves has yet to undergo scholarly exploration and elaboration. In this study, I aim to extend more affirmative work on anal fisting by exploring how gay men construct and understand intimacy in their fist-fucking. In so doing, I offer a qualitative analysis of the thematic features of intimacy in gay men’s fisting and how these constitute an affirmative script/ing of intimacy.

experience. This is often referred to as ‘chemsex’. An example of one such stimulant includes methamphetamine, also known as crystal methamphetamine or crystal meth.

³ ‘Sounding’, also known as urethral sounding or ‘cock-stuffing’, is a form of medical and fetish play. It involves inserting a long, slender rod (known as a sound) typically made of surgical steel into the opening of the urethra and down toward the bladder to heighten and intensify sexual stimulation.

Gay men and anal fisting

Although “no conclusive data about the incidence of ... [fisting] are available” (Cappelletti et al., 2016, p. 58); anal fisting has a documented history which stretches back to the latter 1700s (Crozier, 2013; Peakman, 2013). According to Gayle Rubin (2011), the modern history of fisting, at least in the memory and iconography of Western and north American gay culture, is most closely bound up in the heady nights and Crisco-embalmed hands and forearms of BDSM and leathermen who would congregate at the fisting parties of the legendary Catacombs club of San Francisco, between 1975 and the mid-1980s.

In public discourse, fisting has received sustained attention from both cultural conservatives as well as queer writers and scholars. While the former has focussed on the representation of fisting in pornography and, at times, succeeded in banning and regulating fisting (in) pornography⁴ (Antoniou & Akrivos, 2017; Green, 2012; Stardust, 2014; Strub, 2019); the latter have lauded fisting for the way it unmoors erotic pleasure and intimacy from the conventional logics of heteronormative and phallogocentric vanilla sex (Califia, 1998). Fisting has however also come to feature in more mainstream sexual health discourse⁵ through the contribution of sex positive writers, podcasters, pornographers, porn stars, and fisting aficionados (Abyss, n.d; Bigbuttgeek & Jazzmatazz, 2020–present; Brough, 2005; Cheves, 2018; Herrman, 1991; Niederwieser, 2013; Shockey, 2009). Together, this work has forged a pathway to (at least partially) destigmatizing anal fisting through reputable sexual health and erotic guidance while providing a sex-positive narrative counterweight to the “persistent

⁴ In different countries legal and regulatory frameworks have evolved to classify the representation of fisting as a ‘fetish’ (Australia) or ‘obscenity’ (United Kingdom) which, if depicted in pornography, become liable for prohibition and prosecution. Prior to the growth of internet-based ‘tube’ sites in the latter 2000s, fisting was also included in the infamous ‘Cambria List’ co-opted by the George W. Bush administration in the United States of America to discourage porn producers from filming certain sex acts, such as, facials, water sports, and wax play, amongst others.

⁵ An example of which are the growing number of ‘mainstream’ health and lifestyle magazines which have begun publishing affirmative, pleasure-centred, and non-pathologizing ‘how to’ articles on fisting such as *Men’s Health* (Zane, 2021) and *Cosmopolitan* (Moore, 2021), amongst others.

heteronormativity and disease-centred focus” (Barcelos, 2022, p. 5) which has tended to frame fisting.

Academic work on fisting has been largely dominated by clinically-oriented medico-forensic case studies which focus on the sexual injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, and fatal sexual trauma, in which fisting has been implicated (Cappelletti et al., 2017; de Bakker & Bruin, 2012; Irizarry & Gottesman, 1996; Kim et al., 2013; Lowry & Williams, 1983; Orr et al., 1995; Preuss et al., 2008; Reay & Eisele, 1983; Reiner, 1984; Shook et al., 1985; Short, 2016; Sohn et al., 1977; Spears et al., 1995; Torre, 1987). Although some of this work has acknowledged that non-consent (Cappelletti et al., 2016), inexperience (Navin, 1981), intoxication (Cohen et al., 2004), or violence (Kovelman et al., 2010) were determining factors in the cases under study, much of this research has come to reiteratively associate fisting with harm and violence, discursively circumscribing it as inherently risky and dangerous.

In queer-inflected scholarship, fisting has long been celebrated for how it “provides pleasure, fulfilment, and spiritual tranquillity” (Eby, 2000, p. 1217) through a counter-conventional form of anal sex/uality. For Foucault, fist-fucking represented a new erotic horizon predicated on “possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of [the] body” (Gallagher & Wilson, 1984, p. 27); because it neither centred the genitals nor the end-goal of genital orgasm, in effect disrupting the “erotic monopoly traditionally held by the genitals” (Halperin, 1995, p. 88), especially the penis. These insights have been extended in recent work which points to “new forms of intimacies” (Thorneycroft, 2000, p. 153) and “more mutual, more consensual ... timespaces of intimacy” (Martin, 2022, p. 418) that are engendered between gay men through their fist-fucking.

In this study, I build on the growing base of affirmative and non-pejorative scholarship which brings the intimacy of fist-fucking to the fore by offering a finer-grained qualitative analysis of how gay men construct and understand the experience of intimacy in their fisting.

I analytically engage sexual scripting theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1984, 1986, 2003) as a way of exploring how intimacy in fisting holds common thematic features which are often shared across the experiential accounts of fisters (or tops) and fistees (or bottoms) alike.

