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RESEARCH ARTICLE



That's the Way (I like It): Latent Profiles of Sexual Power Dynamics and Gender Roles

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ABSTRACT

Sexual power dynamics (SPD) regroup sexual interests of dominance, submission, and tender sex. Interest toward sexual domination and/or submission has historically been pathologized and linked with higher levels of sexo-relational distress. Guided by sexual script theory, the consideration of one's attitudes toward gender roles (GR), as either gender transcendent or gender-linked, might help identify different profiles of clients in sex therapy. To our knowledge, studies have yet to explore the different profiles while considering both SPD and GR. The scarcity of research on these variables limits our understanding of their implications for individuals' sexo-relational well-being. The current study aimed to explore the presence of latent profiles based on SPD and GR reported by clients in sex therapy, and to compare the resulting profiles on possible correlates (i.e., sociodemographic characteristics, romantic attachment, relationship and sexual satisfaction). A sample of 325 adults in sex therapy, completed self-reported questionnaires at intake. Results revealed three profiles: (1) *Dominant stereotypical thinkers* (3.7%), (2) *Tender conflicted traditionalists* (15.4%), and (3) *Flexible and coherent lovers* (80.9%). Inter-profile comparisons revealed significant differences regarding gender, age, avoidant attachment and relationship satisfaction. Overall, results suggest the presence of an intricacy between SPD and GR, which would benefit from further exploration.

Introduction

Social interactions intrinsically involve power dynamics (Reis et al., 2000), where there is a gendered expectation of inequality where men hold more power than women (Connell, 1987, 1995). These social scripts of gendered expectations also map people's sexual behaviors or interests, where traditional heteronormative sexual scripts associate men with sexual dominance and women with sexual submissiveness (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007). In the sexual realm, sexual power dynamics (SPD) are characterized by an interest toward sexual practices involving the presence (i.e., sexual dominance and/or submissiveness) or absence (i.e., tender sex; Bolduc et al., 2024) of a sexual hierarchy between partners. Tender sex, also referenced as romantic or vanilla sex, is characterized by an approach to sexuality that emphasizes gentleness, love, emotional connection, and security, where the need to feel loved by one's partner and mutual trust is paramount (Birnbaum, 2007; Bolduc et al., 2024; Lehmler, 2018). Tender sex is therefore expressed through special attention to the other, their well-being, and emotional connection, thus ensuring an intimate experience based on love and trust.

A sexual hierarchy typically implies a partner that takes charge of leading and initiating sexual contacts, namely dominant, while the other partner likes letting the other one lead and follows the other's rhythm, leaning toward submission (Bolduc et al., 2024). Meanwhile in tender sex, dynamics where a sexual hierarchy is absent, the primal element is centered on feeling safe and connected to the partner and not so much about who is leading during sex, where partners have a cooperative dynamic regarding sexual exchanges, not having a set role when it comes to who takes charge (Birnbaum, 2007; Bolduc et al., 2024; Lehmler, 2018).

Interest toward sexual domination and/or submission has historically been pathologized and found to be associated with high levels of relationship and sexual distress, as well as patterns of insecure attachment (Brown et al., 2020). However, recent studies that examined these links have either found no relationship (Pascoal et al., 2015; Rogak & Connor, 2018) or a positive one (i.e., higher levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction; Pascoal et al., 2015; Strizzi et al., 2021; Ten Brink et al., 2021; Vander Molen et al., 2021; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). These differences highlight the need to explore potential heterogeneous profiles of sexual power dynamics to better understand these inconsistencies. In addition, relying on a person-oriented approach to identify profiles in adults currently in sex therapy, may offer significant cues on the profile of people who seek help that might guide well-tailored interventions. Guided by sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), which highlight the interrelations between sexual behavior and culturally prescribed expectations of behaviors, the consideration of an interest toward sexual practices of domination, submission and/or tender sex along with gender roles might help identify meaningful profiles.

Sexual power dynamics (SPD)

SPD regroups three main sexual interests, namely domination, submission, and tender sex. The concept of SPD does not reflect if a person identifies or not with the subculture of BDSM (i.e., bondage-discipline, domination-submission, sadism-masochism), as these are specific sexual practices imbricated within a pre-established and formal agreement (Brown et al., 2020). SPD are rather inclusive of an array of different sexual realities. A person might express interest in sexual domination and/or submission, without identifying as practicing BDSM. In fact, a study showed that the majority (80%) of individuals reporting at least one BDSM-related behavior (e.g., using handcuffs) did not identify as BDSM practitioners (Coppens et al., 2020), supporting the idea that SPD may be prevalent and distinct from BDSM. Yet, most scientific knowledge associated with SPD remains solely focused on BDSM-related fantasies and behaviors. Although studies on SPD are lacking, this literature on BDSM offers pertinent background to draw from and further examine SPD even within non-BDSM practitioners.

In their systematic scoping review Brown et al. (2020) reported that the prevalence of BDSM interest among the general population varies widely from 2% (Australia; Richters et al., 2003) to 70% (Belgium; Holvoet et al., 2017), whereas the prevalence of domination-submission fantasies in the general population varies from 40% to 65% (Canada and United States; Canivet et al., 2022; Canada; Joyal et al., 2015). Brown et al. (2020) postulated that interest for SPD is considerably higher than the average rate of people engaging in BDSM practices, as fantasies represent a safer space in which individuals can explore their interests without the need for a willing partner (Canivet et al., 2022).

Studies comparing BDSM to non-BDSM groups highlighted the absence of differences regarding relationship and sexual satisfaction (Kimberly et al., 2018; Rogak & Connor, 2018), and romantic attachment (Connolly, 2006; Richters et al., 2008). However, Wismeijer and van Assen's (2013) study found differences where the non-BDSM group reported higher attachment insecurities (i.e., more anxious and avoidant attachment) compared to dominant and submissive groups of BDSM practitioners. Interestingly, differences were also found among BDSM subgroups, where dominants had higher levels of attachment insecurities in comparison to the submissive subgroup. Wismeijer and van Assen (2013) specified that they could not explain this distinction, where the underlying reasons remain unclear. These findings suggest that SPD, as expressed in BDSM or non-BDSM practices, may interact with sexo-relational well-being in complex ways.

