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**Keeping love at a distance: An interpretative phenomenological
analysis of former pornography addicts' experiences with
pornography**

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The purpose of the study was to explore former pornography addicts' understanding of their experiences with pornography. The purpose was also to see in what way psychoanalytic theory could contribute to a further understanding of these experiences. Four men between the ages of 25 and 56 who identified themselves as former pornography addicts were interviewed two times each using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview transcripts were analyzed using IPA. Three master-themes were identified (Pornography in the context of growing up; The experience of watching pornography; Pornography as a solution), containing three subthemes each. The psychoanalytic concepts of sexualization and primitive withdrawal were found to be useful in discussing the results. The discussion suggested that pornography can be used defensively to distract from the relational meaning of emotions, while also leading to a distancing from oneself and from important others.

It has been estimated that 10-15 % of searches made on the Internet are for pornography (Ogas & Gaddam, 2012). The accessibility, affordability and anonymity, referred to as the Triple-A-Engine, of Internet pornography have been thought to have a profound impact on sexual behaviour (Cooper, 1998). In the days before Internet, pornography was not as fast and easy to access. Nowadays, there is an abundance of sexual material just a click away, anytime, for free, and without anyone knowing what you're doing. For the majority of people who watch pornographic videos or images on the Internet - mostly men (Ogas & Gaddam, 2012) – it is not experienced as something problematic. But for some, Internet pornography use becomes a compulsory activity, taking up more time than wanted, ruining relationships and leading to negative consequences for productivity and self-esteem (Young, 2008). It's estimated that about 1 % of the general population have problems with excessive Internet pornography use (Shaw & Black, 2008). For these people, the Triple A Engine turns Internet pornography into a powerful tool to control negative emotions, substituting feelings of boredom, loneliness, anxiety, relational stress - or any unwanted state - with sexual arousal (Weiss, 2015).

The topic of pornography addiction has been studied from different perspectives. A review of research on sexuality on the Internet (Döring, 2009) found that most of the pornography research focused on the risks and possible negative consequences of Internet pornography use, for example harm to children and adolescents, and addictive patterns of use. Furthermore, Döring (2009) points out that the majority of studies rely on models of media determinism, conceptualizing the users as passive victims instead of active media users who voluntarily seek and consume pornographic content in accordance with their preferences. In a review on the research of Internet pornography addiction (Griffiths, 2012) the author calls for more qualitative research investigating the experience of Internet sex addiction (a term which, apart from pornography, include a whole range of sexual behaviours on the Internet, such as sexual texting and webcam sex). To summarize, there seems to be a lack of research where the Internet pornography user is construed as an active media user, with his or her specific motivation for searching for pornographic content, as well as a lack of research looking into the specific experience of Internet sex addiction. It could be proposed that investigating Internet sex addiction through the lens of psychoanalytic theory could help fill in these white spots, since psychoanalysis traditionally has put huge emphasis on sexuality as a motivational factor.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud proposed that adult sexuality has its roots in infancy, and that things we experience as children influence the way sexuality

is expressed in adult life. With this focus on sexuality, psychoanalytic theory is useful to understand pornography addiction. One study that applies psychoanalytic theories to the subject of pornography addiction was Galatzer Levy's case study (2012) where he discussed how Internet pornography can serve the function of protecting the individual from anxiety associated with personal, more meaningful (and therefore more frightening) sexual fantasies. He argues that personal masturbatory fantasies is an important part of the sexual development of adolescents and that the excessive use of pornography is antidevelopmental because it creates a psychological sexual template reduced to "fragmentary" experiences of bodies, body parts and isolated sexual actions" (Galatzer-Levy, 2012, p. 493), devoid of personal meaning. Another theoretical case study (Birchard, 2011) explores sexual addiction from a variety of psychoanalytic viewpoints. Birchard (2011) describes how pornography becomes a solution to get rid of distressing affects such as loneliness, anger and shame, and also how it acts as a substitute for missing or problematic relationships, providing a sense of connectedness. He also elaborates on the function of shame - sometimes laid down as a "core affect" due to damaged parent-child relationships - driving the addictive circle, where more pornography use in order to get rid of the toxic feelings of shame only serves to increase these feelings after sexual climax has been reached (Birchard, 2011).

Although the abovementioned studies shed light on the issue of Internet pornography addiction from different perspectives, the experience of this specific condition seems not to have been investigated in a qualitative study applying deep interviews with pornography addicts; as Griffiths (2011) pointed out, there is a lack of research investigating the experience of Internet sex addiction. It has been argued that interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative method well suited to contribute to the psychological understanding of the experience of addiction (Shinebourne & Smith, 2009).

IPA was developed as a qualitative research method in the 90s in response to what was seen as a lack of qualitative research methods that were specifically suited for psychological research (Smith et al., 2009). Since then it has grown to become a popular method, in particular within health psychology, clinical and counselling psychology, and social and educational psychology (Smith et al., 2009). It is an idiographic method grounded in phenomenology and hermeneutics. The focus of research is the experience of some phenomena which are of importance within the informant's life-world, and the method draws upon the philosophy of phenomenology, developed by Edmund Husserl (Smith et al., 2009). In the pursuit of studying experiences, the researcher has to use his or her own understanding in order to make sense of these experiences, hence the "I" for interpretative in IPA. As Smith et al. (2009) puts it: "[the researcher] is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them", thus engaging in what is sometimes called "double hermeneutics". This forces the researcher to be very self-aware about how he or she contributes to the production of the case material during the interviews, and also how he or she interprets the material afterwards, using his or her preconceptions. The goal, however, is to start from a very open position, to "bracket" one's preconceptions as far as possible in order to get as close to the participants experience as possible (Smith et al., 2009).

The purpose of the present study was to explore former male pornography addicts' understanding of their experiences with pornography. The purpose was also to see in what way psychoanalytic theory could contribute to a further understanding of these experiences. Investigating these questions served to give a richer picture of how pornography - which is of such ease of access - is experienced by former male pornography addicts within their specific life contexts.

Method

Participants

The participants were four men between the ages of 26 and 56. Recruitment was done by e-mailing an anonymous self-help group for sex- and love addicts to check for interest in participating in the study. Seven men showed interest, out of whom four men were chosen in accordance with convenience. They all identified themselves as former pornography addicts. In the interviews (see below) they reported having used Internet pornography in a way that had a significant negative impact on their relationships, productivity and well-being. Some of them had in periods been watching pornography for several hours, every day of the week. Most of them reported watching pornography while masturbating, but just watching it without any masturbation also occurred. For most of them, however, the abuse of Internet pornography was just one of many different forms of enactments of sex- and love addiction which they had pursued. Among these other enactments were compulsory flirting, infidelity, manipulative behaviours within close relationships and a general tendency to sexualize relations. The informants will be called by the fictitious names of William, Steven, Tom and Roger.