Sexual scripting theory has proven to be a popular means of analysis for researchers interested in examining how sexual and gender diverse people forge and negotiate their sex/uality in the absence of affirmative and well-established scripts for more non-normative modes of sex and intimacy (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Hoppe, 2011; Kao, 2013). In sexual scripting theory, sexual scripts are (re)produced through iterative, evolving, as well as context-specific and culturally embedded processes of meaning-making which include: intrapsychic scripts, which cover an individual's own sexual goals, desires, and motivations; interpersonal scripts, which cover specific sexual encounters, settings and contexts in which sex plays out; and cultural scripts, which cover the broader norms which are peculiar to particular sexual orientations and communities of practice. Together, these scripts inform how we identify and interpret our sex/uality as well as how we articulate and experience specific sexual interactions and activity.

Sexual scripting theory therefore proves analytically attentive to the ways in which non-normative sexual practices and kink such as fisting, are shaped through affirmative scripts of intimacy. Exploring the constitutive features of such a script is important not only because it renders a clearer picture of how fist-fuckers identify, navigate, and experience fisting as intimate, enjoyable, and safe, but, moreover, do so in the face of hetero- and homonormativities which typically render such kinks and kinksters as “the sexual other” (Khan, 2014, p. 20), even within the gay community – as fist-fuckers themselves have attested (The Handyman, 2017). Through this study, I am interested in exploring the shared and recurrent features which characterise a script of/for intimacy in gay men's anal fisting.

Methods

Study design, procedures, and ethics

In this study I employed an exploratory qualitative design using individual interviews with a sample of 28 self-identified cis-gendered gay men living in South Africa. Data for this study were collected through an unstructured 60-to-120-minute-long face-to-face interview with each participant. Participants were identified with the help of research contacts developed from an ongoing research project with members of the gay community and, thereafter, invited to participate. Participants helped to interlink me with sexual and social networks of partners, playmates, and fist-friends who shared interest and experience in fisting.

Although this snowball-style strategy to recruitment proved necessary in building a suitably sized sample for this qualitative study, concerns have been raised about the dangers posed to participant confidentiality when researching “small connected communities” (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012, p. 708) such as a closely knit erotic community of fist-fuckers. To mitigate this, special attention was paid to establishing clear boundaries of informed consent and anonymity with all participants. Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical clearance was provided by the University of Pretoria’s Humanities Research Ethics Committee (reference: HUM017/0519).

The unstructured format of the interviews was chosen to help in opening the kind of conversational space that would allow each participant the rhetorical freedom and autonomy to discuss at length their experiences of intimacy. I found this unstructured format vital to “creat[ing] a context of conversational intimacy” (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p. 338) that was necessary in cultivating the sense of trust, good faith, and openness that would encourage participants to refrain from self-censoring. The interviews unfolded in the form of a free-flowing conversation with no additional prompts needed. All the interviews were conducted

by the author and initiated with the opening question: *How do you understand and experience intimacy in your fisting?*

Participants

For this study, 28 self-identifying gay men who regularly incorporate fisting into their sex were recruited to participate. A purposive approach to sampling was employed to delimit this sample to gay men who have an active interest in and experience with fist-fucking. Thus, while I did not specify the regularity with which participants needed to have fist-fucked on a weekly or monthly basis, I did not include any potential participants who had only fist-fucked on one occasion. This was done to exclude participants who had perhaps only experimented with fisting, and to focus recruitment on more active and committed fist-fuckers.

Recruited participants were drawn from different ethnic⁶ and social backgrounds, ages, relationship statuses, and the total number of years they had been fist-fucking (see Table 1). All the participants lived and worked in one of South Africa's four major metropolises, namely, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town, or Durban. The sample was overwhelmingly composed of participants who indicated they preferred 'bottoming' (i.e., exclusively receptive; 20), as opposed to 'topping' (i.e., exclusively insertive; 7) or being 'versatile' (i.e., either receptive or insertive; 1). Although the years of experience and regularity of participation in fisting did vary within the sample, all the participants were appropriately versed and skilled in the language, etiquette, and techniques of fist-fucking. None of the participants explicitly identified as members of the BDSM community. All participants identified as cisgendered men.

⁶ The continued use of apartheid-era racial terminology remains highly contested in South Africa. However, many researchers continue to employ these racial(ised) categories of ethnicity in large part because many South Africans continue to use them as meaningful (although not unproblematic) reference points for subjectivity, community, and the material experience of life (and inequality) in South Africa. It is, in this vein, that I have used these racial(ised) identifiers here.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Race	City of Residence	Relationship Status	Years Fisting	Preferred Fisting Position
Jeffrey	32	White	Cape Town	Single	1	Bottom
Henry	34	White	Cape Town	Single	4	Bottom
Michael	56	Coloured	Cape Town	Single	7	Versatile
Mmusi	36	Black	Johannesburg	Single	3	Top
Kameel	29	Indian	Durban	Single	2	Bottom
Joseph	48	Coloured	Cape Town	Single	6	Bottom
Kieran	31	Indian	Durban	Single	12	Bottom
Deon	52	White	Pretoria	Monogamous Partnership	23	Top
Vikram	37	Indian	Durban	Single	6	Bottom
Romeo	28	Coloured	Johannesburg	Open Relationship	8	Bottom
Andrew	39	White	Cape Town	Single	5	Bottom
Maddox	37	Coloured	Durban	Single	5	Bottom
Cyril	42	Coloured	Johannesburg	Open Relationship	14	Top
Thomas	31	White	Durban	Single	1	Bottom
Matthew	48	White	Pretoria	Monogamous Partnership	18	Bottom
Thabo	26	Black	Johannesburg	Single	0.5	Bottom
Sipho	37	Black	Johannesburg	Single	5	Bottom
Zodwa	35	Black	Johannesburg	Single	3	Top
Gershwin	31	Coloured	Cape Town	Monogamous Relationship	1	Top
Xander	29	Coloured	Cape Town	Single	1	Top
Nicholas	28	Coloured	Johannesburg	Open Relationship	2	Bottom
Justin	44	White	Durban	Single	6	Bottom
Vusi	29	Black	Johannesburg	Single	4	Top
Tobey	25	White	Johannesburg	Single	0.5	Bottom
Dermot	62	White	Johannesburg	Single	11	Bottom
Max	33	Black	Johannesburg	Single	6	Bottom
John	34	White	Cape Town	Single	3	Bottom
Mitchell	37	Coloured	Cape Town	Single	13	Bottom