Beyond group comparisons, SPD has been linked to key sexo-relational well-being variables. Birnbaum (2007) observed in a community sample a weak link ($r < .30$) between anxious attachment and sexual fantasies of submission and tender sex. Similarly, in a clinical sample small correlations have been found between all three SPD interests and sexo-relational variables, including romantic attachment, relationship and sexual satisfaction (Bolduc et al., 2024). The presence of such small effect size might reflect a heterogeneous sample and the relevance to explore the existence of distinct SPD profiles. Identifying these profiles is essential for understanding the diversity of experiences when it comes to SPD interests and their implications for sexo-relational well-being.

Gendered differences have been documented in link with sexual fantasies and interests (e.g., Lammers & Imhoff, 2016). Mainly, men tend to report more interest toward sexual domination whereas women report more interest toward sexual submission (Botta et al., 2019; Joyal et al., 2015; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Yost & Hunter, 2012; Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004). Similarly, women tend to be more interested in tender sex compared to men (Joyal et al., 2015; Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004). Another study found that women associated sex with submission, while men did not associate dominance with sex (Sanchez et al., 2006) while other studies did not find any gendered differences (e.g., Richters et al., 2003). These differences not only highlight the relevance to examine self-reported gender identity among different profiles of SPD, but also that other gender-related factors such as the adherence to gendered roles need to be considered when identifying different profiles of SPD. While empirical data are needed to further understand the complexities involving GR and SPD, the sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) offer a useful framework to guide such exploration.

Sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) highlights how sexual behaviors or interests are mapped out based on cultural expectations and norms, which are gendered. For example, within a heterosexual couple, men tend to have more control (i.e., dominant) than women (i.e., submissive), which is supported by a patriarchal social structure and its resulting hegemonic masculinity. Studies found mixed results with no differences regarding the adherence to gendered roles between BDSM interests/practitioners and non-BDSM interest/practitioner groups (e.g., Shulman & Home, 2006), while other studies revealed some differences. For instance, Klement et al. (2017) found that the BDSM group reported lower levels of benevolent sexism (i.e., paternalistic attitudes toward women) as well as lower acceptance of rape myths and victim blaming as compared to non-BDSM adults from the community and college students. Such results suggest that gendered differences regarding SPD may be dependent on the adherence to traditional cultural values regarding masculinity and femininity. As BDSM communities seem to endorse less traditional values, profiles including both SPD and GR might reveal such differences. Examining levels of gender and social role adherence may reveal relevant SPD profiles in men and women (e.g., women who adhere less strongly to gendered roles may be more interested toward sexual dominance). Yet, research is needed to examine these latent SPD and GR profiles, as well as their implications for sexo-relational well-being.

Gender roles (GR)

Gender roles may be defined as the degree to which a person adheres to the belief that social roles, attitudes and expectations are gendered or not (Baber & Tucker, 2006), regrouping two categories: gender transcendent (i.e., social roles, attitudes and expectations are not gendered) and gender-linked (i.e., certain social roles, attitudes and expectations are associated with a specific gender). Examining the interplay between SPD and GR may help identify and uncover meaningful distinct profiles, particularly regarding their implications for sexo-relational well-being.

Studies also highlight the relevance of considering possible sociodemographic characteristics and sexo-relational variables differences among the identified profiles. Interestingly, research has indicated that GR adherence varies across sociodemographic groups. Men and younger

individuals, for example, tend to adhere more strongly to traditional gendered roles (i.e., gender-linked; Baber & Tucker, 2006). Furthermore, research shows that adherence to more rigid gendered roles is associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction in heterosexual couples (e.g., Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Shukla & Kapoor, 1990). O'Neil (2008) reviewed data on GR conflict, where was found to be associated with lower levels of sexo-relational well-being. Some discrepancies were found between the reviewed data, where some found this to be present only in men, and others only in women (O'Neil, 2008). Conversely, other studies have shown that partners' equality in terms of GR is related to relationship satisfaction (i.e., lower rates of divorce; Cooke, 2006; Frisco & Williams, 2003) and to greater comfort and being more open to sexual communication as well as negotiate sexual practices (Shearer et al., 2005), which are both greatly associated with higher levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction (e.g., Mallory, 2022). In light of this, combining both SPD, interest toward sexual hierarchy, and GR could allow for distinct latent patterns (i.e., profiles) to better understand how they differ on sexo-relational correlates.

Relevance of examining SPD and GR in a clinical sample of clients seeking sex therapy

Examining profiles of SPD and GR may be especially relevant for individuals in sex therapy. In fact, when it comes to sex therapy the main focus pertains to promoting sexo-relational well-being. Compared to the general population, individuals in sex therapy indeed tend to report lower levels of sexual (Lafortune et al., 2023) and relationship satisfaction, as well as more insecurities in their romantic attachment (Bigras et al., 2017; Lafrenaye-Dugas et al., 2018). Brandon and Morgentaler (2016) explicitly mentioned that “confusion regarding gender role expression [...] affects dyadic sexual behavior” (p. 97) and emphasized that individual and relational distress was associated with GR based on their respective clinical practices. O'Neil (2008) reported that most studies relied on samples of individuals from the general population, and emphasized the need for more research based on clinical samples to inform and guide clinical intervention. Also, there is a lack of clinical research focused on SPD. Clinically-based sex research is needed to deepen our understanding of the characteristics of sex therapy clients and identify relevant variables that may be associated with sexo-relational difficulties. Results from clinical samples are also crucial to provide insights into which patterns of SPD and GR may be related to sexo-relational well-being (i.e., sexual distress and relational satisfaction), to inform on sex-therapy clients' characteristics and guide the development of more personalized and tailored interventions. Those elements emphasize the specific need to conduct studies within clinical samples of adults seeking sex therapy.

