

**When shame meets love: Affective pathways to freedom from injurious bodily
norms in the workplace**

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Abstract

We explore organizational members' affective experiences to elucidate how and when the reproduction of oppressive bodily norms can be interrupted. We leverage the exceptional access to hitherto overlooked affective dynamics in one organizational context made possible by the introduction of a video art installation in a commercial art gallery. The artwork enabled both the all-female staff and the researchers to observe, feel and reflect on both the invisible force of body shame and the empowering forces of communal laughter and reciprocal generosity. Our analysis reveals how the repetition of loving encounters around the artwork moved the staff away from crippling individualized anxiety and shame and towards more joyful and carefree possibilities. It further suggests that the organization's feminist culture and climate of psychological safety facilitated the trajectory from shame to joy through love. By surfacing and explaining such affective pathways to freedom as an important form of emancipatory politics in the context of injurious, discriminatory bodily norms, we contribute to both scholarship on bodily discipline in the workplace and recent work on the critical potential of affect.

Keywords

Bodily discipline, affect, emancipatory politics, shame, love, art intervention

Introduction

Organizational members face strong pressures to conform to culturally narrow embodied ideals of professionalism (e.g. Trethewey, 1999; Waring & Waring, 2009). Scholars have recognized that an emphasis on the presentation and management of the body can generate anxiety and suffering especially in women and other minorities (Dolezal, 2015; Levay, 2014; Tyler & Abbott, 1998), whose marginalized bodies threaten their ability to see themselves and to be seen as valuable employees (Fotaki, 2013; Puwar, 2004). Yet there is little evidence of real challenges to the stability of those bodily norms (Waring & Waring, 2009). Employees often seem trapped in potentially debilitating strivings for recognition through active monitoring and management of their own and others' bodies (Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Johansson, Tienari & Valtonen, 2017).

We investigate what role affect – embodied sensations that arise in interactions between bodies and which influence what bodies can do and possibilities for living (Pullen et al., 2017) – plays in organizational members' responses to oppressive bodily norms, to further our understanding of how and when the reproduction of such hurtful ideals can be interrupted. We provide an empirically grounded theoretical account of how chains of loving encounters or 'affective pathways to freedom' may develop in organizations. In so doing, we build on and elaborate recent theoretical work suggesting that affective suffering in oppressive regimes is a potential point of departure for empowerment and transformation (Fotaki, Kenny & Vachhani, 2017; Kenny & Fotaki, 2015; Pullen, Rhodes & Thanem, 2017); rather than an impediment to change (Trethewey, 2001).

This line of inquiry emerged from qualitative analysis of surprising dynamics of liberation in a commercial art gallery, whose all-female and diverse staff found themselves exposed to the field of visibility created by an interactive video art installation that recorded and randomly displayed images of workplace life, including their bodies, appearances and

demeanors, for everyone to see. The specific art installation magnified the more or less painful subjection to bodily ideals that these women experienced every day in a gendered, classed and racialized industry where the aesthetics of the body are rather central – providing an invaluable site to study the role of affect in bodily discipline.

Beyond the expected disempowering experience of chronic anxiety and shame under the disciplinary gaze of the artwork and concomitant frustrating amount of conformist body work, our analysis signalled the transformative power of moments of communal laughter, and of awe and compassion – which, repeated over time, form what we call affective pathways to freedom. The gallery workers’ accounts suggest a movement away from passive sad affects towards more active joyful ones via ongoing loving encounters through which they could start to relate to their bodies and themselves more positively and perform differently. The organization’s feminist culture and the group’s climate of psychological safety likely facilitated this transition.

This paper makes a two-fold contribution to organization studies. First, we extend accounts of bodily discipline in the workplace by focusing on affects as they arise and evolve in interactions, answering calls for more corporeal exploration of how bodies feel at work (Thanem & Knights, 2012; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). We find that attentiveness to affective dynamics reveals ways in which bodies are produced in relation to idealized images and could be produced differently. Second, we enrich recent theoretical insights into the transformative potential of affect in challenging oppressive structures (e.g. Fotaki et al., 2017; Kenny & Fotaki, 2015; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015). Our study provides rare empirical support for the argument that affective suffering “can give rise to generous, joyous acts where individuals multiply each other’s power through interaction” (Pullen et al., 2017, p. 117). Our findings flesh out this argument further by clarifying how and when the affirmative politics of love might emerge, and how they may lead to increased freedom in organizations.

We now present insights from the literature on bodily discipline in the workplace and from ethico-political perspectives on affect and organizations. We then describe in detail our empirical site and methods. Next, we offer an analysis of our participants' affective experiences, highlighting the transition from anxiety and shame to more joyful feelings as well as important facilitating conditions. We conclude with a discussion of our study's key contributions, limitations and practical implications.

Theoretical background

Bodies as sites of power

The body has received increasing attention in critical management research, as a target of norms regarding who organizational members should be(come) and how they should act (Trethewey, 1999). Workers in many sectors, from high-end interactive services (e.g. Warhurst & Nickson, 2007) to the seemingly more disembodied worlds of academia or finance (Fotaki, 2013; Riach & Cutcher, 2014), experience 'looking the part' as a job requirement (Waring & Waring, 2009). They buy into the symbolic value of the body (Shilling, 1993) – for example, physical fitness signifies discipline and responsibility (Trethewey, 1999; Johansson, Tienari & Valtonen, 2017; van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2018). They accordingly actively manage their bodies and appearances to maintain self-esteem and secure professional success (Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Trethewey, 1999).

Bodily norms have typically been found to be strict and narrow, disadvantaging women and other minorities (e.g. Johansson et al., 2017; Levay, 2014). With the female body marked as other and deviant by patriarchy (Bordo, 1993), women are typically more vigilant about the presentation of their bodies at work, disciplining their bodies so that they embody male virtues of self-control and mastery (Trethewey, 1999), while still respecting normative standards of femininity (Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Women are perhaps even more body

conscious in feminine occupations, where the beautiful, erotic and/or nurturing female body is a marketing tool (Hancock & Tyler, 2000; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007) and where one's bodily capital is more directly tied to one's worth as an organizational member.

Gender is only one organizing principle of inequality that operates through the body. African American women for example often downplay their ethnicity through hairstyling and accent reduction (Puwar, 2004; Spellers, 2000). Older workers exercise, consume age-defying products and contemplate cosmetic surgery to offset the signs of ageing (Riach & Cutcher, 2014; Thomas, Hardy, Cutcher, & Ainsworth, 2014; Trethewey, 2001). The production of the ideal body typically happens at the intersection of gender, race, age and other categories of difference and creates challenges for diverse individuals in their attempts to thrive at work (e.g. van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2018).