Analysis

The aim of the Thematic Analysis (TA) employed in this study was not to generate a definitive and exhaustive script of intimacy in gay men's fist-fucking, but, rather, to identify the recurrent and shared referent points around which the meaning, experience, and articulation of intimacy with/in fisting appeared to cohere. The analysis offered highlights the thematic features of a script of intimacy in gay men's fisting, while still recognising that these features may "not [be] distributed evenly, nor ... always interpreted in the same way" (Hoppe, 2011, p. 198) by this sample of participants or the broader population of gay men who practice fist-fucking.

Through the use of NVivo software, the transcripts from each interview were analysed following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). The TA employed six steps during which I: (1) started with familiarising myself with the entire field of data by re-listening to and transcribing all the interviews; (2) generated an initial set of general codes; (3) coded the

transcribed text with an initial set of themes; (4) iteratively revised the thematic picture by comparing emergent themes against one another and with existing research and literature; (5) delimited a final set of main themes; and (6), lastly, identified suitable extracts of data for each theme.

I conducted an initial round of participant feedback during step 2, where 18 of the 28 participants provided feedback on the initial set of codes, in the form of written email responses to a detailed framework and description of the codes which had been circulated to each participant. This feedback was especially helpful in identifying and naming the initial codes. For example, I had at first identified a ‘relationship’ code, to capture the state of mutuality and intertwinement between fist-fuckers when fisting. However, participant feedback pointed to this code presupposing a conventionally defined or pre-existing dyadic ‘relationship’ between fist-fuckers, with participants indicating a preference for a less culturally loaded term such as ‘connection’ – which spoke more directly to their lived experience of fisting. A second round took place during step 5, where 17 participants provided feedback on the final set of themes, also in written email responses to a ‘working’ framework of main themes. Here, participant feedback aided in consolidating what had been a tentative set of six individuated themes into paired combinations of the three main themes such as interlinking the ‘pleasure’ and ‘skill’ themes. At both feedback junctures, participant input proved invaluable in rendering more finely the final themes presented in this study.

Results and discussion

Results of the analysis are presented in three main themes: *trust and vulnerability*; *connection and communication*; as well as *pleasure and skill*. Each theme represents a recurrent reference point for the scripting of intimacy amongst this sample of gay men who practice fist-fucking. The commonality of these reference points not only underscores the overlapping ways in which

fist-fuckers make sense of intimacy, but also how they develop and employ an affirmative script of fisting even in the face of hetero-and homonormativities that tend to cast kinkier forms of (anal) sex/uality in pejorative terms (Khan, 2014).

Theme 1: Trust and vulnerability

In much of the sexual and erotic health literature produced by and for the fisting community, trust is framed as the defining feature of any fist-fucking which is enjoyable and safe (Herrman, 1991; Shockey, 2009). For all participants in this study, trust and vulnerability emerged as the first main theme throughout the interviews, with participants describing trust as the most important dimension to their experience of intimacy in fisting:

It's a really deep intimacy, and there's a lot of ingredients that need to come together for you and your playmate to get there; but trust is number one. So, you have to be in the right mindset first, where you are willing to make yourself vulnerable, embrace that vulnerability, and allow someone to share that with you. (Joseph)

Trust is the only thing that is going to fully relax you, make you feel comfortable, open you up. That sense of trust really lets you take yourself to a much more vulnerable headspace so you're more open to the experience. (Maddox)

It involves a lot of trust. To let someone's arm deep inside you is not just physical, it's also emotional. With that comes vulnerability. Being vulnerable with someone in this way and trusting them not to take advantage of that is a serious challenge because, if you think about, gay guys aren't really accustomed to it. We fuck first, ask questions later. With fisting, questions have to be asked first, and trust has to be established first. (Michael)

Fist play is the ultimate exercise in trust – trusting your play partner and yourself. Sure, you have to trust your partner knows what they're doing. But you've got to trust yourself as well, like on a psychological

level. You've got to trust that you're ready to share yourself in a very vulnerable and intimate kind of way, more so than regular anal [sex]. (Henry)

From these data, trust appears as a significant precondition for any fisting encounter. For the participants here, trust forms an emotional foundation which ultimately enables both the desired state of physical relaxation and comfort needed for fisting as well as a greater sense of psychological and emotional openness to the intimacy of the experience. What is underscored by these participants is not so much the primacy of the physical acts of fist-fucking, but, rather, a recurrent emphasis on the psycho-emotional commitments that fisting entails. Trust can be seen to psychologically scaffold and script the "right mindset" (Joseph) or "headspace" (Maddox) for fisting: a state of mind defined by a willingness to actively render oneself emotionally and physically vulnerable and then to share that vulnerability with a playmate.