Interviews

The four men were interviewed two times each at the Department of Psychology using a semi-structured interview guide. Initially, the participants were informed that their accounts would be anonymized in the final report; that participation was voluntary; and that they had the right to quit at any given moment without a declared reason. The interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were recorded with an audio recorder device. The first of the two interviews followed a loosely structured interview guide, with the opening question being “can you tell me about your experiences with porn?”. The participants were then encouraged to talk freely about the topic of pornography using prompting questions such as “can you tell me more about that?” and “how did that make you feel?”. The informants were also asked about some specific aspects such as how their relation to pornography had developed throughout their life time, how they understood their specific pornography preferences and why they thought they had become pornography addicts. Furthermore, non-directive interview techniques were used, such as summarizing (“if I have understood it correctly, porn seems to have been [what the participant just said] for you”) and asking for associations. This was done in a cautious and self-reflective manner in order to minimize the risk of imposing the interviewer’s preconceptions on the account. The first interview recordings were then listened through and transcribed simultaneously.

For the second interview, follow-up questions made in response to the first interview transcript had been prepared for each of the participants individually. The aim of these follow-up questions was to deepen the understanding for certain aspects that were of interest to the research question (“last time you said that porn could be like --- for you, could say something more about that?”). The second interviews were then listened to while being transcribed.

Analysis

Once the eight interviews were done and transcribed the analysis procedure started. The analysis followed roughly the steps outlined by Smith et al (2009). The informants' accounts were analyzed one by one, finishing one account fully before moving on to the next one in order to follow IPA's ambition of sticking close to the unique quality of individual experiences. For more information on the IPA method, see the introduction.

Initial commenting, coding and thematizing. First, the recordings were once again listened through while exploratory comments were made in the margins of the transcript. The comments were done in a free way, mainly to get a feel for the whole of the transcripts before moving on to the details. Apart from summarizing the content of the interviews, these comments also addressed the particular way the informants used language in order to communicate their experiences as well as possible ways of interpreting the material using psychoanalytic theories. The transcripts were then coded on a descriptive, low-abstraction level, using the qualitative research software program NVivo. This coding served the purpose of making the huge amount of data easier to navigate and at the same time enabling further familiarization with the material. Once the coding was done, the analysis moved on to the search for patterns and themes within the transcripts. This search was carried out by looking for ways of grouping the descriptive codes, and also by re-reading different parts of the transcripts very closely to see if the preliminary code groups made sense. By shifting between these two practices the analysis could integrate aspects of the whole as well as aspects of the details. The code groups were given preliminary theme labels aimed at saying something essential about the experiential quality communicated within the group of codes. These themes (or code groups) were then grouped together to form master themes. The master themes (a short phrase) were formulated in a way so that they could stand for all that was covered in the subordinated themes. Each case (that is, each participants story) generated between 3-4 master themes with 3-5 subordinated themes within them.

Refinement of themes. After the cases had been analyzed individually the next step was to look for similarities between cases. By doing so, the existing theme labels were sometimes altered so that they could include codes and extracts from different cases. This also had the effect of sometimes sharpening the theme labels so that they said something more substantial about the experiential quality. In the end the analysis ended up with more themes than could be presented in the finished report. This called for the need of a culling among the themes, a process in which the themes that corresponded best with the overall purpose of the study was kept and others, which were more peripheral with regards to the research question, were dropped (for example themes that only related to family relations without any connection to pornography). After the culling was done nine themes remained. These nine themes were then placed within three new master-themes formulated on a higher level of abstraction in order for them to together include all of the nine themes. In reality, these last steps of the analysis (the merging of themes, the culling and the generation of master themes) wasn't done in a straight-forward way but was rather an iterative process of moving back and forth. For the sake of clarity, however, the steps have been described as if done in an ordered sequence.

Writing. When the nine themes had been chosen the writing up of the themes began. This process started by selecting quotes for each theme; quotes were chosen on the basis of which could best illustrate the experiential essence of the themes. Subsequently, the actual writing up of the themes, supported by the quotes, began. The process of writing helped to

further clarify the themes and how they played out in the informants' accounts. At this point, new possibilities to interpret the quotations appeared, based on the way the participants used language in order to express their experiences. Effort was put into writing these interpretations in a way that made the distinction clear between what was actually said by the participants and what was the author's understanding of it. The interpretations were formulated on different levels: both at the level of understanding why the participants expressed themselves as they did in the specific interview situation, but also at the grander level of trying to understand their experiences in light of their childhood and overall life narrative.

A decision was made to keep the number of participants appearing within the presentation of each theme quite low; this to help make the individual stories shine through since they had been found to be quite illustrative and interesting with regards to the research question. This meant that some themes were present in several of the participants' stories, but in the final presentation only one or two accounts were used to illustrate those themes; this in order to not lose sight of the individual stories.

Reflexivity

The method of IPA does not assume that there are experiential truths to be discovered by the researcher; being an interpretative approach the method requires the researcher to contribute with his or her own subjectivity in order to produce the findings (Smith et al, 2009). The process of reflecting on the researcher's influence on the findings in qualitative research is sometimes called "reflexivity". A valid question would then be: in what way might I have influenced the findings of the study? And, how did my biases and preconceptions affect the interviews and the analysis?

The informants knew that the researcher was a clinical psychology student and this might have affected the way they talked about their problems. There might have been a wish to come up with answers that were psychologically "deep" enough to satisfy my interest in the subject. And although I stated clearly that the study had an exploratory approach and encouraged the informants to tell their story with their own words, they might have been thinking that I knew something about their former condition which I did not tell, or that I was trying out some hypothesis. The ambition was to take a position as unbiased and open as possible, but it is imaginable that my psychoanalytic interest shined through in the way I responded to their answers, for example acting more excited when they were talking about their childhood and reasoned about its importance for their addiction.

In the process of analysing the transcripts my intent was to bracket my preconceptions as far as possible in order to keep an inductive approach. It means I tried to stay open and not think psychoanalytically while coding and testing out themes. This was a complex task since it was known beforehand that the results would be discussed from a psychoanalytic perspective in the end. It is possible that this knowledge had an effect on which themes were prioritized and which were discarded. However, the intent while thematizing was to answer the question: what is the experiential essence of these transcripts and how can I communicate them as effectively as possible?

Ethical considerations

Pornography consumption, and sexuality in general, is a sensitive topic to many people; it is widely regarded as a very personal and intimate part of one's life and not something which people in general share information about with strangers. The issue of anonymity was therefore of particular importance to the present study, and certain measures were taken in order to secure

the anonymity of the participants. These measures included: keeping the audio recordings locked in inside a locker at the Department of Psychology; the immediate destruction of the raw material once the writing of the paper was finished; and making sure that no directly identifiable personal data about the participants were included in the paper. It cannot be denied, however, that the participants would probably be able to identify themselves should they read the paper and the quotes included. With this in mind, the author has strived to write about the participants in a cautious and respectful way.