While past studies have established organizational members' bodies as sites of power relations, considerations of bodies as sites of affect have yet to make deep inroads into bodily discipline research. Organizational members not only perceive, reflect and act upon but also emote about and through their bodies (Thanem & Knights, 2012). They feel, for example, their bodies as a problem as they encounter ideal images (Brewis & Sinclair, 2000) or the disdain of a colleague (Pullen et al., 2017). Heeding the broader call to explore both the stabilizing and potentially disturbing role of affect in the operations of power (Fotaki et al., 2017; Kenny, Muhr & Olaison, 2011), we propose that by attending to affective experiences in bodily discipline we can better grasp the challenges to and possibilities of emancipation from oppressive and discriminatory bodily norms.

The stabilizing and problematic role of affect

Affects are intensifications or attenuations of a body's force of existing or vitality (Pullen et al., 2017), which are expressed in feelings and qualified in emotions such as shame, anger,

admiration or joy. Organizational members, particularly women and minorities, may suffer chronic anxiety and hidden injuries, such as compromisingly low self-esteem and eating disorders, as they strive to meet the elusive bodily expectations of their fields (Levay, 2014; Tyler & Abbott, 1998).

Affective suffering is however more than a problematic by-product of bodily discipline, as shown by recent work on abjection, which treats affect as central to the reproduction of injurious bodily norms. The fear of abjection – the process of social exclusion rooted in visceral feelings of disgust – and the desire for recognition and inclusion have been theorized as potent affective drivers of conformist body work (Gatrell, 2013; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Emotive dependence on the acknowledgement of others (Kenny et al, 2011) underpins for example managers' passionate striving for athletic bodies even as such striving is hurtful to themselves and others (Johansson et al., 2017).

Bodies that violate workplace bodily norms are typically experienced as loathsome (e.g. Fotaki, 2011, 2013; Gatrell, 2017). And, the purging of the shameful in oneself, such as body fat or maternal leakage, through arduous body work, often affects social interactions. Women leaders have been shown for instance to engage in self-protective strategies which stigmatize and exclude those whose bodies are too excessive or sexy (Mavin & Grandy, 2016), furthering their colleagues' experiences of their bodies as disruptive and shameful (Gatrell, 2017; Loveday, 2016). Too preoccupied with securing a viable self through the active monitoring and management of their bodies, professional women can become less concerned with politics (Bordo, 1993) and ultimately oblivious that effective coping with the painful consequences of abjection is not equally available to everyone (Trethewey, 2001).

When affect has been considered in scholarship on bodily discipline in the workplace, it has thus generally been seen as supporting the stability of bodily norms that compromise individuals' well-being. While accounts of abjection provide a compelling diagnosis for the

recalcitrance of hurtful ideals (Mavin & Grandy, 2016), they have important limitations. First, the visceral experience of body shame as it arises and intensifies, which is intimately linked with the powerful intra-psyche fear of abjection (Dolezal, 2015), remains conceptually and empirically underexplored (Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Pullen et al., 2017). The study of affect, and of body shame in particular, is methodologically challenging (Dolezal, 2015; Thanem & Knights, 2013) but is needed to outline more fully the lived experience of oppressive structures (Bartky, 1990) and to understand “what bodies can do” (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015; Pullen et al., 2017).

Second, while pessimistic theorizing may often reflect empirical realities (Waring & Waring, 2009; Johansson et al., 2017), the conclusion that regimes of bodily discipline are inescapably sad, with organizational members’ best option being individual coping, is unwarranted. Disruption remains at least a theoretical possibility (Johansson et al., 2017; Mavin & Grandy, 2016), consistent with the view of body-subjects as in continual processes of becoming even when they repeat normatively prescribed embodiments (Coffey, 2013). Yet it remains unclear why, when and how bodily norms may get disturbed, in part perhaps because of relative inattention to the possibility of positive affects emerging in interpersonal encounters alongside or following abjection (Kenny & Fotaki, 2014). We expect that focusing on affective dynamics can counterbalance this pessimism.

The radical potential of affect

Affect’s emancipatory potential has been recognized in theoretical essays (e.g. Fotaki et al., 2017; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015), which propose that affective suffering can “give rise to generous, joyous acts where individuals multiply each other’s power through interaction” (Pullen et al., 2017, p. 117). This notion is implicit in discussions of the subversive potential of humor and laughter. Trethewey (2004) provides an example when she discusses how

laughing with her students at her awkward experiences of being pregnant and nursing in the workplace enabled them to “critique the taken-for-granted assumptions about work, family, sexuality and their relationship to current understandings of professionalism (p. 38).” Instead of keeping embarrassing experiences to oneself as if those emotions were themselves shameful (Dolezal, 2015), Trethewey’s account suggests that humorously confronting negative affects might enable us to surface and question their origins. Additionally, laughing together at our leaking, excessive bodies can generate the sense of community and vitality helpful to creating genuinely new ways of being (Mumby, 2009).

Recently, several scholars have suggested additional affective pathways to freedom in philosophical reflections on embodied organizational ethics. Pullen and Rhodes (2014) discuss the theoretical possibility of generous encounters, as opposed to micro-aggression and exclusion, where the affective experience of generosity allows for the performance of sexual, cultural and stylistic differences. Kenny and Fotaki (2014) point to the life-affirming impulses of awe and compassion behind generosity or hospitality for the other, arguing that those affects can counterbalance the more destructive feelings of anxiety, disgust and anger produced by a gaze that threatens to deny recognition on the basis of non-adherence to narrow standards. Pullen and Rhodes (2015) also briefly speculate that love “understood as an active internal movement whereby one acts to strengthen the other” (Strawser, 2007: 441) may be critical in enabling resistance to gendered oppression in organizations. Overall, these authors suggest that positive affects might, through mutual recognition, alleviate suffering and enable the performance of difference (Allen, 2005).

Ultimately, those essays articulate the theoretical possibility of transforming passive sad affects in a life-enhancing direction through joyful or generous interactions. Philosophically informed theorizing and embodied self-reflection around singular interactions or moments of freedom give us hope but raise questions about the circumstances under which

positive affective encounters might emerge and create pathways to freedom from normative frameworks. Often deemed anomalous, loving encounters became a defining feature of our informants' experience, moving them from crippling anxieties towards more joyful and carefree possibilities. Our study answers calls to explore empirically the affirmative politics of love (Pullen et al., 2015), not only to clarify them through concrete organizational examples and provide support for love's empowering effects (Pullen et al., 2017), but also to illuminate the processes and boundary conditions of their emergence (Lund & Tienari, 2019) as well as their emancipatory potential.