Latent profile analyses (LPA)

Given that, to our knowledge, there is limited work on the intersection of research on both SPD and GR, and that both constructs are theoretically related, using a person-centered analysis (i.e., latent profile analyses, LPA) may be an efficient strategy to extract meaningful typologies with both constructs. LPA will allow to capture the intricacies of patterns arisen from combining both SPD and GR and may better reflect the diversity of individuals in our current cultural context. Further analyses exploring possible correlates (i.e., sociodemographic and sexo-relational well-being) associated with the emerged profiles will allow for a better delineation of the distinctive features of each profile. Therefore, LPA represents an optimal method to palliate the gap in research concerning SPD and GR amongst sex therapy clients.

Objectives of the current study

This study used a latent profile analysis to explore how sexual power dynamics (SPD) and gender roles (GR) intersect to form distinct profiles among individuals seeking sex therapy. To address this question, the study was structured around three distinct objectives:

1. Identify latent profiles: Using a person-centered analytic approach, we aimed to uncover latent profiles based on participants' interests in SPD (i.e., sexual dominance, submission, and tender sex) and their adherence to GR (i.e., gender-transcendent or gender-linked attitudes).
2. Compare profiles on sociodemographic variables: We sought to determine whether profile membership differed significantly according to covariates such as age, Country of origin, gender, sexual orientation, and relationship status.
3. Examine the differences within the profiles on sexo-relational correlates: The study further aimed to evaluate whether the identified profiles were associated with variations in romantic attachment (e.g., anxiety, avoidance), relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction.

By addressing these objectives, this work provides a nuanced understanding of how SPD and GR interplay within a clinical context, offering insights into their implications for sexo-relational well-being and sex therapy. Given the study's exploratory nature, no specific hypothesis was formulated.

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 325 adults currently in sex therapy. Participants self-identified as women (62.5%), men (33.2%), non-binary or fluid/queer/gender nonconforming (4.3%), with a mean age of 33.5 years ($SD=10.8$, ranging from 18 to 78). Most of the sample identified as cisgender (96.3%), with a lesser representation of trans (1.5%), intersex (0.3%), other (1.2%; e.g., questioning) and some opted not to respond (0.6%). Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. The majority of participants were Canadian (85.2%), full-time or part-time employees (66.8%), and university graduates (54.1%). Most participants were in a romantic relationship (79.4%).

Recruitment took place between 2019 and 2022. Clients of graduate interns providing sex therapy services in the province of Québec were invited to participate in the study during the initial assessment (first few sessions). Through the consent form, clients were informed of their rights to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study, without affecting the services received. The inclusion criteria were to be at least 18 years of age and to be able to read, understand and answer the questionnaires in French or English. Participants completed self-reported questionnaires online via the secure Qualtrics platform, using an alphanumeric code to warrant their anonymity. They could authorize the research team to forward a summary of interpreted results to their interns and clinical supervisor to assist in the identification of treatment needs. The study was authorized by the university's ethics committee.

Measures

A total of five indicator variables were used to derive the latent profiles. Then, eight correlates were tested to ascertain differences between profiles.

Indicator variables

Sexual power dynamics. SPD were assessed with the Brief Sexual Power Dynamics Questionnaire (BSPDQ; Bolduc et al., 2024). The questionnaire includes three subscales of 3-item measuring individuals' sexual interest toward SPD, namely: sexual dominance, sexual submission, and tender sex. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1= not at all true to 5=very true. The mean score to each subscale was calculated, where higher scores represent a higher interest toward SPD. In the current study, the Cronbach's α were .84 for sexual submission subscale, .88 for sexual dominance subscale and .70 for tender sex subscale.

Table 1. Sample characteristics ($N = 325$).

Characteristics	Participants (%)
Gender identity	
Women	62.5
Men	33.2
NB+ (i.e., non-binary, fluid/queer/gender nonconforming)	4.3
Country of origin	
Canada	85.2
Other	14.8
Sexual orientation	
Straight	72.3
Gay/Lesbian	3.7
Bi+ (i.e., bisexual, pansexual, queer)	17.8
Other (e.g., asexual spectrum, questioning)	5.5
Opted not to respond	0.6
Occupation	
Student	23.1
Full-time or part-time employee	66.8
Unemployed	2.8
At home full-time	1.5
Retired	1.2
Other (e.g., on leave)	3.4
Opted not to respond	1.2
Education	
Elementary school	0.9
High school	11.4
College/CEGEP	33.5
University, bachelor (BA)	40.9
University, graduate (MA/PhD)	13.2
Relationship status	
Single	16.0
In a relationship	79.4
Opted not to respond	4.6
Annual income	
CAD\$19,999 or less	24.6
CAD\$20,000–CAD\$39,999	28.3
CAD\$40,000–CAD\$59,999	20.3
CAD\$60,000 or more	25.3
Opted not to respond	1.5

Gender roles. Attitudes toward GR were measured using the Social Roles Questionnaire (SRQ; Baber & Tucker, 2006), which has two subscales. The Gender Transcendent subscale (GT; 5-item) assess the idea that social roles, attitudes and expectations are not gendered per se (e.g., “People can be both aggressive and nurturing regardless of sex”; Reverse-coded items). The Gender-Linked subscale (GL; 8-item) assesses the level of agreement with belief that certain tasks and roles are associated with a specific gender (e.g., “A father’s major responsibility is to provide financially for his children”, “Mothers should make most decisions about how children are brought up”). Items are responded on a scale ranging from 0% = strongly disagree to 100% = strongly agree. A mean score of each subscale was computed, where a higher score is indicative of a higher level of adherence to stereotyped social and gendered roles. The Cronbach’s α for the GT subscale was .66 and .82 for GL subscale.