The centring of vulnerability throughout the above data signifies a unique degree of sexual and erotic openness and mutuality between fist-fuckers that Joseph describes as a "deep intimacy". The sense of "deep intimacy" which characterises fisting appears to define itself through, on one hand, the discursive and affective emphases placed on trust and vulnerability, as well as, on the other hand, a juxtaposition with what fisting is not, namely, "regular anal" (Henry). Michael also alludes to this when he describes what he feels is the standard practice amongst gay men to "fuck first, ask questions later". While Michael's sentiment downplays the nuanced ways that gay men negotiate sex, his words nonetheless give expression to what was a commonly held belief throughout these data, namely, that fist-fucking necessitated a depth of trust and vulnerability which set itself apart from what were believed to be more homonormative modes and practices of anal sex between gay men.

What is interesting to note in these data is how the corporeal and psychological experience of vulnerability with/in fisting is reiteratively scripted as an affirmatively

constructed state of intimacy. The construction of vulnerability as an actively desired state of intimacy for fist-fuckers stands in contrast to a long history of hetero-patriarchal values and socialisation which ideologically feminise and derogate vulnerability (Mackenzie et al., 2013); in effect making it a quality which is considered antithetical to those more traditional, conventional, and hegemonic forms of masculinity in the global North and West (Connell, 1995). Moreover, the affirmative construction of vulnerability by the gay men in this study distinguishes itself from the ways in which vulnerability has also been devalued in the hierarchical formation of contemporary gay masculinities, where vulnerability is often coded as feminine/‘femme’/effeminate and less desirable than so-called masculine/‘masc’/‘straight-acting’ gay men.

What is therefore evident within these data is a subtle queering of the conventional status of vulnerability. Here, longer standing heteronormative discourses of sexual risk which have often worked to pejoratively frame gay men and their sex/uality in terms of vulnerability – to illness, harm, and violence – are resisted and reconstituted. Thus, while it is important not to downplay the kinds of sex or sexual contexts which may legitimately render gay people more ‘vulnerable’, it is important to recognise how affirmative and positive constructions of vulnerability within fisting script an alternative and queer/er mode of vulnerability for gay men, namely, one premised on intimacy and trust.

Trust, however, is not self-evident in fisting. This is suggested by Michael when he asserts that “questions have to be asked first, and trust has to be established first.” For fist-fuckers, trust is gained through the demonstration of knowledge and experience with fisting, thereby placing each partner at ease. This was evident in the accounts of Dermot and Thomas:

... [trust] doesn't come naturally. If I'm chatting with a guy who says he's an experienced top and is keen to come over and play with me, I always first try to get a measure of what he is like in the chat. If he is rushing things, like if he wants to come over right now and play, then that's a red flag for me. ...

[I]f he is rushing me in the chat, there's no way I can trust him to be slow and gentle when he's fisting me. And that is not just a safety issue, it's also about pleasure. It's not going to be very intimate if I have to constantly remind my top to put the brakes on. (Dermot).

... [T]here's general expectations from each partner. So, an experienced top and experienced bottom know what to do and when to do it. It's like a checklist. Like have you agreed on roles and rules beforehand. Check. If you're going to use a sling, is it properly set-up and then is properly adjusted for your bottom's height and weight. Check. Is the lube a trustworthy brand, like J-Lube. Check. If you're topping, I need to see that you have properly filed down your fingernails. Check. So, the moment you can see something is out of place then it's going to give you doubts. (Thomas).

What is clear in these data is that trust is interpersonally negotiated by fist-fuckers through the successful navigation of both tangible and more intangible expectations, wherein these expectations represent markers of fist-fucking experience, be it as a top or bottom. Dermot's account highlights the importance of a potential partner's ability to, in a more intangible way, demonstrate familiarity with codes of acceptable fisting demeanour and etiquette. For Dermot, a potential partner who appears over-eager to fist him serves as an identifier of an inappropriate demeanour for fisting or a lack of experience with fisting which, either way, renders the partner untrustworthy and the session potentially unsafe and less enjoyable.

More tangibly, Thomas refers to a scripted "checklist" that fisting tops and bottoms perform throughout the fisting scene⁷ to demonstrate their knowledge of their roles and, in turn, discursively and experientially constitute themselves as an "experienced top" or "experienced bottom". It is not just that experience now doubles as a signifier of trustworthiness, but that adherence and fidelity to the generally accepted conventions and practices of fisting engender

⁷ Fist-fuckers use the term 'scene' as an expansive reference to the setting, activity, and atmosphere which come together to make up a fisting session.

the development of greater trust. From trimming and filing one's fingernails appropriately to preparing and using a 'trustworthy brand' of lubricant, like J-Lube, the emphasis that Thomas puts on the demonstrable 'doing' of a ritualised checklist draws attention to the performative basis of trust in fist-fucking. Trust is ritualistically scripted and performatively (re)produced throughout a fisting scene. This performative work not only produces continuity of the scene, but then either goes on to create further affordances and new opportunities for pleasure and intimacy with/in the scene or forecloses these.