Methods

Research setting

Our exploration of the role of affective dynamics in bodily discipline developed as we undertook a qualitative study of the staff of an art gallery exposed to a one-camera, three-screen video art installation. The artwork had been installed over the director's desk in her office, overlooking the staff's workspace through a glass wall, a few months before we were invited to explore the transformative potential of such an artwork (Barry & Meisiek, 2010). The installation recorded organizational members' everyday actions and interactions, and randomly recombined and displayed long-stored and just-past clips in overlapping, shifting layers. While manifesting the artist's intention to chronicle the life of the gallery and create non-linear, changing impressions of history, the video-captures effectively made visible the director's and her staff's bodies. Figure 1 shows a still image of the installation.

Insert FIGURE 1

As staff members kept bringing up self-image concerns in recounting their experiences of the artwork, we noticed the work's ability to throw into high relief everyday

moments of more or less painful subjection to bodily norms. It intensified an already existing context of visibility by heightening staff members' state of self-consciousness, through which they imagine how others might see and judge their bodies, appearances and demeanors. As the Exhibitions Manager reflected: "Well for me there was so much judgment wrapped up in it based on how I looked." The artwork thus offered us an opportunity to observe bodily discipline in the gallery and its affective dynamics. It is important to note, however, that the artwork mediated and perhaps amplified but did not create the demands for body work. The Associate Director stressed that "the [bodily] expectations carried over into the [artwork]; it's the same in the [artwork] as it was in reality like you just carried that." The artwork only makes obvious the normative implications of the fundamentally human experience of being seen (Müller, 2017).

Some key features of art galleries made this site particularly suitable to the study of oppressive bodily discipline. Galleries are notorious, as one participant put it, for their "tall, narrow, blonde bun kind of aesthetic," which this gallery's director embodies. Our participants were keenly "aware that we are working in an industry in which body type, what you're wearing, the aesthetics of yourself are under scrutiny to some degree because it's a business of aesthetics and many of the people to whom you're selling work are of a class and economic standing where they find themselves caring about those things." The sector's gendered, classed and racialized attention to the aesthetics of the body, combined with the mirroring and amplifying function of the installation, makes our setting ideal for theory building because the dynamics being examined are more visible than they might be in other contexts and more accessible than they would be through more conventional methodologies (Bell & Davison, 2013).

Empirical materials

We relied primarily on in-depth interviews complemented by on-site observations. We conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with all five organizational members regarding their experience of the artwork. Our number of informants is typical of interpretivist-phenomenological studies, which seek rich and varied experiential accounts from a small set of meaningfully involved participants (Gill, 2015). The director and staff members were female, aged 24-40 years, with an average tenure for the staff of 3.5 years. One staff member was African American while the others, including the director, were white. And as the director said, they had “very diverse body types.” This level of diversity illuminated different and intersecting axes of oppression and allowed examination of the presumption that chronic body anxiety is an unlikely basis of solidarity among those who occupy more or less privileged positions given their race, their economic status and/or their body shape. Interviews lasted on average one hour. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We also took hand-written notes during the interviews.

Informed by discussions of art-based interventions in the workplace (Barry & Meisiek, 2010), we initially encouraged participants to talk about their experiences of the artwork, their interactions around it, and any changes in themselves and their relationships following its introduction. Our commitment to “a non-hierarchical approach which avoids objectifying the participants” (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003, p. 140) and a relational ethics of care became increasingly important as the conversation veered towards affectively charged body talk. Our informants were forthcoming, and explicitly reported valuing the collaborative, reflexive space (Cunliffe, 2003) created by repeated interactions with us. The follow-up protocol asked participants a few years later to revisit their experiences of the artwork and of its being removed from the gallery, before sharing and inviting comments on our provisional interpretations. All staff members other than the director had left the gallery, but remembered their affective encounters with and around the artwork strikingly well. Affects can make

themselves felt months, even years after a specific experience; they can be viscerally re-lived in the process of recollection (Loveday, 2016), making interviewing an effective method for capturing the affective dimension of lived experience.

Observations occurred during a day spent at the gallery when we conducted the first wave interviews as well as during an evening event. We witnessed firsthand staff members' reactions to the artwork and its gaze, from expressions of shame such as bodily contractions (Dolezal, 2015), to quiet absorption into its poetic chronicle of gallery life. Our direct observations of one staff meeting and some informal interactions also provided insight into everyday life and relational dynamics at the gallery. This broader contextual understanding of the gallery's culture was critical to identifying the conditions which facilitated the emergence of positive affects.

Analysis

We conducted an inductive thematic analysis of our participants' lived experiences of the artwork. We familiarized ourselves deeply with the material through several close readings, noting potential emerging themes, such as industry aesthetics, anxiety, shame, material insecurities, vanity/narcissism, conformist practices, humor, empathy, etc. Parallel to this process of open coding, we developed memos and exemplars into a separate file for each emergent theme identified across the interviews. An iterative reviewing and joint discussion between the authors of the themes led to their further revision and assimilation into overarching themes, including "individualized anxiety and shame," "affective pathways to freedom," and "facilitating conditions."

As the themes emerged, we sought to explain the unexpected transition from negative experiences of anxiety and shame to more joyful and carefree experiences. Existing accounts are rather pessimistic regarding the possibility of emancipation from hurtful bodily norms

which mark particular body types (e.g. ageing, unfit, or non-White bodies) as other and unsuitable for the workplace, suggesting that individualized anxiety in the pursuit of recognition stands in the way of communal mobilization for change. By alternating between data and theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we identified affective pathways to freedom, capturing the moments of laughter and generosity through which increases in bodies' capacity to act and subjective well-being may occur, as well as some conditions that facilitate their emergence. Our notion of affective pathways to freedom builds on Kenny and Fotaki's (2015) exploration of Ettinger's "'proto-ethical paths to freedom-with-resistance', that is, a resistance 'impregnated by and built upon compassion, awe and fascinane'" (p.191).

Interviewing all five organizational members at two different times allowed us to attend closely to the individual experiences and the common thematic patterns, and to provide novel insights and rich details into an underexplored phenomenon. In committing to a detailed and idiographic account of their affective experiences (Gill, 2015), our objective was not generalizability, but credibility and transferability of insights (Fotaki, 2013). Our theoretically informed narrative of the gradual relaxing of the originally tight hold of norms on gallery workers' experiences of themselves and on their bodily performances through the repetition of loving encounters is accompanied by selected quotations from our participants that reflect the salient sub-themes and themes of our analysis. We use pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Consistent with the interpretivist-phenomenological tradition (Gill, 2015), we do not take our informants' individual and collective experiences to be representative of what others might experience in general. Our findings regarding the emergence and multiplication of loving encounters across individual differences in the face of suffering in our small but diverse group of informants, however, constitute eminently plausible evidence (Fotaki, 2013) of more general processes. While our respective pain and joy were most certainly not exactly

the same given our own social location, we – a mixed gender research duo - recognized in their experiences our own fear of shaming encounters and our own entrapment in negative narcissistic cycles of shame-driven body work; and we felt similarly enlivened by our capacity to laugh at ourselves and by our reciprocal displays of vulnerability and compassion in the process of conducting this research project.