Sociodemographic variables

Sociodemographic questionnaire. Participants provided personal (e.g., age, Country of origin, gender, sexual orientation) and relationship information (e.g., relationship status).

Sexo-relational correlates

Romantic attachment. Romantic attachment was evaluated with the 12-item Experiences in Close Relationships questionnaire (ECR-12; Lafontaine et al., 2016). The ECR-12 is composed of two 6-item subscales that assess both dimensions of romantic attachment; anxiety (e.g., “I worry a fair

amount about losing my partner”) and avoidance (e.g., “I do not feel comfortable opening up to a romantic partner”). Participants rate their responses on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. A mean score is calculated for each subscale, where higher scores indicate greater attachment anxiety or avoidance. Mean scores of 3.5 or above on the anxiety subscale indicate an anxious attachment and mean scores of 2.5 or above on the avoidance subscale indicate an avoidant attachment (Brassard et al., 2012). The subscale of anxiety had a Cronbach’s α of .83, whereas avoidance had a value of .86.

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was assessed using the short version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-4; Sabourin et al., 2005; Spanier, 1976). The first three items are scored on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0=never to 5=always (e.g., “In general, can you say that things are going well between you and your partner?”), the fourth item is scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0=extremely unhappy to 6=perfectly happy. A sum was calculated, where higher scores reflect higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Scores of 12 and under indicate dissatisfaction while scores of 13 and above indicate relationship satisfaction (Sabourin et al., 2005). This questionnaire Cronbach’s α value was .78.

Sexual satisfaction. Participants perceived levels of sexual satisfaction were evaluated using the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (GMSEX; Lawrance & Byers, 1995). This 5-item questionnaire uses a 7-point bipolar scale to evaluate the positive and negative dimensions associated with sexuality, such as: my sexuality is, good-bad, pleasant-unpleasant, positive-negative, satisfying-unsatisfying, valuable-worthless. A sum score of all 5 items was used, ranging from 5 to 35, where higher score is associated with a higher level of sexual satisfaction. The questionnaire’s internal consistency was measured with Cronbach’s α , which was of .88.

Statistical analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted in three steps. First, descriptive analyses carried out on SPSS version 27 were used to document sample’s mean scores on each respective scale and sociodemographic information. Second, latent profile analyses (LPA) were conducted through *Mplus* v8.5 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). Profiles were generated based on participants’ scores on the three BSPDQ subscales (i.e., tender sex, domination, submission) and the scores on both SRQ subscales (i.e., Gender Transcendent and Gender-Linked). LPA is a latent variable modeling technique that allows the identification of latent subgroups of participants based on continuous indicators (scores to the scales; Wang & Hanges, 2011). As mentioned by Williams and Kibowski (2016), LPA is “used to identify subgroups of an underlying categorical latent variable with data obtained from cross-sectional designs” (p. 148). The optimal number of latent profiles was selected based on multiple criteria including the examination of statistical fit indices and theoretical interpretability, which is equally important in choosing the final solution (Bauer & Curran, 2003; Dziak et al., 2020). Regarding statistical fit indices we relied on the Akaike’s Information Criterion (AIC; Akaike, 1987), the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC; Schwarz, 1978) as well as Entropy (Celeux & Soromenho, 1996) and the Lo-Mendell-Rubin test (LMR; Lo et al., 2001). For AIC and BIC the scores lower while the number of profiles is increased until the scores rise again. The lowest AIC and BIC scores indicate the optimal number of profiles (Nylund, Asparouhoy, et al., 2007; Nylund, Bellmore, et al., 2007). Stimulation studies suggest that the AIC has a tendency to overestimate the optimal number of profiles. However, the BIC balances model fit and parsimony and has been described as the superior of these indicators (McLachlan & Chang, 2004; Nylund, Asparouhoy, et al., 2007; Nylund, Bellmore, et al., 2007). Therefore, we prioritized the BIC over the AIC in choosing the optimal number of profiles. Entropy is an index reflecting the accuracy of class membership with higher values indicating more precise assignment of participants to latent profiles, a score of 1 is ideal and any score above .80 is

deemed satisfactory (Tein et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2020). The LMR test indicates if an additional profile would cause significant improvement to the model, small probability values ($p < .05$) indicate that the model provides significantly better fit to the observed data than a model with an additional profile (Nylund, Asparouhoy, et al., 2007; Nylund, Bellmore, et al., 2007; Tein et al., 2013). As for the number of participants within a profile, ideally it should regroup at least 5% of the sample (Leiter & Maslach, 2016; Merz & Roesch, 2011). Finally, in selecting the final solution, a balance of all these criteria listed is important to consider, given that there is not one singular criterion that is deemed best.

Third, chi-square tests and ANOVA were conducted on SPSS version 27 to compare profile on correlates (i.e., variables not used to generate profiles). To measure effect size, Cramer's V for chi-square tests and eta squared (η^2) for ANOVA were used. For Cramer's V cutoffs for small, medium and large effect sizes were determined based on the smallest number of categories (r) in the contingency Table (i.e., when $r=2$, .10=small, .30=medium, and .50=large; when $r=3$, .07=small, .21=medium, and .35=large; Cohen, 1988). For f values, benchmarks suggested by Richardson (2011) were used to establish small, medium, and large effects for η^2 (i.e., .0099, .0588, and .1379). The correlates included the following: sociodemographic variables (age, gender, sexual orientation, relationship status), romantic attachment (ECR-12), relationship satisfaction (DAS-4) and sexual satisfaction (GMSEX).

Results

Descriptive data as for means and standard deviations of the total sample are shown in Table 3, as well as the inter-profile comparison on indicator variables (i.e., SPD and gender roles). Details of inter-profile differences on sociodemographic variables are presented in Table 4 and sexo-relational correlates are shown in Table 5 i.e., romantic attachment, relationship and sexual satisfaction).