In this way, Dermot and Thomas's accounts highlight how significant thought and consideration goes into determining the trustworthiness of a fisting partner. Rather than a 'reckless' sexual practice "indulged in by people with pathological attitudes to risk-taking and sex" (Denman, 2003, p. 194), knowledgeable and experienced fisters/fistees search out and test the trustworthiness of their partner, taking time to evaluate their suitability and credibility as playmates. In this way, fisters and fistees alike stressed that trust was an essential element to the experience of safety, pleasure, vulnerability, and intimacy in fisting.

Theme 2: Connection and communication

The second main theme to emerge through participants' articulation of their experience of intimacy in fisting concentrated on the connection and communication between both fister and fistee. For topping and bottoming partners, the erotic intensity and qualitative character of the connection established during a scene was experienced as unique to fisting, and not something they experienced in other forms of gay (anal) sex:

... it's just like you and your partner are not even two separate people anymore. You're so closely connected that you're one. (Matthew)

I can feel his arm in me, taking-up space inside me, and kind of becoming part of me; and he can see his hand and, if I'm lucky, his arm slowly disappearing into me, the warmth of my body envelopes his arm. Our bodies literally merge together. (Romeo)

From these data extracts, it is evident that the experience of an exceptionally intimate physical merging between playmates forms a critical facet of a fisting scene. In Matthew and Romeo's quotations, the connection between playmates is characterised by the dissolution of any material sense of corporeal boundedness between playmates. What is performatively forged through a fisting connection is a newly formed and almost unitary configuration of intimacy. This potent sense of intimate closeness is not only discursively scripted through the discourse and language of connection and amalgamation, but, also, the affective intensities and material sensualities of two bodies forming and exploring carefully plotted corporeal connections of intimacy. Romeo's reference to the enveloping "warmth" of his innards underscores the palpable sensuality of this intimate connection. Yet, this sense of connectedness is not simply 'static' in its experiential character, but, as Deon describes, one in which bodily movements and kinetics are actively at work:

... we're one living thing. I time every insertion by [Matthew]'s breathing. He exhales, I slide myself deeper inside of him. He inhales, I pull back some to keep him comfortable and also adding more lube. Our movements sync-up together. That's how connected we are in that moment. (Deon)

What Deon's account highlights is that fist-fucking entails an erotic kinetics of intimacy. The corpo-erotic connection is not in stasis but actively shifting and evolving through the dynamics of pace and motion between two living and breathing bodies. For some fisters/fistees a scene may aim to culminate in the insertion of a top's hand into the bottom's rectum; for others, including the more experienced fist-fuckers, a scene will work towards achieving repeated and progressively deeper cycles of insertion and withdrawal (Jacobson,

2014). In doing so, a bottom's hole is repeatedly 'fucked' or 'punched' by a top's hand/s and arm/s. However, what Deon draws attention to is that fist-fucking is not haphazard, aggressive, or even at the discretion of the topping playmate. Both the topping and bottoming partners patiently work together towards a state of connection wherein their bodily movements and activity co-productively "sync-up".

Achieving a fully embodied and mutually attentive state of synchronicity can be one of the most psychologically and erotically stimulating experiences for fist-fuckers as it comes to mark an almost completely immersive state of erotic entanglement with/in one's partner (Herrman, 1991). There is a profound sense that through this particular corpo-erotic connection that fisters and fistees experience a discursive rescripting and performative redrawing of their own bodily boundaries; together, the playmates are erotically transformed and corporeally transmogrified into what Deon describes as "one living thing". However, Deon's reference to "adding more lube" highlights how the organic intimacy of this synchronised and carefully coordinated connection is in fact facilitated by a range of inorganic and synthetic agencies, in particular lubricant, which enables the "operation of the erotic assemblage" (Wadiwel, 2009, p. 495) that is fist-fucking.

Deon's account is also important for the way it brings into focus the level of attention a fisting top exercises in synchronising with the bodily rhythms of their bottom and, particularly, their bottom's rate and depth of breadth. The bottom's comfort is prioritised by the top, with the top's speed and depth of insertion and withdrawal directly informed by the bottoming partner's comfort. This erotically intuitive form of consent, connectivity, and synchronicity is something which all fist-fuckers in this study sought to develop through unique forms of communication when fist-fucking:

A big part of the connection is a whole new way of communicating. [...] We communicate and connect through eye contact, body language and facial expressions, groans, verbal and non-verbal

communication. To know someone that well, to be able to read them and their body like that is just a very intimate kind of connection. (Cyril)

A good top listens to your body. That is a skill you develop through experience. He'll know what to do if he sees that I am starting to bleed. He'll check-in with me and also make his own judgement, but not overreact. It is not uncommon to bleed a little, but it should only be a little. And a good top will be able to judge if we should just take a pause or stop depending on how much blood. (John)

For fist-fuckers, regular and ongoing communication in a fisting scene is non-negotiable. In fisting, this style of communication serves to ensure that each playmate's roles and rules are respected and that their desires and needs are met while, at the same time, the personal wellbeing and comfort of each playmate is safeguarded. This has been seen in recent research where the extended duration of fisting sessions comes to necessitate an ongoing and prolonged relay of communication between fister and fistee (Martin, 2022). It is through this relay of regular 'checking-in' that an "evolving and ongoing model of consent(ing)" (Martin, 2022, p. 415) between playmates is practiced as a scene unfolds.