Findings

Our findings revealed a striking movement away from passive sad affects towards more active joyful ones in the face of disciplinary pressures. Below we describe 1) the staff members' early experiences of chronic anxiety and body shame under the normalizing gaze of the artwork, 2) the affective moments and processes through which the staff came to experience an increase in their bodies' force of existing and a growing indifference to the gaze, and 3) some conditions that facilitated the transition.

Individualized anxiety and shame

Fear of shaming encounters. The gallery workers recalled their initial disquietude with being constantly visible and thus especially conscious of their bodies. Marian (Marketing Director, African American, 31) described her fear:

“It was not just being recorded, but it was being displayed so it was just like – you were being watched by whoever came in and ourselves, every coworker, so it was definitely like an over saturation of people – the *fear* of people looking at you all the time.”

Natalie (Associate Director, white, 36) captured the collective unease with the installation of the artwork: “It definitely came up in conversations and oh, it’s really going in there, I guess

we really have to watch out now. Everyone's *really awkward* at that moment.” Their comments betrayed fear of being seen by not only others but also themselves (Dolezal, 2015).

All staff members compared being captured by the artwork to being photographed – an experience that can create great discomfort. Elizabeth (Owner/Director, white, 40) observed:

“I *hate* having my photographs taken. And I hate that I hate it. I hate that I’m basically mirroring to my daughter this idea that somehow it’s *horrible* at any given instant for anybody to capture me on film.”

Beyond conveying her dread of being photographed, her comment highlights her collusion in reproducing this process. Photographs or video-captures provide women with an unwelcome opportunity to see themselves from a distanced perspective (Dolezal, 2015). Such opportunities often bring critical self-evaluation, as Natalie expressed: “I’m always *disappointed* when I see myself in photographs or videos.” Elizabeth confirmed that one could not help but feel shame even while fundamentally disagreeing with the values of assessment, reflecting the pre-reflective nature of shame (Dolezal, 2015):

“I think all of the staff is, at that time anyway, identified with being feminist and knowing that it was important to have a positive body image. But in reality, on the ground, it seemed anyway that we had something really critical to say about ourselves and it's pretty hard to escape the kind of culture in which we live even if we have intellectual values that tell us otherwise.”

Informants reported actively attempting at first to avoid entering the field of visibility created by the artwork, as Marian explained: “Honestly, most of us tried to move away from the camera as much as possible because it’s like –[...] You don't want to be recorded constantly.” The staff, in seeking invisibility, sought to circumvent the risk of acutely feeling

that their bodies do not live up to internalized ideals – a typical avoidance strategy among shame-prone minorities (Dolezal, 2015).

Forms and intensity of bodily anxiety. The artwork revealed and amplified typically unacknowledged staff members' pre-existing anxieties about how their bodies appear to others and compare to the ideal. The uncontrolled, excessive body was perhaps their most common concern (Trethewey, 1999; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Informants expressed disappointment when they noticed their “old lady baggy fat arms,” “like this triple chin,” their “boobs look[ing] fat, [their] stomach.” Marian specifically reflected on weight gain: “I'm not sure...that awareness or even, like, the usual issues that you would have anyway of like, ‘Oh, I look like I've put on some weight today.’ That is on constant display there.” They also worried about challenges to their professional credibility by inappropriate body language and wardrobe malfunctions (Longhurst, 2001). For example, Elizabeth recalled one employee expressing shame upon discovering that her thongs showed on the screens: “she was mortified to find out that it wasn't gonna go away.” Marian described the discomfort that being caught fixing her clothes or slouching would trigger:

“You like scratch your head, fix your bra when you think nobody is looking. And it's like someone is watching you all the time. You can't slouch in your chair. You can't...anything...it would make me feel uncomfortable.”

Other anxieties and insecurities were more personal, operating at the intersection of gender and other categories of difference, such as age or race. Elizabeth for example expressed feelings of loss as the mirror reveals she is “getting older, these marks stay, they don't go away.” She elaborated:

“I should be thinking about [Botox], because I have a friend who’s always like you should really get that taken care of. And that’s come up at the same time that this piece has been here so the two things are reinforcing each other.”

Reflecting the influence of a discourse of “age as decline” (Thomas et al., 2014; Trethewey, 2001), Natalie similarly suggested that body issues increase with age: “I’m 36. I say 25 and you got body issues? Argh...whatever.” She was also expecting at the time of our inquiry and told us: “I really didn’t like that it showed me getting more and more pregnant.” Her reaction revealed her concern of being devalued as an organizational member, for the maternal body is seen to pose a threat to the controlled order of organizations (Gatrell, 2017; Trethewey, 1999). During the second-round interviews, Marian revealed anxiety based on her racial background, which she had not felt comfortable talking about previously:

“It's not just a feminist issue, it's also a predominantly white industry and so being the only black person in the room almost all the time, also is like let's just redisplay that over and over again. It felt very much like pointing out every difference and every flaw in all of us.”

Her anxiety and greater initial level of discomfort with the artwork reflect the power of whiteness in shaping experiences in her industry and other such places of privilege (Puwar, 2004).

The director and Cora (Exhibitions Manager, white, 24), the youngest employee, seemed overall less vulnerable to the experience of acute body shame. For example, Elizabeth observed: “Yes, it's true that you would see yourself but you wouldn't necessarily see yourself in a particular act that might be humiliating or embarrassing or silly or whatever because the images did become that buried. It was rare.” Compared to her staff’s, her experience is less marked by constant worry about embarrassment. Her staff’s comments that they have never

seen her “do awkward things” or “fall like the rest of us” suggest that Elizabeth has become so adept at controlling her body that shame from flawed self-presentation is muted. Her body, like Cora’s, is also closer to the art world’s professional ideal – white, slim, toned, confident, well-coiffed, sexy and fashion savvy – making them perhaps less anxious around the artwork, as one might expect, but nonetheless their accounts are conflicted. Elizabeth recognized that “everybody had something that they reflected on negatively.”

Self-centered preoccupation with shame avoidance. The artwork also brought to awareness a form of narcissism. While there were other things for gallery members to see (such as their peers or generally what happened within the gallery), they admitted that early on they compulsively looked for themselves in the video captures. Cora elaborated:

“I think the human tendency is to focus on yourself more so...at least for me anyway. I’d be focusing more on my personal...oh my body language, look at what I was wearing, look how I was carrying myself at first rather than look how I was addressing the other person.”