Another ethical consideration concerned the carrying out of the interviews. It was probable that the interviews would raise topics that were painful in one way or another for the participants to talk about. This was also confirmed during the second interview when some of the participants expressed that it had been tough for them to be reminded of their former addiction. However, they also expressed that it had been meaningful for them to reflect on their behaviours in this way, and were thankful that somebody wanted to lift this highly charged and taboo subject. To summarize, the present study was associated with some problematic aspects with regards to the sensitive nature of the subject; in spite of this, the measures taken to deal with these aspects as well as the importance of the subject being investigated may be regarded as supportive for the study being carried out.

Results

The purpose of the present study was to explore former male pornography addicts' understanding of their experiences with pornography. The purpose was also to see in what way psychoanalytic theory could contribute to a further understanding of these experiences.

Nine themes that were of interest to the research question were identified. These nine themes have been organized in three master themes, placing them within a temporal and conceptual structure. The table below presents an overview of themes and participants appearing within them.

Overview of themes and participants

Themes	Participants appearing in themes
<i>Master theme 1: Pornography in the context of growing up</i>	
The first encounter: the allure of the forbidden	Tom
A boundless childhood	Steven
An elephant opening the gates to hell	Tom
<i>Master theme 2: Experiences with pornography</i>	
Inside the pornography bubble	Roger, Steven, William
An incongruent self	Steven, Tom
An endless search for something	Tom
<i>Master theme 3: Pornography as a solution</i>	
A solution to loneliness	William
A way to keep love at a distance	Roger, William
Control and vengeance	Steven, William

Master theme 1: Pornography in the context of growing up

This section aims at presenting experiences with pornography during childhood. It also aims at giving the reader a picture of how the informants understand their pornography addiction and pornography preferences in the light of things they experienced as children.

The first encounter: the allure of the forbidden. This theme addresses the memory of the first encounter with pornography and the feelings and meanings associated with that memory.

For Tom, the earliest encounter with pornography was experienced as something forbidden and inappropriate which at the same time has a strong allure. Tom remembers the first time when he, as a child in primary school, came in contact with pornography; a group of children had gathered around a piece of pornography found in the neighbourhood nearby the school:

“There was a sloppy magazine lying under a bush /.../ it was exciting to look at in a way that you didn’t fully understand. You knew that you weren’t supposed to look at it, and that made it interesting”

The discovery of the pornography was experienced as something perhaps disgusting (“some sloppy magazine”) and also forbidden (“you weren’t supposed to look at it”). Tom tells how an elderly man later found the group of kids, telling them that looking at it was no good and that “you were supposed to kiss real girls”. The man took the magazine away from them. It could be interpreted that, to Tom, the adult world was thus condemning pornography, thereby further constituting it as something forbidden to him. In the following extract, Tom elaborates on the topic of the forbidden in the context of pornography and why he believes it has had such an allure to him:

“I still cannot explain, but when I’m not allowed to do something I get a strong urge to do it and it doesn’t matter what it is: just the fact that i’m not allowed to do it makes me want to. And one could trace that back to my mother and her way of ruling”

So he has always had a strong urge to do the forbidden and connects this with his mother. Tom has earlier in the interview painted a rich picture of his experiences with his mother during childhood. While showing empathy for her (“she has had it rough /.../ her own mother was horrid”) she is described as unpredictable, strong-willed and manipulative:

“She would rule, often with manipulation: she either screamed or threw things, or she would cry and tell what a pity she was in, in order to get sympathy”

There was certainly some aggression underlying Toms talk about his experiences with his mother. She was described as someone who decides what you can and cannot do, and it is not hard to imagine getting pleasure from doing the opposite to her will. At this point, the analysis has moved away from Toms first experience with pornography as a child (and the way

he experienced it as something forbidden) to Tom's understanding of *why* the forbidden might have had such an allure to him. The experience of the forbidden might constitute a revolt against a loved yet tyrannical mother figure. It would be too far-fetched, however, to see this motivation as residing in the child finding the pornographic magazine in the bush; but, at present, it seems to be relevant to Tom in the way he interprets the meaning of the allure of pornography.

A boundless childhood. This theme addresses the link Steven did between his preference for pornography depicting adultery and the circumstances under which he grew up, which he described as "boundless". Not only did he see a parallel between this pornography preference and his childhood; he also made a connection to the way he has lived his own relational life as an adult. In the following extract the topic is a specific pornographic movie involving adultery:

"Me: Do you get any associations to this scenario [in the movie] where there's a third part who doesn't know what's going on?"

Steven: I don't know, I've always had a secret life /.../ where I'm unfaithful, and very focused on porn /.../ the boundlessness in that I can do every damn thing I want /.../ I don't know exactly why it turns me on but I know I lived a very boundless life when I was a kid, I didn't have any restrictions or things like that at all with my mother, and I was like one of those kids that was allowed to go almost anywhere I wanted, because I had no parent who was there and could say exactly what I should and should not do"

There was something both exhilarating and reckless about the way he described his experience of being boundless ("every damn thing I want"), some kind of destructive form of freedom. Later he described how he had been seeing himself as "above the social rules and norms", a preposition suggesting some presumptuousness, and perhaps also a liberating sense of flying. There was, however, parts pointing at a loneliness underlying the freedom of movement experienced as a child ("because I had no parent who was there"). Furthermore, Steven saw the lack of parental control as a contributing factor to the development of his pornography addiction: he described how he could easily watch pornography on the TV from a very young age (6-7) without anyone noticing. After watching pornography on TV he remembered how it became an important aim to him to "in some way recreate what I saw in this porn movie". In order to fulfill this aim he engaged fellow female friends in sexual games which he described as "inappropriate to our age at the time". He thus moved beyond the boundaries set by age. And the theme of boundlessness was not only present in the way Steven described his own actions and his own state of being. In the following extract, where Steven further associates regarding the theme of adultery, one can see how his own boundaries were trespassed by experiences he had as a child:

"These men were very focused on having sex with my mother and I remember some time ... we could be lying in the bed, very safe and calm, and then one of these men would come in and like, demand to have sex with my mother /.../ even when they had sex I could still hear and like stick out my head and see what was going on"

There is a sense of intrusion and violation in the extract above. The bubble of safe and calm, being with mother in bed, is shattered by the arrival of these men. It could be considered metaphorically as an invasion from the adult world, demolishing the safe space of childhood, filling it with content "not appropriate to our age", as Steven described the sexual games earlier. So not only was he himself without boundaries, moving freely without parental control,

watching pornography and engaging girls in sexual games: he was also a victim of the adult world trespassing the borders of his land, his psychological sphere. And all of this is somehow important to Steven in his attempt to make sense of why he finds adultery to be a turn on. Could it be that his mother's involvement with these men was felt as some sort of betrayal? Then, a simple interpretation as to why adultery was felt as a turn on might be proposed: what feels familiar feels good.