For fist-fuckers, as Cyril highlights, the script of connection and communication in fisting is constituted multi-modally, through verbal and non-verbal means, as well as multi-sensorily, through different senses such as sight, sound, and kinaesthetics. Fisting becomes an exercise in 'reading' (Cyril) and 'listening' (John) to one's playmate and their body through an attentive recognition of the corpo-erotic cues of fisting, generally, and the (bottom's) fisted body, specifically. For most of the participants, it was believed that the ability to properly identify and interpret the verbal and non-verbal cues in fisting could only be developed through experience. It was only through an accumulation of experience that fist-fuckers, particularly tops, could come to appreciate the nuanced ways in which bottoming playmates and their bodies communicate needs when being fisted. An example of this is seen in John's account

when he refers to a topping playmate being defined as a “good top” only when they possess the experiential expertise to interpret the presence and meaning of blood in a considered and competent way. For the participants who preferred to bottom, much like John, the intimacy of a fisting scene often hinged on a top’s ability to respect and respond appropriately to their body’s communicative cues.

Theme 3: Pleasure and skill

The third main theme to arise from the data was the premium that participants placed on pleasure in their experience of intimacy in fist-fucking:

I think a lot of people think that fisting is painful. I’m not saying there aren’t moments when things feel a bit, uhm, awkward or tricky, but it’s about pleasure. It’s not like I want to feel pain. I have to be very aware of any pain. (Andrew)

You can’t think about it like penetrative sex. It’s not like there’s a build-up of tension and then, when you cum, you experience that release. It’s more like a feeling of being stretched open and then being filled-up. Like there’s a missing puzzle piece being added to you so you’re complete now. Physically, it’s very intense, but also emotionally, it’s very comforting. (Jeffrey)

... I can say that there’s nothing more intense than when I am able to help provide that kind of pleasure to someone else. It’s a different level of intimacy for me because it’s kind of tantric and spiritual, not really sexual. (Zodwa)

What is clear from Andrew, Jeffrey, and Zodwa’s accounts is how the pursuit of pleasure organises and directs the entire fisting experience. Andrew does this in his account by explicitly framing the meaning and experience of pain as anathema to fisting. In doing so, Andrew highlights how fisting differs from a number of other(ed) advanced sexual practices that are often subsumed together under the umbrellas of kink and BDSM. Contrary to

uninformed impressions and hyperbolic representations of fisting in some gay pornography, fist-fuckers do not deliberately seek out pain. As Andrew points out, fist-fuckers condition themselves to be acutely aware of any experiences of pain. Thus, unlike BDSM, where “serious pain and rich pleasure are indeed related metonymically in cooperative setting” (Airaksinen, 2018, p. 2); pain is a definitive indicator that a fisting scene must be halted.

What is evident from these data is that while pleasure is central to the sensory and semiotic experiences of intimacy in fist-fucking, it should not be conflated with the kinds of pleasure associated with what Jeffrey calls “penetrative [anal] sex”. For Jeffrey, the conventional logic and practices of orgasm-oriented penetrative penile-anal sex between gay men are abandoned in fisting. In fist-fucking, the pleasure of organal massage and pressure from a top’s hand and forearm drive the physical and emotional experience of erotic satisfaction. For bottoms, the series of sensations produced from the pressure being placed on their prostate gland and internal organs as their top delicately massages their way through their colo-rectal passage serves as one of the most characteristic sensations of being fisted. Jeffrey’s description of feeling “filled-up” mirrors other accounts which stress the experience of fullness – not climactic release – as the principally desired sensation.

In some ways, this mirrors Hoppe’s (2011) account of how some gay men who prefer to bottom experience intense sexual satisfaction and what some describe as an ‘anal orgasm’, even in the absence of penile stimulation or ejaculation when bottoming. For these bottoms, pleasure is produced through an erotic and relational circuitry (of power) between the topping and bottoming partner, where the bottom’s pleasure is as much derived from the physical stimulation of their prostate by the top’s penis as it is by the psychological sense of submission to or gratification of their top. However, where Hoppe’s (2011) findings continue to point to the ongoing symbolic and erotic status of at least the topping partner’s penis for some bottoms, in fist-fucking, the penis is largely discarded for tops and bottoms alike:

Your cock isn't really part of the equation. Most of time you're wearing a jockstrap or [cock] cage.
(Gershwin)

For Gershwin, an exclusive top, the erotic “equation” of fisting is decoupled from the conventional bodily sites and organs of gay sexual intimacy and gay anal sex, namely, the penis and anus. Hetero- and homo-normative tropes of gay sex, and the phallogocentric logics which underwrite them, lose meaning and currency in fisting: penile penetration is replaced with a haptic exploration, and phallic hardness with fragility and vulnerability. Pleasure is relationally co-produced, not localised within so-called sex organs, but distributed and networked throughout the entirety of the body; orgasm loses its sensory primacy as climax is displaced by a prolonged and sustained “[i]ntensity and duration of feeling”⁸ (Halperin, 1995, p. 91).