Anna (Registrar, white, 24) commented on the “sad and true fact” that “if there’s an image of you up there, it’s hard not to look.” This fascination with one’s own body is not unusual among socially subordinated subjects, whose bodies have been marked as shameful (Bordo, 1993; Mavin and Grandy, 2016): they cannot help but be overly preoccupied with managing the constant threat of shame – a painful experience of the self as lacking in worth (Dolezal, 2015).

Staff members recollected the heaviness of self-protective conforming practices. Cora recalled:

“The negative one was if I were having a bad day, I had to deal with the reality of being on camera. That *felt heavy*, like I had to perform; I had to be mindful of how I

walked in the door. Literally how I walked and my physical expression, my body, my face.”

Marian confirmed the frustrating amount of body work that they engaged in:

“I feel it was impossible not to be constantly aware that [...] not only were you being recorded but at any moment, it could playback at you. So we were always [...] checking our hair more often and making sure that things looked great.”

Natalie resented it as well: “I hate that I have to think about that sometimes. Sometimes it’s just so automatic you don’t think about it.” Body work was for her a response not merely to a symbolic threat to the self but to a material one (Collinson, 2003): “those things relate to your ability to keep your job or not. So it’s hard not to – You have to kind of comply.” Frustration with having to engage in body work was perhaps most vivid for Marian, one of the few black workers in the industry, who remembered feeling like bodily ideals demanded that she downplay her ethnicity (Spellers, 2000):

“In this particular job, it was more like constantly trying to conform and not be black. Yeah. [...] For sure straightened hair and a very particular way of dress and colors. These are things that are not – they’re not necessarily like I grew up thinking of dressing up.”

Affective pathways to freedom

The transformative power of humor and laughter. Gallery members’ early chronic fear of shame gave rise over time to regular enjoyment and transformation through ritualistic demonizing of the artwork and laughing together at the embarrassing reflections. They jokingly assigned malice to the artwork because “it always feels like it’s the very thing that

you live in fear of having the thing capture that the latter seems to have retained the next day.” Marian recalled: “There were moments where you'd see us fixing a shirt and it's like, oh, you didn't get the fun moments and you got us fixing our pants. That was really funny.”

Elizabeth elaborated:

“We have our good hair days and our bad hair days, let's just put it that way and it is interesting how I think all of us thought that it seemed somehow maniacal and we would assign this motive to it intentionally trying to capture us on bad days, but you know, obviously that's completely constructed in our own heads because it's a machine. It has no values or motive.”

They recognized that the artwork, which randomly sampled and displayed images, was in fact neutral. By demonizing the artwork, they implicitly problematized their own critical judgment according to internalized bodily ideals.

They started warning each other whether the “freaking camera got it” and laughing together at their embarrassing moments. Marian explained: “It caught *all of us* doing something embarrassing. [...] It ends up being something everybody giggles or laughs about...” They recognized their shared vulnerability to the possibility of shame, but instead of feeling isolated in their embarrassment, they laughed about it together. Marian continues: “So actually it's become a very social part of the gallery.” Overall, the artwork became an anchor for the positive, energizing experience of laughter and meaningful social connections around shared oppressive workplace experiences (Trethewey, 2004). Our interviews were punctuated by contagious laughter; in the staff, we experienced selves that were vibrant and playful, and not numbed or paralyzed by shame.

Elizabeth observed that the experiences of shame and laughter through interaction with the artwork opened up space for discussion: “When the artwork was there, there were

ways that we would laugh at ourselves [...]. I don't know if it changed anything necessarily. It certainly was a source of conversation absolutely.”

While she questioned here whether the ritualistic laughter and conversations the artwork triggered changed anything substantive, she and her staff provided us with evidence that they helped transform some of the oppressive bodily norms, in addition to fostering the vibrancy we observed. Some staff members remembered earlier moments of micro-violence. Natalie for example said: “I had times where [the director] was like – specifically wanted me to change shoes, some things like that. I mean it was very meticulously evaluated for success.” Anna recalled the issue of wearing the same thing twice at openings: “some comment might be made, but not everyone can afford to have different outfits –.” They overall felt that “she softened up on that.” A particular rule, embedded in the gallery’s dress code, even became a “running joke.” Elizabeth recalled: “I had a bias about people wearing jeans [...] We all decided we would wear jeans for [a particular] opening and that sort of became this funny thing.” After this subversive episode, the rule was broken.

Along with this relaxation of norms of appearance, staff members came to be less focused on themselves and more on reflections of social life in the gallery. In recollecting their experiences after the artwork was removed, Elizabeth asked:

“Isn’t it interesting that the thing that we were most connected to and didn't want to lose was not our own images necessarily but when if we saw – I don't know, a client that we liked whose image had stayed and that we would get all excited about it or we would say oh, look.”

They started to notice with excitement images of joyful moments. Marian confirmed her shifting experience of the artwork: “I still have sort of mixed feelings about it. I really loved seeing some people's images played back [...] moments like Cora painting on the walls or conversations, just talking through.” Anna also “remembered missing it [...] missing being

able to stand there and watch the old generated shrinklits of things that have happened.” Their missing the artwork indicates their growing positive experience of it and of themselves, away from self-centered compulsive shame avoidance. Anna ventured it was because of “the way people are reacting because [otherwise] something can stay somewhere for a long time and you can dislike it more and more.”

The empowering and healing force of generosity. The anxiety and shame triggered by the artwork also led to generous acts through which the staff members empowered each other. When somebody expressed embarrassment or mortification, one typical response was “just laughing and you usually point out something about yourself too.” Another response was to disagree with the assessment. Cora’s recollection exemplifies this process: “I remember people saying God I look like shit and I look at them and I’m like you’re crazy, I don’t even see any part of it where you look awful, you look beautiful.” In our interviews informants stressed how beautiful the portrayals of others were, while predominantly recollecting flawed portrayals of themselves. They emphasized to us, as they did with colleagues in front of the artwork, the others’ unique features and mannerisms, such as “the way her hair stands up,” or the way she is “always laughing or moving [her] hands around.” They also talked about the beauty of “what [their colleagues] are doing all day,” such as greeting and talking with visitors: “It’s really neat to see them talking, it’s beautiful.” Marian did not recall any instances of micro-violence amongst the staff members as they looked at the artwork: “I’ve never seen anything happen related to that that has been uncomfortable, like bad, like people argue like ‘why are you wearing that at work?’” Instead, seeing their reflections became an opportunity for positive comments about each other.