Latent profile analysis model

Based on the five constructs regrouping sexual power dynamics (i.e., sexual dominance, sexual submission, and tender sex) and gender roles (i.e., gender transcendent and gender-linked), models ranging from one to four latent profiles were examined and compared to select the best solution. The lowest AIC and BIC scores indicated that a four-profile model was optimal, where the second best was the three-profile model (see Table 2). In terms of theoretical interpretability, the three-profile model was chosen over the four-profile model as the extra profile in the later model contained only six participants (1.8%) and did not add relevant information compared to the three-profile model.

Table 2. Fit statistics for LPA models with 1–4 latent profiles.

No. of classes	Log-likelihood	# Parameters	AIC ^a	BIC ^b	ABIC ^c	ENTROPY	LMR ^d	BLRT ^e
1	−4126.349	10	8272.698	8310.537	8278.817	–	–	–
2	−4071.463	16	8174.925	8235.466	8184.716	.864	.002	.000
3	−4035.448	22	8114.896	8198.140	8128.358	.906	.788	.000
4	−4008.631	28	8073.263	8179.210	8090.396	.904	.045	.000

^aAkaike's Information Criterion, ^bBayesian Information Criterion, ^cAdjusted Bayesian Information Criterion, ^d p -value of Lo-Mendell-Rubin likelihood ratio test for 2 vs 3 classes, ^e p -value of Bootstrapped likelihood ratio test for 2 vs 3 profiles and 3 vs 4 profiles.

To further interpret each profile, their statistical distinction on the five variables used was examined (see Table 3). The first profile is labeled *Dominant stereotypical thinkers* ($n=12$; 3.7%), as it regroups participants with the highest scores on sexual dominance (statistically different only compared to participants assigned to the third profile). Regarding gender roles,

Table 3. Inter-profile comparison analyses on indicator variables ($N=325$).

	Total sample ($N=325$)	Dominant stereotypical thinkers ($n=12$)	Tender conflicted traditionalists ($n=50$)	Flexible and coherent lovers ($n=263$)	Statistic	Sig	Effect size
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	F	p	η^2
Sexual power dynamics							
Submissive	3.45 (1.07)	3.00 (0.95) ^a	3.40 (1.07) ^a	3.48 (1.07) ^a	1.25	.288	.008
Dominant	2.28 (1.10)	3.00 (1.28) ^a	2.52 (1.18) ^{a,b}	2.21 (1.06) ^b	4.44	.013	.027
Tender Sex	3.92 (0.94)	3.17 (1.19) ^a	4.14 (0.70) ^b	3.91 (0.95) ^b	4.52	.020	.033
Gender roles							
Gender	13.96 (13.54)	56.42 (19.41) ^a	15.98 (10.17) ^b	11.64 (10.14) ^c	33.6	<.001	.391
Transcendent							
Gender-linked	19.17 (18.31)	38.50 (16.83) ^a	51.98 (12.20) ^b	12.05 (10.08) ^c	311.29	<.001	.659

Note. Means that do not share the same superscript letters on the same line statistically differ at $p < .05$ in Bonferroni-corrected post hoc comparisons. F were used when Levene's test was nonsignificant, due to a heterogeneity of variance, whereas Welch's F were used when Levene's test was significant, highlighting a homogeneity of variance.

this profile is unique in that it had high scores on both gender transcendent (GT) and gender-linked (GL) subscales, compared to the other profiles ($M_{GT} = 56.42$ and $M_{GL} = 38.5$). The second profile is labeled *Tender conflicted traditionalists* ($n=50$; 15.4%), since it consists of individuals with the highest score of tender sex (statistically different only compared to participants in the first profile) and GL, whereas they have the second-lowest scores of GT. The *Tender conflicted traditionalists* were characterized through their incoherence in terms of their scores on gender roles, where, on the one hand, they agree the most with the belief that certain tasks and roles are associated with a specific gender, while also agreeing with the idea that these roles should not be gendered ($M_{GT} = 15.98$ and $M_{GL} = 51.98$). The third profile is labeled *Flexible and coherent lovers* ($n=263$; 80.9%), regrouping individuals with the lowest scores on sexual dominance (compared to participants in the first profile) as well as both gender roles' scales. This profile regroups participants with the lowest scores on both gender roles' scales reflecting their flexibility and coherence toward gender roles ($M_{GT} = 11.64$ and $M_{GL} = 12.05$).

Sociodemographic variables

Group comparison analyses were conducted to compare the three observed profiles according to sociodemographic characteristics (see Table 4). ANOVA indicated a significant difference between profiles as for their age ($F_{(2,322)} = 7.90$, $p = .0002$, $\eta^2 = .062$) which corresponds to a medium effect size (Richardson, 2011). Post hoc Bonferroni comparisons highlighted that the profile of *Tender conflicted traditionalists* regrouped older participants ($M = 39.68$; $SD = 12.62$) whereas the profile of *Flexible and coherent lovers* comprised of younger individuals ($M = 32.27$; $SD = 10.12$), where there is no statistical difference with the *Dominant stereotypical thinkers* ($M = 35.50$; $SD = 8.99$). Chi-square results show a significant difference between profiles as for their gender ($\chi^2(4) = 21.76$, $p < .001$, $V = .183$), with a small effect size (Cohen, 1988). Post hoc Bonferroni comparisons showed that the profile of *Dominant stereotypical thinkers* comprised mostly of men (83.3%, $n=10$ vs 28.5%, $n=75$) and that the profile of *Flexible and coherent lovers* regrouped mostly women (66.2%, $n=174$ vs 16.7%, $n=2$), where there is an equal gender representation amongst *Tender conflicted traditionalists*. As for their sexual orientation, a significant difference was found $\chi^2(6) = 12.89$, $p = .045$, $V = .141$, which corresponds to a small effect size (Cohen, 1988), with no post hoc Bonferroni differences. There were no significant differences across profiles regarding their Country of origin, $\chi^2(2) = .321$, $p = .852$, $V = .031$, nor their relationship status, $\chi^2(2) = 1.22$, $p = .544$, $V = .063$.