It is within the sensate intensity and pleasure of fist-fucking that, as Zodwa suggests, fist-fuckers produce and access what they consider to be a “tantric and spiritual” quality to the intimacy of fisting. The idea of fisting having asomatous horizons is a belief long held within the subcultural mythos of the fisting community (Herrman, 1991). For the late leatherman and scholar, Geoff Mains (1991), the “shifts in state of consciousness” (p. 43) experienced in fist-fucking were a combined effect of the intense “mental focus required for fisting and the opioids released as a result of fisting” (p. 43). This is echoed by Zodwa when he describes the erotic experience of fisting as “not really sexual”, at least as ‘sex’ is homonormatively understood. The discursive disassociation of the erotic experience of fist-fucking from gay sex is not entirely surprising given the way fisting aficionados often articulate the corpo-erotic meaning of fisting in far more esoteric terms. For fist-fuckers, the intense erotics of fisting are not merely carnal but metaphysical, engendering feelings of a “divine sexual communion” between

⁸ I am however not suggesting that an orgasm, be it genital, anal, or otherwise, does not occur in fisting or is not sought after by some. As Alexander Cheves (2018) has accurately described, a fisting orgasm is simultaneously “intense and agonizing in the loveliest way possible.” (par. 25).

playmates (Brough, 2005) and even a sense of “becoming one with the universe” (Niederwieser, 2013).

What all the participants in this study placed unanimous emphasis on in describing the significance of pleasure in their fist-fucking was the importance of knowledge and skill. The pursuit and achievement of pleasure in anal fisting is carefully curated by fist-fuckers through the acquisition and application of fisting technique:

... it’s not sex, it’s an education. You’re always researching. Even if you’ve been doing it for a while, you still read and brush-up to make sure you’re refining your technique and skill. This ... makes me a better playmate in the process and the scene more intimate and more safe. (Kieran)

This isn’t a quick fuck. Your hand is not a dick, you can’t just stick in. It requires you do your homework. You have to talk to experienced fisters, that way you get pointed to the right online spaces and trustworthy [web]sites where you get accurate information. This way you learn how to make your scenes safe and fun. (Justin)

You can’t compare [fisting] to anal [sex]. There’s almost an instinctual knowledge to anal [sex]. In anal, a top kinda knows that his cock is going into a bottom’s ass, and then you kinda know that you have to go through the natural motions of fucking. There’s no instinctual knowledge to fisting. A top has to learn what to do with his hands, how to ball [his hand], how to be gentle, how to lube up, and how to give pleasure to his bottom. (Mmusi)

From Kieran, Justin, and Mmusi’s extracts, it is clear that while fisting and BDSM may differ in regard to their respective valuation of pain, they share an emphasis on the significance of erotic knowledge and skill in creating sexual satisfaction. From their accounts it is evident that the degree of expertise entailed in fisting informs how these participants rhetorically liken fisting to “not sex” (Kieran), that it “isn’t a quick fuck” (Justin), and that “You can’t compare [fisting] to anal [sex]” (Mmusi). The intimacy and erotics of anal fisting are unlike the ‘usual’

sexual mechanics of gay men's penetrative anal sex, or what Mmusi describes as "the natural motions of fucking".

The rhetorical distancing that many participants placed between anal sex and fisting, combined with Mmusi's reference to fist-fucking being distinctly unlike "natural" or "instinctual" practices of gay anal sex, potentially points to a scripting of intimate pleasure-making with/in fisting that is akin to what Paul B. Preciado (2000/2018) describes as a "countersexuality" (p. 20). For Preciado (2000/2018), a countersexuality is one where sexuality and pleasure are not only decoupled from the genitals, but, also, the "heterocentric biowriting machine" (p. 25) that subsumes, shapes, and forms bodies, genitals, as well as sexual practices into normative, naturalised, and conventional systems of sexual knowledge and practice. What is clear from these data extracts is that the erotic skill and pleasure of fisting is not one which is understood through the kinds of "instinctual knowledge" which Mmusi asserts is at work in penetrative anal intercourse. Kieran quite pointedly suggests this when he contends that his "hand is not a dick", in effect disrupting the script of how penile-anal sex and intimacy may be understood to play out and the parts of the body needed. Rather, fist-fucking relies on a new scripting of pleasure, skill, and intimacy predicated on an alternative "pleasure-knowledge" (Preciado, 2000/2018, p. 21) that is generated through "researching" (Kieran), "homework" (Justin), and "learn[ing] what to do" (Mmusi) by accessing trusted members and sources of information within the fisting community.

Conclusion

Although fisting has "held special appeal for queer theory" (Huffer, 2013, p. 73), it is only recently that empirical studies of fisting have begun to move beyond commentary by offering accounts which directly tap the voices and experiences of fist-fuckers themselves. This trajectory of work is important not only for the way it stands in contrast to the pejorative tone

of medico-forensic scholarship but, also, because this research tunnels through the representational shock and awe of fisting into a more considered analysis of the textured meanings, motivations, and experiences that fist-fucking entails. This study sought to explore and expand on how gay men understand and experience intimacy with/in their anal fisting. Contrary to the characterization of being a “weird pathological nonunderstandable form of sex” (Denman, 2003, p. 201), the fist-fuckers who participated here constructed themselves as active and thoughtful agents of their erotic desire and subjectivity whose enjoyment of fisting was principally understood by what they experienced as a more intense and certainly queer/er sense of inter/personal intimacy.