An elephant opening the gates to hell. This theme addresses Tom's experience of pornography as something unspeakable in his family as he grew up and the way he understood this as a contributing factor to his pornography addiction. Every time the topic was raised his parents would go silent and an awkward atmosphere took possession of the room. Already during the first minutes of the interview Tom said he had been brought up to be "ashamed of his sexuality". In the following extract he talks about how the topic of sexuality was dealt with within his family:

"It was like an elephant in the room, it shouldn't be there, the sexual, it didn't belong anywhere. And that made it wrong, or made me feel that it was wrong, to have a sexuality. And therefore I was ashamed because I had one."

Tom explained further how this internalised shame created a vicious circle in which he would masturbate to pornography, then ejaculate, then experience intense feelings of shame which he later on would try to get rid of by masturbating even more, thus being caught in a trap where every pornography session threw him back to square one. The air of shame surrounding pornography also affected Tom's relationship with his brother. As they grew up and started to watch pornography on the computer they developed a "shame balance" between them where they both knew that the other one was watching it and masturbating but never spoke openly about it. Instead they shamed one another by practical jokes and by fooling the other in front of their friends. It was only when

"it was quiet in the nights and you didn't see each other, then you could talk about most things! And, as I said, maybe we didn't talk about everything but ... sometimes it worked out."

Although not referring directly to the topic of pornography this extract gives a vivid picture of the ambience at home and the feeling of an elephant standing in the room. It was only when not seeing the other person in the eye that one could truly open up and speak about what was going on, safe from the risk of shame reflected in the other person's eyes. Tom, however, still felt a need to talk about his destructive use of pornography and masturbation and found ways to do so among his friends:

"I had an approach where I named and shamed myself in front of my friends, like, I told them what I did, how long I did it and that it was reprehensible and that it was no life /.../ I had no other way of talking about it than to joke, I think there was a need like "I cannot carry this on my own". It was too hard."

In this extract the experience of pornography addiction is portrayed as carrying something heavy without any good means of getting help from others. Only by presenting his problems in a comic way did Tom find a way of lightening his burden of shame. Later in life, he felt an anger about these circumstances and the way pornography was dealt with as he grew up:

“I’ve been walking around feeling angry because people haven’t seen that I have had problems for a long time /.../ If somebody would have told me that porn can be damaging and that my behaviour was a downhill road into hell [laughs] then maybe I could have stopped while it still hadn’t gone so far”

Here, his early days of pornography use are likened with a downhill road into hell, with nobody there to catch him before falling into the flames. It was easy to empathize with the anger since people’s unwillingness to touch the subject had had such a devastating effect on the development of his pornography addiction. The elephant in the room stood in the way of him getting proper recognition for his condition. And yet, directly after the extract above he added:

“But I see now that it wouldn’t have helped if I knew that I had a problem /.../ because you know what its like with addiction. You lie to the end”

This extract points towards some sort of surrender to the power of the affliction. At the same time there is a willingness to take responsibility for one’s own actions, a reluctance to blame others. And while commendable, it can also be interpreted as a way of denying a feeling of having been let down by the environment.

Master theme 2: The experience of pornography

In contrast to the master theme above, where pornography was placed in the context of growing up, the scope of this section below is more narrow in trying to convey a sense of what it can be like to use pornography as an addict.

Inside the pornography bubble. This theme addresses a certain way the participants talked about the use of pornography: they compared it with being inside a bubble, shut out from the outside world. As will be shown, the participants gave partly overlapping, partly differing accounts of what it was like to be inside this bubble. In the extract below, Roger is using his body to illustrate how pornography could be an escape from your feelings:

“Roger: When you’re sitting there surfing porn, then you are in your own bubble, there is nothing else, there is nothing below here [points towards his body below the head] that you’re using.

Me: When you say ‘below here’ do you mean feelings, or what?

Roger: Yes, exactly. So it is only the brain”

Here Roger is making a distinction between his body and his brain in order to describe some sort of numbing effect that the use of pornography has on him. He explained how the brain got satisfied, how something got “secreted” in there and how it received “fast and easy” impressions. For Roger, pornography was a way to keep his head busy so it would not have to connect with his body, which was felt as a container for unmanageable feelings.

“You’ve got so much god damn grief that you don’t want to take care of because you don’t know how to deal with it, so therefore you push it down. You won’t allow this road to open because /.../ then all of this comes up and

you absolutely don't want that, because how are you going to deal with it? So it is much better to fly into your bubble"

The pornography bubble could be likened with a safe haven where one is protected from dangers rising from one's own emotional life. In the extract above the entering of it is described as "flying", pointing towards the ease and comfort by which it is done (just picking up a smartphone). The phrase "flying" might also imply some sort of weightlessness at the time of leaving the emotional burden behind on the ground, where it is deeply seated in the earthly flesh of Rogers body ("so much god damn grief"). Several times during the interview he sighed in order to illustrate the relief he feels as he enters the pornography bubble ("It's the lowering of pressure, it's like [exhales]"). But pornography was not only an escape from the inner life, it could also be a way of leaving the external world, as described here by William:

"Then you are inside the bubble, you're just inside your own brain, just trying to turn off the outside world as much as possible. Make as little noise of yourself as possible and like 'can I only have this? I just need this small thing'"

In this extract there is a sense of hiding ("make as little noise of yourself as possible") and leaving the world behind. The phrase "turn off the outside world" is interesting since William told earlier that he has also been abusing online gaming worlds: just like he can hop into another world through the computer maybe he wishes he could turn off the real world, as if it was only a bad videogame. It is yet another vivid example of pornography as a safe haven; a way of seeking refuge from something; a state of being "en-bubbled".

An incongruent self. This theme addresses the double feelings participants had with regards to their pornography consumption and how it affected their self-image. Steven describes it as

"this duality, that on one hand I'm a person who has certain values and thoughts that I really believe in, and on the other hand I have this different side who don't give a damn about those thoughts and values. And these worlds haven't been questioned inside of me, I haven't been able to see the different parts /.../ they have surfaced once in a while but then they have been pushed down again, into the unconscious"

Here Steven makes a distinction between different parts of him which he sees as incongruent with each other. There seems to be, however, some instance capable of keeping these incongruent pieces of him separated from each other, momentarily pushing one piece "into the unconscious". The thoughts and values he is referring to in the extract regards his former religious beliefs and its offspring in the form of engagement for different humanitarian causes. The frustration was palpable as he emphasized that he really did believe in these humanitarian values, that they were an important part of his identity, while at the same time he had this other side who did not seem to fit in with that identity. This duality was actualized as he talked about an occasion when he felt he crossed a boundary set by his inner moral beliefs:

"The duality, the shame I feel when I'm watching a [real] picture of a woman being raped in a prison, that I'm having self-sex to that picture, there is a part of me who doesn't care about that, who just wants it, like 'this is turning me on', and just wants to act out on that picture"

In this extract the shame of watching something morally repulsive for the purpose of pleasure is countered by a need for acting out that seems to be overwhelming in its power. There is an indifference (“doesn’t care”) to the part of Steven who just wants to act out - a trait that seems to enable him to, at least momentarily, shut off the other, moral side of him: to push that side “into the unconscious”. It could be suggested that that part of him was purely motivated by the pursuit of pleasure. In the following extract, Tom described a similarly reckless part of him and the estrangement he felt towards this part:

“There are views on women that’s being transmitted ... I’ve noticed how they have affected me: thoughts and behaviours that I don’t recognize in me, that I can trace back to like ‘ah now I remember, I consume a lot of misogyny!’ /.../ One of the sickest things is that, the way I’ve lived my life is not what I have wanted. If I were to see myself I wouldn’t recognize me, I’ve expressed opinions and then I’ve done something completely else”

In this extract, Tom describes how misogynist ideas - which he traces back to his pornography consumption - sneaked up on him when he was not aware and how it took him a while before he remembered where they came from. It was as if pornography was working silently, like poison in his mind. There was also a feeling of detachment and perhaps disappointment in the way he talked about him not recognizing himself: the gap between the values that he verbally adhered to and his actions. Just like Steven, Tom grew up with a religiously based sense of right and wrong existing side by side with his pornography addiction: a part of him which he described as some kind of “knightlyhood” – a quest to do the right thing and a willingness to be sacrificial in relation to others. This phenomenon could be interpreted as a form of balancing act between what is perceived as good and bad; too much of the “bad” (pornography) demands increasing amounts of the “good”. The soul yearns for balance; but it comes at the price of feeling estranged as the different parts do not fit well together.

An endless search for something. This theme conceptualizes pornography as a searching quest: pornography not only as a means of bodily satisfaction, anxiety reduction, withdrawal and so on, but also as a search for something deeper, better, more meaningful.

“Tom: The search is a big thing for me. Most of the time is spent searching for porn, not watching porn. I’m always searching for something better /.../

Me: What are you searching for?

Tom: The meaning of life! [laughs] No, but as I said, contact with another human being, something deeper. To understand and be understood maybe. It’s fuzzy.”

Here Tom refers both to the practical side of searching for pornography – jumping from clip to clip for hours in an endless stream of naked men and women – and to a more personal form of searching: his own search for a deeper contact with another person. After initially distancing himself from it all by using humour (“The meaning of life!”) – perhaps a way of showing that a part of him also appreciates some absurdity in it – he then spoke candidly about this search for something deeper, although it seems fuzzy to him. This search for contact with another human being was also related to the way Tom understood his preference for watching pornography depicting BDSM (bondage, discipline, submission and dominance):

“That kind of sex demands a higher form of communication to be safe /.../ you have to trust the other person, when it gets too much, when you’re crossing a line /.../ how to communicate that without ruining the ambience? So from my experience it demands a higher form of communication”

This extract shows how the allure of BDSM does not have to be the act of dominance, which could be a more obvious way to interpret it since it may look very grim and dehumanizing from an outsider’s perspective. On the contrary, to Tom it was in the trust and communication that he found excitement; perhaps, in the act of reaching out and connecting with another person on a level beyond words. It is as if pornography at least in some way could satisfy deep relational needs. However, the satisfaction did not last very long and the search often leaved Tom feeling miserable and disappointed:

“What’s so shitty about the whole thing is that I keep coming back, and forget that I cannot find what I’m looking for in porn, but I keep coming back, searching and searching, thinking that I will find it! /.../ It’s punishing from beginning to end, there’s nothing in it for me, but I keep coming back searching for something I know I won’t find there. Ew! I need to take off this sweater.”

In this extract there is a hopeless sense of a circular movement with no end: he kept coming back searching and searching, and never found anything but punishment. One could interpret it as the universal drive towards reproduction on a hiccup, stripped of all relational meaning, tied up to an endless stream of foreign faces and bodies flashing by on the screen, unable to get loose. (Tom described how after ejaculation, most of the times, he was left with a feeling of disgust and disappointment with himself: “how could I believe I would find it here?“.) The frustration and anger about this vicious circle, palpable in Toms tone of voice as he spoke, found its bodily expression as he got so filled with disgust (“ew!”) that he had to take off his sweater.

Master theme 3: Pornography as a solution

The themes in this section addresses the informants’ understanding of pornography as some kind of solution to personal life problems. As will be shown, it often ended up as a weak or destructive solution; nonetheless, pornography seems to have had a powerful capability of transforming feelings and self-states in accordance with the informants’ immediate needs.

A solution to loneliness. This theme adresses pornography as a way of dealing with feelings of loneliness. William grew up with a chronic sense of loneliness, of being left out and not getting what he wanted or needed. Being from a young age first and foremost an emotional support in relation to his fragile mother, he described how he got stuck in a pattern of always taking care of others and not getting anything back. When asked about when he started to notice problems with his use of pornography, he replied

“In the beginning it was just exciting, maybe nothing special about that, but I think it started when I was thirteen, because I remember I felt a lot of discontent with my friends getting girlfriends, things like that, and I was like

*'why not me?'. I think it was a lot about me being lonely! Something like that.
Or ... I feel lonely...'*

In the extract above William reflects on the onset of his problems with pornography and the circumstances surrounding it. Before these obvious signs that he was lonely appeared pornography was not something problematic, “just exciting” in a non deviant way. It was not until the outer signs of his loneliness appeared in open day light that his pornography use was perceived as problematic, taking up more and more of his time and focus. This sense of loneliness seems, however, to have been there even before his teenage years, and perhaps also after, in the present (“or ... I feel lonely ...”). In this emotional context William described vividly how pornography worked as a remedy to his feelings of loneliness:

“If you’ve felt lonely all your life, what you want is to feel close to someone /.../ It becomes kind of an intimate thing after all [watching porn]. You are having sex with the people in the computer in one way or another, at least that’s what it was like for me. Getting a sense of intimacy and belonging, maybe. Feeling that there was room for me and that I was important too.”

In this extract William expresses a longing to be close to someone, a need he felt that the world around him could not meet but indeed pornography could, in some way. “Having sex with the people in the computer” can be seen as a bridging of gaps between the real world, technology and his imagination – some sort of transcendence which might have felt unavailable to him as he tried to relate to real people: the friends at school were getting girlfriends, but he, no. All that was left for him was “this little thing, it was the only thing I could have, and no one was allowed to know anything about it”. As I listened to his story I got a feeling of an empty and indifferent world, devoid of any life or life-bringing impulses. It might have been his tone of voice that elicited this emotional undercurrent; he spoke in a dry, punctuated, telegrammatic style, and every word had weight to it. In the extract above he also talked about getting a sense of “belonging” in pornography, something he said he never felt in the real world. He and his family moved several times, and every time he just dropped everything: did not hear a word from his old friends and neither did he try to contact them. Perhaps pornography in this context could be interpreted as something that gave William a firm point in the world to gravitate back towards, like an umbilical cord that kept him in contact with at least some degree of intimacy in a hostile and non-giving environment.