Table 4. Inter-profile comparison analyses on sociodemographic variables ($N=325$).

	Dominant stereotypical thinkers ($n=12$)	Tender conflicted traditionalists ($n=50$)	Flexible and coherent lovers ($n=263$)	Statistic	Sig	Effect size
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	Welch's F	p	η^2
Age	35.50 (8.99) ^{a,b}	39.68 (12.62) ^a	32.27 (10.12) ^b	7.90	.002	.062
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	χ^2	p	V
Country of origin				.321	.852	.031
Canada	83.3 (10) ^a	88 (44) ^a	84.8 (223) ^a			
Other	16.7 (2) ^a	12 (6) ^a	15.2 (40) ^a			
Gender				21.76	<.001	.183
Men	83.3 (10) ^a	46.0 (23) ^a	28.5 (75) ^b			
Women	16.7 (2) ^a	54.0 (27) ^{a,b}	66.2 (174) ^b			
NB+	0.0 (0) ^a	0.0 (0) ^a	5.3 (14) ^a			
Sexual orientation				12.89	.045	.141
Straight	100.0 (12) ^a	79.6 (39) ^a	70.2 (184) ^a			
Gay/Lesbian	0.0 (0) ^a	8.2 (4) ^a	3.1 (8) ^a			
Bi+	0.0 (0) ^a	12.2 (6) ^a	19.8 (52) ^a			
Other	0.0 (0) ^a	0.0 (0) ^a	6.9 (18) ^a			
Relationship status				1.22	.544	.063
Single	9.1 (1) ^a	12.8 (6) ^a	17.9 (45) ^a			
In a relationship	90.9 (10) ^a	87.2 (41) ^a	82.1 (207) ^a			

Note. Proportions and means that do not share the same superscript letters on the same line statistically differ at $p < .05$ in Bonferroni-corrected post hoc comparisons.

Sexo-relational correlates

ANOVA (see Table 5) indicated significant differences between profiles in regards to avoidant attachment, $F_{(2,318)} = 4.15$, $p = .017$, $\eta^2 = .025$, and relationship satisfaction, $F_{(2,259)} = 5.71$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .042$, both associated with a small effect size (Richardson, 2011). Post hoc Bonferroni comparisons highlighted that participants assigned to the *Tender conflicted traditionalist* profile had a higher mean score of avoidant attachment ($M=3.21$; $SD=1.22$) compared to individuals from the *Flexible and coherent lovers* profile ($M=2.71$; $SD=1.24$), but both profiles had no statistical difference with the *Dominant stereotypical thinkers* ($M=3.28$; $SD=1.50$). All three profiles' mean scores are above the cutoff score as established by Brassard et al. (2012), reflecting the presence of avoidant attachment within the overall sample.

As for relationship satisfaction, post hoc Bonferroni showed that participants in the *Flexible and coherent lovers* profile had a higher level of relationship satisfaction ($M=13.86$; $SD=3.25$) compared to participants in the *Tender conflicted traditionalists* profile ($M=11.98$; $SD=3.82$), but no significant difference with *Dominant stereotypical thinkers* ($M=12.91$; $SD=2.70$). According to the cutoff scores, *Flexible and coherent lovers* profile is also the only group that has a score indicating relationship satisfaction, where the other two profiles indicate relational dissatisfaction (Sabourin et al., 2005). Profiles were not distinguished regarding anxious attachment, $F_{(2,318)} = 1.17$, $p = .0313$, $\eta^2 = .007$, and sexual satisfaction, $F_{(2,321)} = 0.34$, $p = .715$, $\eta^2 = .002$.

Table 5. Inter-profile comparison analyses on sexo-relational correlates ($N=325$).

	Total sample ($N=325$)	Dominant stereotypical thinkers ($n=12$)	Tender conflicted traditionalists ($n=50$)	Flexible and coherent lovers ($n=263$)	Statistic	Sig	Effect size
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	F	p	η^2
Attachment							
Anxious	4.25 (1.36)	4.14 (1.53) ^a	4.52 (1.22) ^a	4.20 (1.38) ^a	1.17	.313	.007
Avoidance	2.80 (1.26)	3.28 (1.50) ^{a,b}	3.21 (1.22) ^a	2.71 (1.24) ^b	4.15	.017	.025
Relationship satisfaction	13.53 (3.39)	12.91 (2.70) ^{a,b}	11.98 (3.82) ^a	13.86 (3.25) ^b	5.71	.004	.042
Sexual satisfaction	22.34 (6.60)	23.17 (7.86) ^a	21.72 (5.97) ^a	22.43 (6.67) ^a	0.34	.715	.002

Note. Means that do not share the same superscript letters on the same line statistically differ at $p < .05$ in Bonferroni-corrected post hoc comparisons.