The findings presented in this study outline three main themes which represented shared, recurrent, and interrelated features that often characterized an affirmative script of/for intimacy in fisting: (1) *trust and vulnerability*; (2) *connection and communication*; as well as (3) *pleasure and skill*. The repeated references to vulnerability, care, gentleness, patience, comfort, and attentiveness, signal a construction of intimacy that runs contrary to the prohibitive discourses of pornography regulation which, in some countries, erroneously represent fisting as a sex act marked by danger, aggression, or violence (Thorneycroft, 2020). These findings highlight how fist-fucking is both produced through, and productive of, a queer/er erotic circuitry between gay men’s bodies which runs counter to the conventional discourses of gay anal sex/uality and, in particular, the genito-centric and phallo-penetrative logics that often (but not always) subtend the binarized and gendered (power) relations between so-called tops and bottoms (Winer, 2022). This is most evident in the way that fisting bottoms, their pleasure, and their safety are centred in the fisting scene, entailing a displacement of the erotic significance of the top’s penis, as Gershwin suggested, and, in turn, the development of a new corpo-erotic repertoire premised on an ethics of care practiced by tops, as Mmusi described. This necessitates and conditions a scripting of intimacy that is not overdetermined

by or reliant on hetero- and homo-normative tropes and practices of gay anal sex to make erotic meaning. Rather, the data highlights repeated instances in which fist-fuckers construct the intimacy of their fisting as a countersexual script that is, in its understanding and experience, unlike “regular anal” (Henry), “not really sexual” (Zodwa), and “not sex” (Kieran). The scripting of intimacy by fist-fuckers calls on new sources and forms of corpo-erotic knowledge and technique to not only establish and sustain a sense of intimacy with/in their fisting encounters, but, also, to reform what they recognise and experience as pleasure, both psychologically and sensually.

In many ways, this points to fist-fucking as a form of intimacy perhaps better characterized as erotic ‘play’ than ‘sex’, per say. This echoes fist-fuckers’ descriptions of their fisting partners as ‘playmates’ or ‘fist-friends’ (Joseph, Dermot, Henry, and Kieran). Moreover, it reflects discussions within the fisting community that discursively define fist-fucking not in terms of ‘sex’ but as ‘edge play’ (Sara & Jay, 2018), defined and experienced not by sexual activity or pleasure but as a kind of “boundary play” (Holmes et al., 2022, p. 2) that pushes against, queers, and redefines corpo-erotic boundaries. In this sense, the scripting of intimacy in fist-fucking shares some of the same features which also mark the experience of intimacy by kinksters more broadly, and the diverse range of advanced erotic practices that are pursued by members of the kink community. This includes queer/er and more expansive definitions of pleasure, sensuality, and ‘sex’; a deepened and attuned sense of emotional and interpersonal connectedness; specific forms of verbal and non-verbal communication; as well as ongoing and collaborative consenting practices (Spratt et al., 2021).

Through the lens of Simon and Gagnon’s (1984, 1986, 2003) sexual script theory, it is evident that the thematic features of intimacy in fisting also interconnect intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural scripts for sexual and erotic meaning making. The scripting of intimacy is primed by psychologically-rooted predilections such as the desire to experience

and share a profound sense of vulnerability and connection; interpersonally navigated such as through demonstrable performances of appropriate fisting demeanour and etiquette that render a bottoming/topping partner more trustworthy; and informed by culturally validated (re)sources such as trusted websites and literature as well as experienced fist-fuckers which possess accurate knowledge to enhance expertise in fisting skill and technique. The deep sense of intimacy that gay fist-fuckers ascribe to their anal fisting can therefore be seen to require both a non-normative and countersexual pleasure-knowledge of community-specific scripts for safe and enjoyable fisting which are then affirmatively and adaptively negotiated in personal and interpersonal ways as a fisting scene takes shape.

Limitations of the present study and future directions for research

There are some limitations to this study and, with these, future directions for research. First, while this study focuses on the experience of intimacy in gay men's fist-fucking, fisting is by no means the sole preserve of cis gay men (Hollibaugh, 1996). The practice of anal and vaginal fisting is well-documented amongst lesbian, heterosexual, and other queerly configured people and relationships – going as far back as the *Kama Sutra*. In fact, the transgressive power of vaginal fisting to radically decouple itself from the logic and praxis of phallogentric heterosex when put to work in lesbian and queer womxn's sex lives has been something long celebrated in feminist and queer theory (Huffer, 2013). There does however remain a need to address the dearth of qualitatively oriented scholarship which directly samples how people other than cis gay men take-up fisting. If fisting possesses the power to erotically “confuse the modern sex/gender identities deployed ... to categorise desiring agents” (Scholfield, 1999, para. 6), then it is worth exploring how scripts of gender and sex/uality are undone and remade within differently gendered relations of vaginal and/or anal fisting.

Lastly, the conclusions in this study are limited to a sample of gay men whose fist-fucking did not form part of any BDSM-related sex/uality or (reported) chemsex. It is important to recognise that some gay men do incorporate fisting as a part of other modes of sexual activity and kink. It is therefore possible that the scripting of intimacy as well as the understanding and experience of trust, connection, and pleasure in fisting may be different for these men, especially where different subcultural frameworks and divergent erotic ends inform the processes of psycho-sexual meaning-making around fisting. Future research which specifically drills down into the experiences of BDSM or chemsex fisters/fistees could prove useful in teasing out whether the thematic features of intimacy outlined here hold true for different groups of gay men who practice fist-fucking.

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