Participants’ accounts suggest two key experiences behind those generous acts: compassion and awe. Anna remembered “a tipping point of sorts where there was this drive to

counteract that constant negativity of, ‘I look awful.’” Cora described a “group dynamic where you’re supporting each other around this negative internal experience and then being able to associate with other people on that experience and then collectively sort of moving through that and getting to a more positive space.” She suggests here how their shared experience of bodily anxiety – across differences in race, class, and age – resulted in a meaningful sense of connection and mutual support. Elizabeth similarly credited the artwork for reflecting the capacity for compassion:

“I mean to me, it reflected back to us what I consider sort of both a positive and negative thing about the way that women often relate to one another which is one of shared criticism that’s reflected back onto yourself and at the same time, making sure that you helped the other person along and feeling better about whatever that thing is that they reflected negatively on themselves.”

She viewed the experience of compassion – arousal in concerning when one encounters the pain of another (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015) – as a definite possibility in relations among women, even as she recognized its shadows – the self-criticism and micro-violence that make up what we typically characterize as the female gaze (Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Trethewey, 1999).

Informants further suggested that the generous comments they addressed to their colleagues were not merely the expression of compassion but of genuine amazement at what they saw on the screen. Cora for example observed:

“When I’m looking at myself, my hair is this way, my boobs look fat, my stomach and if you look at my ass but when I’m watching other people it’s not all those. [...] when you’re looking at the other and the thing I love about that piece, what was beautiful about it is people are emotionally talking, they’re moving. It’s so much more than like a hairstyle or your lipstick color. It’s the whole person.”

While she reduced herself to an object, whose various elements she criticized for their non-conformity to bodily ideals, she apprehended her colleagues in their full humanity and was moved by the beautiful aesthetic impressions of their physical presence and interactions. Her account reveals an experience of awe, an affect that is attentive but, unlike shame, nonevaluative (Heinämaa, 2017). She loved what she saw not because her colleagues' bodies were normatively pleasant but instead because "there is so much more to them than those single aspects." Anna similarly reflected on the authenticity of the generous comments:

"I don't feel like at least between the majority of the people working in the gallery at the time, that there was any kind of fake compliments just to assuage someone's – I feel like it was genuine. Actually seeing something that someone else didn't."

Whether originating in compassion or awe, the generous comments among the staff members resulted in an increase in their bodies' capacity to act. While they described the artwork as maniacal and malicious in jest, they also came to understand that it "doesn't ask [them] to look good," that over time they "don't feel [they] get as pinned down to one way of being." Those statements reflect the generous gaze that enabled the staff members to measure their worth beyond terms set by their industry's bodily ideals. Indeed, the generous acts granted them recognition for the beauty of their uniqueness rather than their modelling themselves after their boss, and the intelligent appeal of their interactional work full of laughter with clients rather than their attempts to enact perfectly-in-control and fashionable bodies. Marian, who most of her life "acted white," was grateful for "just having that space to not try to be a conformist but find my own identity."

Participants further commented on the transcending and healing properties of those genuine positive interactions with their colleagues. For example, Cora described their collective movement towards:

“a positive space where you’re all able to kind of I don’t know look at it differently or support each other like – Well if you can see me this way maybe I can see myself a little bit this way [...]. There’s other ways to see myself like collectively bringing each other up like group support like people who are recovering from things or recovering groups.”

Anna felt that the turn to counteract the constant negativity with generous comments was especially useful to those with the deepest self-esteem issues:

“In the beginning, it was ‘Oh, my God I look horrible’ to someone out of the room being like, ‘Oh, my gosh there’s this beautiful clip’ of so and so with them not even being in the room and having that sort of dialogue evolve I think really boosted the – I don’t know [...] – Basically, it made everyone that felt so haggard and so run down that really started to develop image issues, a number of people eating disorders things like that. It started to help at a point.”

Their comments suggest that “ongoing continual encounters of healing” (Ettinger, 2006) can interrupt the process of self-destruction that obsession with one’s flawed bodies and acts of micro-violence towards deviant bodies engender.

Facilitating conditions

Feminist culture. While regular encounters with art might cultivate in people the capacity for compassion and awe (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015), our informants were keen to point out that many commercial art galleries were far less respectful and compassionate than theirs, suggesting that the organization’s culture is important in understanding their propensity for generosity. Marian captured this view by describing the feeling walking into most other galleries:

“One of the things I love about working in that art gallery is that most commercial galleries you walk into kind of make you feel like you shouldn't be in there in the first place. [...] If you walk in and you don't already feel a sense of privilege, it feels like the people behind the desk don't want to talk to you unless you look like you are going to buy something. So it feels very much about the transaction... [Our] gallery was always very much about like greet everybody who walks in, talk about the work.”

Elizabeth confirmed that she worked hard to build a unique organization, which while selling artworks embraces the power of art as critical inquiry. The gallery's mission includes “education and community and social justice and the belief that art has the capacity to change lives and is a vehicle for reflecting on the human condition and for talking about everything from the psychological to the political.” She believed that employees “shared similar ideas about the human condition and politics” and that:

“You would have to be [empathic] in some way because the program is so content driven and the content is so often so reflective of issues that are sort of particular to that profound way that I think it would be strange to have a vain staff.”

The organization's culture, through its commitment to critical reflexivity and justice, seemed to encourage inclusive and respectful interactions with clients and staff. Our informants, however, were not rid of all forms of aggressive and exclusionary impulses. Cora, for example, recognized those impulses and took responsibility for the suffering she inflicted: “I judge women because I judge myself. I take ownership over the fact that I have, like, and it's competitive, I can't even help it. It's just like, it happens, I hate it about myself.” However, as Elizabeth suggested, they were overall likely to be sensitive to others' needs and unlikely to express feelings of superiority. The director's own attempts were critical in fostering this ethical disposition; Anna observed: “We know our places but we're also equals as humans

even though we all felt that our director is leaps and bounds beyond us, she didn't act like that.”

Psychological safety. The group’s climate of psychological safety constitutes another important contextual condition explaining the staff members’ propensity to initiate and reciprocate humor and laughter and generosity, because such a climate eased the expression of anxieties and other admissions of vulnerability. We observed on site that work-related talk was interspersed with very personal anecdotes. Elizabeth drew our attention to the potentially enabling role of those intimate relationships:

“I recognize as the employer rather than the employee, people don't necessarily reveal always their most honest feelings in my presence but we – I mean the gallery – is small enough and relationship is intimate enough in many, many ways that... We're also all female at that time. I think there was a kind of intimacy that you might not experience in a larger workspace with people of different genders.”

The relational intimacy, she suggests, supported risky self-revelation: “employees are encouraged or feel comfortable or safe I hope talking about things in a way that they might not in a more generalized business context.” Marian confirmed that their shared intimacy allowed for empathy around the artwork and the painful self-objectification it generated:

“I would say that everything at least in the situation where you have a bunch of close-knit women who spend all day with each other would happen whether it was surveillance or just looking at photos that we took of each other. So I'm not sure the surveillance side of it affected that empathy.”