Discussion

The current study explored the presence of latent profiles based on SPD and GR reported by clients currently in sex therapy. LPA is particularly suitable for discerning heterogeneity and, in this context allowed to identify three distinct profiles: (1) *Dominant stereotypical thinkers*, (2) *Tender conflicted traditionalists*, and (3) *Flexible and coherent lovers*. Further analyses of the potential correlates allowed for the identification of distinctive features of each profile. Indeed, *Dominant stereotypical thinkers* showed the highest interest in sexual dominance, as well as the highest adherence to gendered roles, and most participants assigned to this profile identified as a man (83.3%). The important representation of men in this profile echoes Baber and Tucker's (2006) results indicating that men adhered more strongly to the belief that roles, attitudes and expectations are gendered (i.e., gender-linked). Moreover, in line with traditional heteronormative sexual script, the majority of men in this profile were characterized by higher interest toward sexual domination, which is consistent with other studies (e.g., Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). This profile does not have any noticeable differences from the other profiles regarding sexo-relational correlates, which is contrary to previous studies (e.g., Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Shukla & Kapoor, 1990). Various factors could explain this difference. First, it is worth noting that while this profile scored the highest on GT, it was the second highest on GL, possibly suggesting that GL has more of an impact on sexo-relational correlates than GT. Second, it is possible that certain nuances were not captured by the scale used, such as participants' behaviors in their daily life which is known to be directly linked with sexo-relational variables. Third, alignment with societal expectations may be key in understanding the lack of association with sexo-relational correlates, both in terms of GR and SPD. Combining both GR and SPD could explain the differences in our results, being a common distinction from previous studies. Men who strongly adhere to gender stereotypes, GL specifically, and exhibit more interests toward sexual dominance which is also in alignment with societal expectations may experience no significant difference in sexual and relational satisfaction compared to those who do not conform to these expectations. This contrasts with scientific knowledge gathered until now. Lastly, this profile regroups the least number of participants from our study (3.7%) which could also explain the lack of association, mostly due to low representation and statistical power.

Tender conflicted traditionalists are characterized by their high interest in tender sex, along with their strong belief that roles, attitudes and expectations are gendered (i.e., gender-linked), such as thinking that "Girls should be protected and watched over more than boys" (Baber & Tucker, 2006). While also agreeing that no matter ones' gender or sex, individuals are not bound by any specific roles, attitudes and expectations (i.e., gender transcendence), such as "Tasks around the house should not be assigned by sex" and "People should be treated the same regardless of their sex" (Baber & Tucker, 2006). Such results might reflect some ambivalence in this group of clients regarding their adherence to GR. This profile regroups older participants with a high score on avoidant attachment and the least satisfied in their romantic relationship compared to the third profile, *Flexible and coherent lovers*, where being conflicted in terms of their adherence to GR seems to be associated with more sexo-relational distress. This is congruent with O'Neil's (2008) review, where GR conflict was found to be associated with more relationship dissatisfaction as well as more attachment difficulties.

Participants in the *Flexible and coherent lovers* profile reported the lowest adherence to gendered roles, attitudes and expectations, which echo a flexible and coherent way to view GR. This congruence toward GR seems to be associated with less sexo-relational distress. This profile includes a majority of women. Characteristics of individuals assigned to the *Flexible and coherent lovers* profile are in line with findings from previous studies where partners' equality in terms of GR were related to better sexo-relational well-being (e.g., Cooke, 2006; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Shearer et al., 2005).

A notable difference was found regarding the age of our participants. Younger participants adhered more strongly to gender-transcendence where older participants adhered more to

gendered roles (i.e., gender-linked). These results are contradictory from previous studies (Baber & Tucker, 2006) where younger individuals adhered more strongly to gendered roles. Given that GR are culturally defined, they can evolve across time and places (Gibbons et al., 1997). For instance, GR in occidental cultures tend to be less rigid than throughout most of history (Eagly et al., 2020). A potential understanding as to why older participants seem conflicted is that they may be torn between their traditionalist upbringing and the current evolution, whereas younger participants adhere less to gendered roles, reflecting the current times and beliefs, where there is a sense of congruence for these participants. Scarborough et al. (2019) found that through the years, US citizens tend to adhere more strongly to egalitarian GR, which could be similar with Canadian citizens, especially due to Canada having a higher ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index in 2024 than the US (36 vs 43; World Economic Forum, 2024). In addition to generational evolution, Davis and Greenstein (2009) highlighted in their review that education is an important factor when it comes to gender egalitarianism. Both elements seem important to consider given that our sample consists of a majority of Canadian-born and University graduates, which might explain the disproportionate representation of the third profile (*Flexible and coherent lovers*) which regroups the majority of the participants (80.9%).

The exploration of SPD and GR in an integrated fashion allowed to identify specific profiles. Precisely, some distinctions were present for sexual dominance and tender sex, but not across all profiles. The scores on SPD scales did not show as much variance compared to scores from both GR dimensions, which could explain in part the difficulty to identify discernable profiles, whereas, both dimensions of GR did differ significantly across all profiles with large effect sizes (Richardson, 2011). This could highlight the importance of GR as a key factor to consider in profiles of SPD. The presence of three profiles, allowed to have a group where GR discrepancies emerged, represented by the second profile *Tender conflicted traditionalists*. This is an interesting discrepancy since the authors, who created and validated the questionnaire used, mentioned that both scales (i.e., gender-linked and gender transcendent) have the same direction (i.e., gender transcendent has a reverse coding to allow the same direction of both subscales), representing a certain consistency in the construct of both subscales (Baber & Tucker, 2006). Therefore, it is interesting to have a latent profile where there was a notable difference between both scores of these scales. This highlights further the importance of using both scales when examining GR, considering the differences that can arise. Similarly to our findings, Scarborough et al. (2019), in an analysis of responses from the US General Social Survey between 1977 and 2016, found that their latent class analyses regrouped participants in three categories (i.e., collapsed classes): (1) traditionalism (18%), (2) ambivalence (31%), and (3) egalitarianism (51%). Our results align with this classification.