A way to keep love at a distance. This theme addresses the way in which pornography could work as a means to maintain an experience of intimacy while at the same time keeping real relationships at a distance. As outlined in the theme above, pornography could serve the function of diminishing feelings of loneliness. However, this way of satisfying the need for relating and intimacy may have come at a price of pushing opportunities for real, nourishing relationships away. In the following extract Roger describes how he grew up:

*“in a dysfunctional family, completely devoid of love /.../ There was no touching at all - but there was torture! So at least something on the letter T!
[laughs]”*

It is a vivid example of Rogers capability to use humour to keep distance to the emotional content of what he is saying as he picks up on the random alliteration of the words touching/torture. At the same time, it might have been this distancing that made it possible for him to talk in such a straightforward way about his childhood experiences. He elaborated further on how this background made him “worthless” at knowing how to deal with intimate

relationships; that he never learned from his family how to do it. He described how deep inside of him, beneath layers of faked self-confidence, he carried a deep seated belief that he was not worth loving. When asked why he thinks pornography became such a big thing for him, with his background, Roger replied:

“Somehow, it’s a hunt for love, in a damn weird way! /.../ The weird thing is that you’re looking for love and you want love, and at the same time you don’t want it – because you don’t deserve it! /.../ And in that process it is so much easier to just look at girls in pictures, because they won’t ask any questions, will they?”

In this extract Roger is trying to grasp what it is about pornography that made it so important specifically to him. At first he seemed upright confused about his own answer that it is a hunt for love (“damn weird”), because of this paradox: that he felt he did not deserve what he was looking for. And at the same time it is as if this paradox was in itself a key to his understanding of why pornography has had such a big impact on his life. Given that he wanted love while at the same time being unable to accept it (“you’re not worth it”), pornography became an optimal solution; it offered an experience of intimacy while keeping the objects of love at a comfortable distance, merely as pictures on a screen. Since the girls in the pictures “won’t ask any questions”, neither did they pose any threat to the voice within Roger that said he did not deserve to be loved. So, one could interpret pornography as some kind of solution to the love problem while keeping his view of himself as unlovable intact. But it may have come at the price of keeping real relationships distanced, as evident in the way William described the role of pornography within his former relationship with his girlfriend. She discovered his use of pornography several times, demanding him to quit or else she threatened to leave him. And at every discovery, William made attempts to quit, but kept failing every time (until he searched for help). Reflecting on this period of his life afterwards, William could see that he did not count on the relationship from the beginning:

“It has dawned on me now that I was thinking that she will never stay with me anyway, this will never last so there’s no point in me giving up on this [porn] /.../ During all this time there was a constant fiddling and lying and a constant worry that she would catch me /.../ It happened several times that my girlfriend wanted to have sex but I didn’t because I was afraid she would notice I had had self-sex before”

In this extract it becomes clear how pornography can work as a way of keeping intimate relations at a distance. During his years as a pornography addict, William made big efforts trying to hide the secret of his pornography use from his girlfriend, thus maintaining a distance between them. He even refrained from having sex with her, not because of a lack of libido, but purely out of worry that she would find out about his use of pornography earlier during the day (which he laughingly says he imagined would be evident from his lacking amount of sperm). Using pornography in this way, William made sure that his view of himself as lonely was maintained: assuming that the relationship had no hope of lasting regardless of what he did (“she will never stay with me anyway”) he kept watching pornography, thus increasing the risk of it actually happening. Similar to Roger, William expressed a difficulty of receiving and accepting love. This could express itself as William received fellatio; on these occasions he had to fantasize about pornography in order to reach climax:

“I had to fantasize in order to come /.../ It gets so intimate when I’m the only one receiving. You know, that someone cares; when she only interests herself for me and the only thing that matters is my well-being. It was super-hard for me. So it ends up with me not being able to receive love, because all my life I have been thinking that I don’t deserve it. So once I do get it, I don’t know what to do with it, I can’t take it in.”

In this extract, William explains how difficult it has been for him to receive love and how this difficulty could play out in the context of sex. Pornography worked as a way for him to distract himself from what was going on, since what was going on did not with his life-long held view of himself as unlovable (“I can’t take it in”). By using pornography to fulfill the socially and culturally established norm of the man reaching climax in the end he also made sure that his problem with intimacy did not surface to the outside world, thus keeping it safe from the risk of being solved. So it is yet another example of how pornography could work to maintain distance. As William kept reflecting upon his inability to receive love, he remembered still more vivid examples of how this could manifest:

“As a kid, if someone stood up for me or showed that they cared, or thought about my feelings, I started to cry because i didn’t think anyone cared - cared about me in that way, that somebody wanted any good, for me.”

Me: It sounds tough.

W: Yes. When you look at it like this, in retrospect, it’s goddamn shit to be a kid. It turns into an emotional hell in some way, without you knowing it. And being alone in it also. Hm.”

This extract shows how deeply the assumption of being unlovable was rooted in William. There is a parallel between the little child crying at the well-willingness of others and his difficulties to receive sex as an adult. The strong language used as he described his childhood (“goddamn shit”) might point at some sort of, perhaps healthy, anger felt about the conditions under which he grew up. It might be interpreted that the very capability to express one’s experiences as “an emotional hell” is a sign of being able to both distance oneself from something and to call it by its (subjectively) right name. It is quite a different form of distancing than that which has to do with the abuse of pornography.

Control and vengeance. This theme addresses pornography as a way of turning feelings of helplessness and incapability into its counterparts power and control, and also pornography as a way of getting a feeling of revenge for failures experienced in earlier relationships with girls. Steven grew up with a feeling of being powerless in many situations: at home, where his divorced parents were fighting psychologically and physically, as well as in school, where he was bullied. At home he felt he had to take care of his mother, who often expressed intense emotions of abandonment while she was dating different men. In order to make her happy again, Steven used to dress up as a cartoon super hero, “because that’s what makes mum happy, I thought, but it didn’t!”. In the extract below, Steven made a link between this chronic sense of helplessness and his pornography use:

“I struggled to get some control over my existence because I had no control at home /.../ But it didn’t work out, because I was just a child! I couldn’t control the situation as I thought I could. The only thing I could control was the porn. There, I could control the women in the movies and be in a position

of power, getting ejaculation, anxiety reduction, and use them in the way I wanted, completely without risk of feeling shame or fear, or getting humiliated or rejected”

In the extract above, Steven describes how the situation at home was beyond his control. Despite struggles to be on top of things, illustrated symbolically by the use of super hero costumes, he sees now how he “was just a child” without the tools to set things straight in the chaos at home. In this context, pornography became his solution, a safe place where at least he could feel some sort of control over “the women in the movies”; a kind of compromise for the lack of real influence over the state of affairs at home. And while watching pornography - as opposed to the way he experienced himself in school where he had lost popularity and the company of girls - he was “completely without risk of feeling shame or fear, or getting humiliated or rejected”. The superhero made a devastating come-back in the fantasy land of naked women: submissive and attendant to his needs in a way the real women of his childhood never were. In a similar way to Steven, William described how he struggled to control the women of his life. By always being attendant to their whims and needs, he nurtured a hope of one day getting the love and attention he felt he was in a chronic lack of since birth.