In the absence of psychological safety, organizational members may be more likely to suppress or hide their embarrassment, as if those affective experiences were themselves

shameful (Dolezal, 2015), hindering the dynamics of emancipatory reciprocity we observed.

Discussion

Our exploration of affective experiences suggests that bodily norms may condition but do not determine possibilities for living in organizations. Indeed, our participants were able collectively to break out of the disempowering cycle of self-obsessive narcissism with their bodies and appearances. Early on, they engaged in frustrating amounts of compromising body work to elude the acute sting of body shame, reinforcing the stability of bodily norms. But loving encounters suffused with laughter and generosity emerged from the recognition of their common and fundamental vulnerability. The repetition of these encounters led to an overall increased capacity for joy around the artwork, more positive relationships to their bodies and more carefree, subversive performances. We use the metaphor “affective pathways to freedom” to describe this process. The organization’s feminist orientation and climate of psychological safety likely facilitated the staff’s moving from shame to joy by respectively nurturing a general ethical disposition towards openness and respect, and facilitating admissions of vulnerability. We are not claiming that the gallery members have reached or would ever reach a state of complete freedom from bodily ideals, where bodies only ever feel joy. Instead, we see affective pathways to freedom as an important and potentially self-reinforcing form of emancipatory politics, which can help erode the grip of bodily norms on both our experiences of ourselves and the range of viable bodily appearances and performances in organizations.

Contributions to scholarship on bodily discipline

Bodily discipline research has importantly highlighted the subtle perpetuation of inequalities among organizational members through the docile yet immanently violent reproduction of culturally narrow bodily norms. A few scholars, primarily in the psychoanalytical tradition, have inferred that individualized anxiety at the risk of being abjected may underlie the persistence of those injurious norms (e.g. Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Johansson et al., 2017). We extend their insights into the role of affect in bodily discipline by attending to affects as they arise and evolve in interactions between bodies in a shared organizational context.

Our investigation exposes the possibility of joyful disruption of the forces that reproduce hurtful norms. As we have demonstrated, bodily norms are vulnerable to the affirmative politics of love that may arise from the affective suffering they inflict, underpinning recent ideas in organizational ethics research about the radical potential of affect (Fotaki et al., 2017). Our work, beyond enabling greater optimism about disruptive possibilities, adds depth and complexity to current theorizing by foregrounding the flow of affects between bodies, in a way that can account for upward trajectories in body-subjects' vitality and further elucidate downward trajectories. Past studies could perhaps be re-read from this perspective – focusing on affective dynamics over numerous encounters could reveal how potential pathways to freedom were obscured or blocked by the intensification of overlooked or misunderstood negative affects. For example, body shame often works below conscious awareness, and when acutely experienced is likely to be misinterpreted as a symptom of personal deficiency and coped with privately (Dolezal, 2015). Or, the occlusion might have resulted from people closing themselves off from positive affects that may interfere with sadness and its source. For example, organizational members may take themselves so earnestly as to foreclose laughing together at their leaking bodies (Mumby, 2009) or leaders may be too quick to silence the cracks that spontaneous humor/laughter at transgression may make visible (Hunter & Kivinen, 2016). Taking affect seriously means

recognizing the complex and dynamic possibilities in interactions between people, including the possibilities for emancipation, rather than assuming an endless and inevitable cycle of sad affects predicated on our fundamental need for recognition and fear of abjection.

Our approach is consistent with the “becoming” perspective (Coffey, 2013), which views body-subjects as ever-changing, even when they recreate dominant norms. Abjection studies tend to contribute to the pessimism of structural theories by featuring the fear of exclusion that drives performances that are sanctioned by others. Our study reveals the possibility that visceral experiences of bodily shame might be engaged affirmatively through loving encounters, whereby organizational members experience empowering alternative ways of being together and in their bodies and embolden each other to perform subversively. Resistance thus does not require the suppression of our fundamental need for recognition but instead can manifest in counteracting forces of laughter, compassion and awe, whose emergence can sustain us in our struggles and help us challenge oppressive norms. Those affective forces can emerge alongside or following abjection and are likely lurking in many organizational contexts. Being attuned to those trajectories of possibilities (Ashcraft, 2017), and further exploring what may spark, halt, or facilitate them, can critically extend our understanding of how hurtful bodily norms can be successfully challenged.

Contributions to research on the critical potential of affect

Emphasizing affective pathways to freedom from injurious bodily norms, our study contributes to an important body of essays on the critical potentialities of affect in oppressive regimes. By considering how our informants affectively experienced and responded to discriminatory bodily norms, we were able to provide empirical support for the abstract affirmative politics of love whereby organizational members may empower each other (Pullen & al., 2015) – a politics that is not as well empirically grounded as the politics of anger that

can similarly spring from the shame and hurt experienced in discriminatory regimes. Further, we could clarify how and when such politics might arise and how they may lead to increased freedom.

Scholars have recognized the theoretical possibility for shame and anxiety to be transformed through loving encounters but whether the affective force of love emerges is seemingly determined by grace. While we agree that loving encounters do not arise at will (Pullen et al., 2017; Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015), our findings elucidate what it takes for this theoretical possibility to become an empirical reality. In particular, they indicate the critical role played by mutual recognition and acceptance of fundamental vulnerability in the emergence of both ritualistic laughing at embarrassing bodies and regular exchange of generous comments. This dynamic is different from the underlying shared awareness of a common and specific vulnerability, which may emerge from the bodily resonances of frustration and anger which sometimes follow specific shaming episodes and may lead to collective outrage and mobilization. The struggle we found was not against an outside instance, such as occurs with sexual harassment (Vachhani & Pullen, 2018), but against organizational members' own desire to maintain the myth of self-mastery (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015). The emergence of loving encounters occurs through a process of self-fragilization (Ettinger, 2006), where individuals expose the hurt they experienced in the pursuit of recognition and open themselves to be brought into awe by others. When organizational members become mutually aware of their fundamental vulnerability and mutual interdependence, they can become more disposed to act lovingly or generously (Rushing, 2010).