Limitations and further research

The present study involves some limitations. First, using a clinical sample of clients in sex therapy garners many strengths, while also limiting the results' generalizability to the general population. The main differences when comparing clinical and community samples found in a previous study are that individual seeking therapy report being less sexually satisfied than their counter parts from the community sample (Lafortune et al., 2023). As for sociodemographic variables, slight differences (i.e., small effect size) were found for age and education, where the clinical sample was younger and regrouped more undergraduates (Lafortune et al., 2023). Within our clinical sample, the means for anxious and avoidant attachment were both above the cutoff scores, resulting in a sample with high attachment anxiety and avoidance (i.e., insecure attachment; Brassard et al., 2012). A broader discrepancy within the participants' scores may allow to discern more differences amongst profiles. This is another notable difference from the general population, where the majority (50–55%) of the population tends to report a secure attachment (i.e., low attachment anxiety and avoidance; Brassard & Lussier, 2009). Another element to consider is the disproportions found in our profiles. While comparing with a general population

sample from the US (Scarborough et al., 2019), we have also found that traditionalism was our smaller profile (*Dominant stereotypical thinkers*; 3.7%) and that egalitarianism was our bigger profile (*Flexible and coherent lovers*; 80.9%). Having a bigger sample and participants that are more representative of the sample could allow to obtain similar distributions as Scarborough et al. (2019). Considering these differences, replicating our study with a general population sample could further validate the results of our study and strengthen the generalizability of our findings.

The present study did not examine to which degree both SPD and GR reflected the behaviors of the participants in their everyday life. It is possible that a participant's interests or beliefs translate differently in their life and impact their sexo-relational well-being to a different level. Our sample consisted mainly of university students/graduates which as discussed above may impact their adherence to GR and SPD. In addition, our sample was mostly Canadian which makes current results unable to account for the potential impact of culture regarding GR and SPD. Replicating the study with more diverse samples encompassing different education levels and cultural background is necessary to further examine the possible impacts of these characteristics on adherence to GR and SPD within romantic relationships. Accounting for more diversity within replicating studies could allow to have better distribution within the profiles obtained.

Another limitation concerns the low internal consistency of the gender transcendent subscale which is similar to the one obtained when the measure was validated (Baber & Tucker, 2006; $\alpha = .65$). An internal consistency equal or higher than .60 is considered acceptable (Mohamad et al., 2015). Results should be replicated using a more comprehensive measure with strong psychometric qualities. Also, aside from a medium effect size for the participants' age, all other significant differences found between profiles and correlates had a small effect size (Cohen, 1988; Richardson, 2011), limiting the importance of such statistical differences. Having a profile that regrouped few participants (i.e., < 5%) may also have affected the statistical power of our subsequent comparison analyzes. Finally, further studies are needed to be able to incorporate the cornucopia of variables associated with SPD and GR (e.g., religious beliefs and upbringing; Feltey & Poloma, 1991; Read, 2003).

Clinical implications

Despite these limitations a notable strength in the current study is its focus on SPD in contrast with BDSM-only community members/practitioners. This responds to De Neef et al. (2019) recommendation to focus more broadly on sexual interests related to BDSM not limited to practitioners. Since most people engaging in BDSM-related behaviors do not identify as BDSM practitioners themselves (Coppens et al., 2020), it is central for sex therapists to consider SPD instead of BDSM to be more inclusive when asking about their clients' sexual interests and behaviors. This study adds to the knowledge surrounding the complexity of SPD highlighting a positive (non-pathological) perspective since all latent profiles were not inherently associated with patterns of sexo-relational well-being nor distress. The three profiles also offer interesting guidelines for interventions. They underline the importance for sex therapists to move beyond stereotyped assumptions of the association of traditional values and sexual dominance with sexo-relational difficulties, where it is not inherently true, such as found in this study (first profile: *Dominant stereotypical thinkers*).

Our results also highlight the importance of assessing SPD and GR without viewing these characteristics as inherently bad, to limit stigmatizing people. Our findings reflect that we live in the gray, and we need to work in that gray area in therapy. Another guideline for sex therapists would be to consider both SPD and GR in interaction, since they can impact individual's sexo-relational well-being, especially when they express congruent GR. Unless it is directly linked with the client's reason to consult, both SPD and GR are typically absent from intake assessment. Assessing SPD and GR adherence could add to the practitioners' understanding of the individual

or couple seeking help. In sex therapy, an objective could be to help clients cultivate more flexible interest toward SPD due to its association with better sexo-relational well-being. Also, even though it reflects the individual's macro-perspective of a bigger societal issue GR still may impact the therapeutic outcome. As sexo-relational well-being is associated with GR congruence (third profile: *Flexible and coherent lovers*), sex therapists could focus on fostering GR congruence to lessen sexo-relational distress in their clients. This aligns with recommendations made by Brandon and Morgentaler (2016). Therapist should also help individuals cultivate more egalitarian GR, being another important distinctive characteristic found in our third profile.

Conclusion

Our results offer novel insights into the intersection of sexual power dynamics (SPD) and gender roles (GR) within a clinical population. These profiles emphasize the nuanced ways in which SPD and GR influence sexo-relational well-being, particularly through attachment styles and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, the findings highlight that individual with egalitarian and congruent views on GR (*Flexible and coherent lovers*) report higher relationship satisfaction and less avoidant attachment, whereas traditional and conflicting perspectives on GR (*Tender conflicted traditionalists*) experience greater relational distress and more avoidant attachment. Therapeutic intervention would gain to focus on fostering egalitarian and congruent GR, which could increase individuals' relationship satisfaction and attachment security. Furthermore, the discovery of three specific latent profiles provides a framework for tailoring sex therapy interventions to account for both SPD and GR, moving beyond traditional pathologizing perspectives of sexual interests like dominance or submission. Clinicians are encouraged to integrate SPD and GR assessments into their therapeutic practices to better understand the clients' relational dynamics and guide personalized interventions. Interesting leads for future empirical studies would be to explore the alignment between participants desires and behaviors in order to analyze the congruence and their implications in terms of sexo-relational well-being. By shedding light on the interplay between sexual interests and gender roles, this study advances the discourse on sexo-relational well-being, offering both theoretical and clinical contributions to sex therapy and relationship scientific knowledge.

Ethical approval

This research project was approved by the Université du Québec à Montréal Ethic Institutional Board, the institutional committee on research ethics involving human beings (CIEREH #1269_2019).

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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