

Opponent's review of the Master's Thesis

Title: Access to sexual healthcare is a feminist issue: Analysis of queer-friendliness and accessibility of STI testing clinics in Berlin, Germany

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The diploma thesis focuses on the possibilities of access to sexual healthcare – specifically to tests for sexually transmitted infections – for queer women in Berlin. The author has a strong personal interest in the topic, and in her thesis, she builds on her good knowledge of the environment and relevant contexts of the examined issue based, among other things, on her work as a sex educator. However, the framing of the specific objectives is somewhat vague and without a clear direction: “to evaluate queer femmes’ access to sexual healthcare, and to conduct the research leading to such evaluation in a truly feminist way” (p. 1). The introductory chapters generally lack a thorough elaboration of the research problem – an explanation of its essence, why its solution is important (whether in terms of developing the existing findings or social relevance), and who should be interested in the outcome. Without clarifying these transpersonal “whys”, a number of the subsequent, albeit interesting reflections seems a bit tedious.

The focus is better clarified in the chapter dealing with the theoretical grounding and existing findings. This chapter (as well as the subsequent discussion on the choice of methodology) shows the reader very clearly that the text has been written by a very capable writer who knows the context of relevant knowledge very well. Regarding the theoretical background, the thesis claims allegiance, broadly speaking, to constructivism, specifically to Black and post-colonial feminism, the standpoint theory, or the disability theory. The author skilfully “circumnavigates” theoretical literature and is able to precisely identify what aspects of her topic may be affected by its various subtle planes and how. She has clearly exposed in what ways access to STI testing is a relevant social and sociological problem. She also reveals the gender dimension and in accordance with the chosen theoretical framework, she consistently puts emphasis on the intersectional perspective.

Turning now to the parts of the thesis dealing with the research itself, in my opinion, they are unfortunately affected by the aforementioned inadequate definition of the research problem (and perhaps by unclear research motivation). Most research questions can be hardly described as truly research questions. They are rather of a fact-finding or dichotomous nature. Answers to them lie in description and their importance and potential benefits are not very clear. This applies to the very first question (“How many sexual healthcare centers are in Berlin, where are they located, and how do they function?”), but partly also to the second one (“How many of Berlin’s sexual healthcare centers specifically cater to queer femmes?”). Of what avail is such information to readers who are not Berlin’s queer women? Should the answers show whether the services are adequate, the thesis would also have to use the analysis of the real needs and perceived deficits, which it does not. Unfortunately, other research questions are problematic as well. The question “Is it necessary to have a German insurance in order to get tested for STIs in Berlin?” is narrowly fact-finding as well. While the focus of the last but one question (“How can I use my own experience with STI testing at Berlin’s sexual healthcare centers as a method of feminist research?”) on the methodological

aspects could lead to interesting reflections, it should have to be clearly defined to show the transpersonal benefits of the research. This applies even more significantly to the last question (“Will repeated STI testing through blood drawing help me get rid of my fear of blood tests?”).

Regarding the methodology, the author has decided to use online questionnaires aimed at queer women with experience of STI testing (70 responses) and disabled queer women (5 responses). The data obtained from the questionnaires are largely seen as a way of familiarization with the environment, the basis for the actual autoethnography, considered by the author as the main method. The autoethnographic research was followed by 7 semi-structured interviews with women who had been tested in Berlin within the past year to compare their experiences. While I appreciate some methodological multilayeredness, due to the nature of the research questions, I am not sure whether autoethnography is the best method (some of the research questions had to be answered through desk research; others would probably be better answered using questionnaires or interviews).

In the context of the proclaimed author’s tendency towards feminist methodology, I was also surprised by the fact that the questionnaires give little space to open questions or questions focused on the experiences of other women with the services provided, the perceived shortcomings, or suggested improvements. In this regard, other actors were not given voice, which means the potential of the distributed questionnaire was untapped.

However, this seems to be part of a wider (and conscious) approach of the author. Although she sees her work as feminist research and emphasizes feminist ethics and the benefits of the findings for the transformation of gendered injustice, she also formulates the following remarkable statement (p. 34):

“[I]n many ways, I see autoethnography as the only ethical method a feminist can employ for their research. In doing so myself, I want to fully embrace my biases, my own positionality and proximity to the topic, and create a work that is fully true to what was experienced without any chance of misinterpretation or communication noise that could occur if the information was obtained from a source different from myself.”

But should not the research that aims to change the structures of the world – albeit taking into account all the restrictions – as honestly as possible try to capture the perspectives and needs of everyone who would be ultimately affected by its results? This question certainly should not surprise the author but I will appreciate if she explains the benefits of her perspective compared to the “conventional approach” (and the corresponding methodological decisions).

The quality of the analysis to a large extent reflects the aspects mentioned above. On the one hand, it confirms the author’s ability to formulate truly insightful observations and approach the researched topic in a deeply reflexive way (although the latter seems to slightly cross the boundaries of moderation). At the same time, however, the analysis often remains incomprehensibly descriptive (e.g. in the descriptions of the service profile, presentation and offer of the centres). Here, the author’s exploration resembles a bit the practices of “user ratings”, not going beyond the interests of the narrowly defined target group. This approach will certainly be well utilizable for creating sex education content or online databases (this possibility is considered in the final chapters); however, in my opinion, the thesis should relate to more general issues. Although the author provides a good summary, it is not a central part

of the text. Moreover, the discussion of the data obtained in the context of the presented theoretical portfolio or any other resources is very implicit. Thus, the aforementioned structure of the work results in rather flat conclusions. One can appreciate the final set of practical recommendations that could tackle the lack of access to sexual healthcare, although, as the author points out, they are only partially based on the research.

While my review may seem quite critical, despite the aforementioned shortcomings, I find the thesis above average in many respects. The author has shown a very good orientation in relevant sources, the ability to process them into a cohesive whole, and a strong ability to work with the data in a reflexive way and consistently use the intersectional perspective. I therefore **recommend the thesis for the defence**, and I suggest evaluating it with the **grade 2**.

Question for discussion:

The title of the thesis starts with the statement “Access to sexual healthcare is a feminist issue“, but its essence (or the situation it is formulated against to) is not explicitly explained in the text. Could the author briefly look at the reasons for this title again and relate the main findings of her research to it?

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