Our work draws attention to organizational conditions that may facilitate the emergence of loving encounters. Typical organizations are dominated by modes of judgment that control rather than enable and concomitantly by sad affects (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015),

with scholars pondering if and when a loving gaze may materialize. In loving encounters, organizational members resist the impulses of value judgment – of aggression and exclusion. We believe that the gallery’s political culture supported this resistance as well as the experience and display of compassion. This culture contrasts with the surrounding neoliberal and masculinist norm, which we suppose dominates the gendered organizations in which bodily discipline studies have typically been conducted. Feminist or egalitarian forms of organizing demand critical, reflexive acts that support the development of sensitivity to domination and dynamics of exclusion (Vachhani & Pullen, 2018), including our own complicity in them (Fotaki, 2011); dominant forms of organizing divert attention from such dynamics (Acker & Webber, 2016), numbing us to the lives of others for whose lack of well-being we refuse responsibility. Additionally, the climate of psychological safety facilitated admissions of sad affects, without which the recognition of human vulnerability and the effort to alleviate each other’s suffering may not have happened. In the absence of a safe climate, organizational members might dismiss exposure of their own weaknesses as too interpersonally risky, thus precluding the emergence of loving encounters. The identification of contextual features that make loving encounters more likely deserves additional scholarly exploration.

Our study also helps illuminate the emancipatory potential of loving encounters. Scholars have proposed that ethico-political acts of love matter (Lund & Tienari, 2019), even if they do not “change the world in one fell swoop” (Pullen et al., 2017, p.117). Our findings reveal a liberating process, in which organizational members, through reiterated acts of love, disrupt the tight grip of bodily norms. This process supports the notion that the affirmative politics of love may constitute a real challenge to dominant discriminatory norms (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014; Kenny & Fotaki, 2015) in part perhaps because unlike individual acts of resistance they do not rely on a fantasy of autonomy (Mumby, Thomas, Marti & Seidl, 2019).

The key to the efficacy of communal laughter and reciprocal generosity may be the deep nurturing sense of connection and positive regard that people experience in such loving encounters and the resulting increase in felt vitality. Those experiences, scholars have suggested, create the possibility of thinking and doing otherwise (e.g. Mumby, 2009), by providing the means of intuitively comparing our habitual, regulated ways of being in our bodies and relating to each other with more joyful and authentic ways (see e.g. Vlieghe, 2010). We suggest that increased agency may flow from a somatic, group learning process (Rigg, 2018) that happens as organizational members experience an increase in joy through love, which may induce them to seek out and repeat those encounters (Thanem & Wallenberg, 2015). In our case, the multiplication of loving encounters likely was aided by organizational members' increasing attention to the fun and loving moments captured by the artwork – a reminder of their collective experience of joy. Given how critical the repetition of loving encounters seems to be to their overall potency in emancipating organizational members, we encourage scholars to elaborate the potentially self-reinforcing nature of the affirmative politics of love.

Limitations and practical implications

While key to providing unique insights and rich details into a complex process of liberation from harmful bodily norms, the small-scale and idiographic nature of our study prevents us from making definitive claims beyond our informants' accounts (Gill, 2015). The usefulness of the novel and potentially significant insights generated should however not be marginalized to particular cases but instead assessed through further scholarly reflection and empirical studies (Alvesson & Robertson, 2017). In our view, affective pathways to freedom are theoretically possible elsewhere and our case in fact provides useful practical guidance for facilitating their emergence. The pathways we identified should serve as a haunting and

provocative reminder of a reality that may currently fail to - but could nonetheless materialize.

Patterns of self-abjection among women and minorities have been identified in many industries, whose normative standards for embodiment while contextually situated are similarly narrow. Shame is seeping in those individuals' bones (Loveday, 2016) over numerous occasions of (self-)judgment (Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Pullen et al., 2017), and is acutely experienced again in every encounter (not simply with their reflected images) that brings their "seen bodies" to consciousness (Dolezal, 2015). Rather than assuming an endless sad cycle, we encourage other scholars to "dwell in the middle of potentials and pathways" (Ashcraft, 2017) in other shared organizational contexts, i.e. to attend to the experience of body shame and the possibility of love in everyday interactions between bodies, not only to establish further the relevance of our particular study's insights but also to uncover additional facilitators and barriers to the affirmative politics of love. Such work is important given the hidden costs of bodily discrimination (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2018), including body shame's potentially devastating consequences on employees' thriving.

Despite the strong consistency in themes that emerged across our diverse informants' accounts, we suggest that closer attention to differences between individual experiences in other contexts can elaborate our theorizing further. Future work could refine our understanding of why and when organizational members who are privileged by dominant norms, including men, self-fragilize. Our own experience as a mixed-gender team suggests the possibility of becoming-human together but we do not deny that sex/gender may complicate the emergence and multiplication of loving encounters. Scholars may also notice subtle differences in how organizational members experience various empathetic gestures or laughter, which could help further explain why a pathway develops or not. Love may, for example, be experienced as pity and lead to a decrease rather than an increase in vitality.

Pragmatically speaking, we expect that effective interventions to foster loving encounters and open up more joyful patterns of bodily becoming may not be so much about installing art objects as enabling the witnessing of the often silent and invisible force of body shame and the mutual recognition and acceptance of our fundamental vulnerability. Body shame talk, often problematically dismissed and denigrated as self-centered griping or risky exposure, could be one such enabler since such talk, like stress talk, can spark an affective sharing of anxieties (Ashcraft, 2017). Images can also make more visible women's and other minorities' embodied experiences and enable through affective resonance in the viewers apprehension of their common vulnerability (Kosmala, 2008). Similar effects might result from a team leader's sincere and courageous display of bodily vulnerability and pain (Müller, 2017). The success of those efforts to bring about pathways to freedom through the progressive reclaiming of our capacity for love may further depend, as our study suggests, on efforts to build a favorable local culture of critical reflexivity and psychological safety.

Final reflections

The video art installation, beyond methodologically supporting the study of affect in bodily discipline, enables reflection on the profound human experience of being-seen-by-another – an experience that is central to the development of inequality regimes in organizations and society (Müller, 2017) but also paradoxically to their possible undoing. Our findings indeed show that there is more to being-seen-by-another than the alienating gaze of the Other. It also entails an ineluctable embodied relationality at the heart of the self that reveals that we are vulnerable and exposed (Dolezal, 2017); this relationality can open pathways to freedom. What is apprehended in the experience of shame, beyond our non-conformity to particular norms, is our capacity to be wounded and to wound. Performance artist Marina Abramovic offers a similar reflection on the visual conditions of recognition

through the exposure of her vulnerable body (Müller, 2017). Like our installation, her performances have the capacity to engender “an intimate reawakening to the fragility of life and a more general sense of connection” (Phelan, 2014, p. 577). In enabling mutual recognition and acceptance of vulnerability, they offer a key to the transformation of oppressive workplaces into compassionate borderspaces (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015) or loving relational spaces (Lund & Tienari, 2019), in which organizational members open themselves to otherness and difference. These insights have important implications for potentially more effective resistance to various forms of oppression and self-rejection in today’s organizations. We hope that our work encourages others to join this broader project.

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Figure 1. The Art Installation





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