“I’ve taken care of others and always thought about their feelings, and by doing so also I’ve also tried to control them, but people do as they want! And not what I want, never. /.../ It built up to this great frustration, being powerless, because I cannot control these people in my life /.../ so it was my way of regaining the control in some sense, to assert myself - that I can control what I can see and how much. In a way you are like God, it’s like the most intimate thing you can do with another person and I’ve got control over it”

In this extract William admits that his caretaking behaviours towards women was partly motivated by a wish to control them (though I interpret “control” in this context mainly as a wish to keep the women of his life, his mother and his girlfriend, emotionally stable). In trying to control their well-being, and failing to do so, he himself became emotionally dysregulated as he was struck by frustration and feelings of impotence; states which he then used pornography to get out of. In pornography he could reverse this impotence into a God-like state where he could control “the most intimate thing”. When asked about his pornography preferences he told how he started out with soft pornography, where the enjoyment of the woman was the turn-on, but how he gradually shifted towards more violent pornography that focused on “pushing down, power, control”. This escalation coincided with the growing insight that however much he tried to satisfy the needs of his girlfriend, she never started to take care of him in the same way, as he had hoped. When asked what it was about porn involving humiliation that appealed to him he replied:

“I think it was because I was frustrated that I was never given anything, from the world around me, and the ones who didn’t give me anything were the women. /.../ My mum for example, she’s just sitting there, talking to herself, about herself, with herself, not at all interested with me. And my girlfriend, I did everything for her, everything she asked for, and then if I asked her for something she could be just like, ‘no.’”

In this extract it is as if pornography can provide some sort of revenge for injustices William experienced in his relationships with women. It shows how the theme of control in

pornography can take different shapes: as a way of controlling one's own emotions in quite a straightforward way, but also as an experience of controlling others in a sadistic and aggressive way, taking revenge for relational injustices. The following extract from the interview with Steven further illuminates how reality and fiction work together in providing a feeling of revenge in pornography:

“There was also this hate-thing. I could use these persons that I fantasized about, and who never gave me any validation, in porn. So at least I could fantasize about them and have self-sex to them, and like imagine them in these situations”

The “hate-thing” described above is another example of Stevens capability to use fantasy and imagination to cope with the disappointments of early childhood (the persons referred to in the extract are his classmates when he was young). Not only could he, by watching pornography, compensate for the lack of control at home: he was also able to, in his imagination, fit in the faces of real girls from school on the naked bodies in the pornographic movies, and thus perhaps re-establish some sense of pride while achieving anxiety reduction through ejaculation. Just like William felt let down by the women of his life, so did Steven, and for both of them pornography became a solution in regaining a sense of control and revenge.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore former male pornography addicts' understanding of their experiences with pornography. The purpose was also to see in what way psychoanalytic theory could contribute to a further understanding of these experiences.

The result points at a multitude of meanings that the experience of pornography addiction can have to the individual. The informants understood their pornography addiction partly as a consequence of the circumstances under which they grew up, for example as a (somewhat paradoxical) way to get rid of intense feelings of shame associated with sexuality within the family, or as a consequence of being brought up in a home without boundaries. The experience of using pornography was described as being encapsulated in a bubble; as a search for something relationally meaningful; and also as an experience of being incongruent with one's own values and moral. Pornography was also interpreted by the participants as a solution to different life problems with deep roots in their sense of self: a solution to a sense of being lonely, rejected or unworthy of love. In this context, pornography provided the informants with an experience of intimacy, of control and of revenge for perceived relational injustices. In light of these findings the psychoanalytic theory of defense mechanisms was found to be useful in furthering the understanding of the condition of pornography addiction. Below follows a section that look at some aspects of the result from the perspective of defense mechanisms.

Pornography use as a defense mechanism.

The concept of psychological defenses is an essential building block of psychoanalytic theory. Defenses are conceptualized as an uncounscious tactic the individual deploys in order to get rid of anxiety, either by shutting off different parts of the self or - as in more pathologically structured individuals - by tweaking the perception of external reality. The different types of defense mechanisms have been enumerated and described in great detail by, among others, McWilliams (2011). Can theories of defense mechanisms deepen the analysis of the accounts

in the present study? All of the informants described their pornography use as a way of dealing with painful feelings, ranging from mere stress to chronic feelings of loneliness. In that sense, it doesn't live up to the criteria of defense mechanisms being *uncconscious* processes, and could perhaps better be described as a flawed coping strategy. It should be remembered, however, that at the time of the interviews the participants had all ceased their addictive behaviour and probably had a degree of insight they were incapable of during their time as active pornography addicts. Furthermore, there might be aspects of the participants' choice of pornography as a coping strategy that is beyond the realm of conscious reflexion, aspects which could be illuminated by theories of defensive mechanisms. In the section below, a couple of defense mechanisms will be described and applied to the accounts of the informants

Sexualization. In the early writings of Freud (1905) sexual energy was seen as a healthy force underlying all human activities, and defenses were seen as a way to suppress this energy because it had been associated with anxiety due to the demands of parents and society to act "civilized". Since then, however, many clinicians have observed how sex itself can be used defensively, "to master anxiety, to restore self-esteem, to offset shame, or to distract from a sense of inner deadness" (McWilliams, 2011, p. 122). Stoller (1991) described how childhood trauma can be psychologically mastered by sexualizing the very scenario that traumatized the individual: by incorporating aspects of the trauma into one's sexual fantasies one can turn terror or pain into victory (symbolically) at the moment of orgasm. As seen in the result section above, this theme of using sex as a way of regaining a sense of power and control was present in the accounts of William and Steven.

William. As he talked about his preference for pornography involving humiliation of women William associated to his mother and girlfriend whom he felt never gave *him* anything: he was only there to satisfy *their* needs. He described how this situation made him frustrated. Using the theory of sexualization as a defense mechanism, one can interpret Williams' use of pornography as a way to sexualize his feelings of anger towards these women. Why, then, this need to fuse feelings of anger with sexual excitement? Maybe the function of sexualizing the anger (by watching humiliating pornography) was to distract William from the relational meaning of the angry feelings; it would have been too frightening to direct the anger towards the real people whom these feelings concerned (that is, his girlfriend and mother). The fear of placing the anger where it belongs should not come as a big surprise: the human species is inherently social and people are willing to sacrifice a lot of their pride and integrity in order to sustain relationships. William described how the pattern of always adjusting his behaviours in response to others had followed him throughout his whole life. In the unconscious fantasies of William, his rage towards these women might have been coupled with a frightening image of him destroying them with the forcefulness of his anger, making the anger too anxiety-ridden to be dealt with directly; hence the need to cover the anger up by sexualizing it. This interpretation is not congruent with Freud's notion of defenses as a way for the neurotic to keep sexual impulses out of awareness. On the contrary, here William *uses* his sexual drive to defend himself from the anxiety associated with the anger towards his mother and his girlfriend. Following this line of reasoning, it could also be interpreted as some kind of displacement as the anger gets relocated from his real relationships and acted out in the form of violent pornography consumption.

Steven. Steven reflected on his preference for pornography involving adultery and linked it to his childhood where he was exposed to his mother's sex- and love affairs. He described vividly how he tried to take control over his existence at home, and how he, in failing to do so, turned to pornography and masturbation as a means to get a compensatory experience of control. As the maternal instance at home failed in helping Steven regulate his emotional state he found pornography helped him to control his emotions, helped him console himself. It resembles quite well what the psychoanalytic literature presented above says about sexual acts

as a strategy to master anxiety. One could also speculate whether his preference for pornography involving adultery has anything to do with the fact that he as a child witnessed his mother having sex with strangers, an event which could possibly be interpreted as traumatic. The clinical literature is full of examples of how traumatized individuals experience a compulsion to symbolically repeat the event that traumatized them in an attempt to master these events psychologically (McWilliams, 2011). By identifying with the characters committing adultery in the pornographic movies Steven succeeds in flipping the roles to his favor - from victim to perpetrator. It is also possible to apply Stollers (1991) closely related theory of perversion as a way of turning traumatic childhood events into victory by sexualizing them. By using the scenario of betrayal (adultery) – reflected in Stevens past by the mother figure giving herself away to stranger men – as an object for sexual excitement Steven succeeds in turning terror and impotence into triumph and victory at the moment of orgasm.

Primitive withdrawal and splitting of the ego. The defensive strategy of primitive withdrawal means the individual withdraws into his or her inner world in order to escape anxiety associated with interpersonal situations or with external reality in general (McWilliams, 2011). For example, it could take the form of fantasizing, reading books, playing videogames or, as in the present study, watching pornography – anything that serves to encapsulate the individual from outer reality. To most people, these activities do not become a problem, but there is a potential to use them as a way of disconnecting from the world. People within the schizoid personality spectrum rely heavily on this defense mechanism, ranging from severely autistic states to artists with a healthy ability to draw from their rich inner lives in their commenting on the outside world (McWilliams 2011). However, people who rely on primitive withdrawal are not only disconnecting from the outer world, they also keep their own need for relatedness and attachment at a distance, resulting in a feeling of “nothingness”, “a black hole”, “a shell”, “frozen” and “not belonging to the world”, as the clients in O’Reilly-Knapp’s article (2001, p. 46) put it. Theoretical and empirical works suggest that this mode of functioning has its roots in an insecure attachment style where the child has repeatedly - in times of emotional distress - experienced the absence of a responsive caretaker, resulting in a detachment from the need itself, and thereby a detachment from a part of the self (O’Reilly-Knapp, 2011).

Several of the participants described how they used pornography as a way of escaping external reality, which was perceived as uncontrollable or unable to satisfy relational needs. Pornography became a fantasy land where the informants had control over their experiences, over “the most intimate thing”. William explained how he was present only inside his own brain, wanting to “shut off the outside world”. It also seems that this defensive strategy came at the price of splitting off parts of the self as well. Roger described this experience using his own body: he said he felt nothing from his chest and down as he was immersed in pornography. It resembles how Fairbairn (1952, referred to in O’Reilly-Knapp, 2011) describes the splitting of the ego in normal as well as pathological development.

According to this theory the child has one part of the self in contact with external reality, called the central ego, trying to cope with the demands of the outer world. At the same time, the child carries within itself (hidden from the outside world) another part of the ego called the libidinal ego, where the wants and needs are stored; this part of the child is withdrawn from the outside world as a result of inevitable disappointments. This is described as the first split of the ego. The second split occurs as the libidinal ego, crushed by the disappointments of reality, gets an offspring in the form of the anti-libidinal ego: an inner structure who punishes the libidinal ego for having all these selfish wants and needs and whose function is to diminish the desires (Fairbairn, 1952, referred to in O’Reilly-Knapp, 2001).

This theory of the ego applies to both normal and pathological development; in the latter case the splitting of the psychic structure is thought to be exaggerated in a way that makes the total self felt as drained of power, empty or lacking energy (Igra, 1983). This theory illuminates

well the process of withdrawal which the informants described, which seems to be two-fold: pornography as an escape from external reality as well as from parts of the self. Furthermore, the antilibidinal ego is thought to be a persecutory and aggressive instance which, apart from attacking one's own wishes attacks desired objects in the outside world (Igra, 1983). This resembles the way Steven described his use of pornography as a "hate-thing": when his love objects in school didn't give him the attention he wanted he turned to pornography where he could fantasize about them in sexual situations, subsumed under his control. As described by Fairbairn (1952, referred to in O'Reilly-Knapp, 2011), one solution to the absence of gratification is to direct the hate towards one's own desires, but one might as well direct it towards the objects desired.

Conclusion

The psychoanalytic concepts of sexualization and primitive withdrawal was found to be useful in interpreting the accounts. The idea that sexualization of feelings - for example anger - serves to diminish anxiety associated with the relational significance of that feeling proved to be useful in deepening the interpretation of the material. This way of interpreting the use of pornography could perhaps also explain some of the specific pornography preferences reported. Assuming that porn functions as a way of sexualizing anxiety-ridden feelings such as anger, it is not far-fetched to think that one's preferences will be coloured by those underlying primary feelings. In the case of anger, for example, pornography depicting violent or aggressive scenarios would be preferred, as was the case for William. Therefore, the present study expands upon the proposal by Birchard (2001) that pornography can act as a substitution for real relationships. Not only may pornography work as a substitution for relationships, it may also provide a safe arena where forbidden feelings belonging to one's real relationships can be acted out. Furthermore, theories of primitive withdrawal helped to illuminate the way pornography worked as an escape from external reality at the price of escaping, and shutting down, aspects of the self as well (that is, one's relational needs and wishes).

Limitations and future research

The informants were all recruited from an anonymous self-help group for sex- and love addicts. It means they had already been talking a lot about their problems. Several of them had also been in other psychotherapeutic treatments throughout their time as pornography addicts. This means they had probably already to some degree created a narrative with regards to their addiction. It is also likely that this narrative had been influenced by the treatments they had been in, something which could be noticed some times during the interview when the participants used similar language to describe their problems. This was not in itself a problem for the study: the method of IPA assumes that our experiences are influenced by many different factors, among them socio-cultural ones such as the discourses of these treatments programs. However, other methods, such as discourse analysis, might have been more apt at analyzing how this treatment-language shaped the subjectivity of the participants.

The fact that they had already been in different psychotherapeutic treatments also has consequences for the psychoanalytic ambitions of the study. During the analysis I was struck by how much material of psychoanalytic interest there was in the transcript. Sometimes they even used psychoanalytic concepts to describe their experiences. This may be due to past therapies where they have been socialized into thinking about their problems in a certain way rather than the explanatory power of psychoanalytic theories.

Finally, the fact that the studied group consisted solely of men need to be addressed. It may not be surprising since the vast majority of people suffering from pornography addiction are men (Weiss, 2015). However, researching pornography addiction among women could help illuminating the way in which gender might influence the experience of this condition.

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