

CHEMSEX AND BAREBACKING: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF SEXUAL PANIC
ON AN OFF-ROAD MOTORBIKE

CHEMSEX Y BAREBACKING: UNA AUTOETNOGRAFÍA DEL PÁNICO SEXUAL EN UNA MOTO
TODOTERRENO

Jorge Humberto Lucero Díaz

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona; jpoinds@gmail.com

Historia editorial

Recibido: 05-10-2024
Aceptado: 10-12-2024
Publicado: 17-02-2025

Keywords

Chemsex; Barebacking;
Sexuality; Ethnography;
Risk management

Abstract

I examine autoethnographically the intersections of chemsex, barebacking, and sexual panic, critically challenging the dominant discourses surrounding these areas of study. Drawing from my personal experiences, the study employs the metaphor of off-road motorbiking to interrogate the complexities of risk, pleasure, and the body. My analysis highlights the paradoxical ways in which society valorises risk in extreme sports while pathologising risk-taking in sexual encounters, particularly among men who have sex with other men in chemsex. I critique the moral panic that marks certain bodies as deviant and subject to social regulation. I argue that barebacking in chemsex, often reduced to public health concerns, should instead be understood within a broader socio-cultural context where pleasure, the body, and risk are negotiated. I complexify binary notions of safety and danger linked to sexual panic, urging a nuanced understanding of chemsex and barebacking that recognises their relational aspects.

Resumen

Palabras clave

Chemsex; Barebacking;
Sexualidad; Etnografía;
Gestión del riesgo

En este artículo analizo autoetnográficamente las intersecciones entre el *chemsex*, el *barebacking* y el pánico sexual, desafiando críticamente los discursos dominantes. Basándome en mis experiencias personales, utilizo la metáfora de andar en moto todoterreno para explorar las complejidades del riesgo, el placer y el cuerpo. Mi análisis resalta las paradojas en las que la sociedad valora positivamente el riesgo en los deportes extremos, mientras patologiza la toma de riesgos en los encuentros sexuales, especialmente en el contexto del chemsex. Critico el pánico moral que señala a ciertos cuerpos como desviados y sujetos a regulación social. Sostengo que el *barebacking* en el *chemsex*, frecuentemente reducido a preocupaciones de salud pública, debe comprenderse dentro de un contexto sociocultural más amplio, donde se negocian el placer, el cuerpo y el riesgo. Complejizo las nociones binarias de seguridad y peligro asociadas al pánico sexual, y abogo por una comprensión que reconozca sus aspectos relacionales.

Lucero Díaz, Jorge Humberto. (2025). Chemsex and Barebacking: An Autoethnography of Sexual Panic on an Off-Road Motorbike. *Athenea Digital*, 25(1), e3752. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/athenea.3752>

Introduction

As my confinement due to the Covid-19 pandemic neared its conclusion, I found myself engaged in a discussion with friends who shared similar political and epistemological perspectives. During our conversation, which eventually turned towards our experiences with sexual encounters facilitated by geolocation dating applications (Apps) during lockdown, I recounted my varied use of these platforms upon my recent move from Santiago, Chile, to Barcelona, Spain. I explained that I utilised Tinder to connect with individuals outside Barcelona, occasionally turned to

Grindr for quick encounters within the city, and sought older partners through Scruff. Initially, the dialogue proceeded smoothly. However, as we delved into more intimate and sexually charged narratives, a sense of unease crept in. I recounted having turned down certain dates on these apps because some individuals practised exclusively safe sex, which involved condom usage. Instead, I admitted a preference for MachoBB, a condomless sex App. To my surprise, my friends, who typically form part of my academic circle, immediately distanced themselves both physically and emotionally. Their friendly demeanours turned stern, and their tone shifted to one of moral judgement upon learning of my inclination towards condomless sex. Their reaction swiftly marked me as irresponsible, reckless, and a public health concern. I refrained from disclosing instances where substances were involved in some of my sexual encounters.

Almost a year after that meeting, the headline “Chemsex: the Possible Origin of Monkeypox” appeared in the online media *Marca* (“El chemsex: El posible...”, 2022) and “What is Chemsex: the Practice at the Origin of the Monkeypox Outbreak” was the headline in the online media *Sport* (“Qué es el chemsex...”, 2022). These reports framed chemsex as the use of drugs in sexual encounters among men who have sex with men (MSM) and gay individuals, a definition that I will delve into further later. Both newspapers linked the 2022 outbreak of monkeypox to the intersection of drug use and group sexuality within the gay community. While the *Marca* article notes that the disease can occur regardless of gender and age, both media pieces specify that the origin of the outbreak lies in gay men who use drugs. These narratives depicted participants in these encounters as irresponsible individuals who eschew condom usage due to drug influences.

I introduce these narratives here as they directly intersect with my own experiences, experimental endeavours, pursuit of pleasure, body, identity performance, and conceptions of modern masculinities, all of which are central to my role as a social researcher. Additionally, they contextualise the socio-relational environment within which my practices unfold and where this article is situated.

To provide further socio-historical contextualisation, I will briefly refer to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s before looking more deeply into having sex without a condom or barebacking (BB) in chemsex, in conjunction with risk. HIV/AIDS was established as the disease “of the 4Hs (homosexuals, Haitians, haemophiliacs, heroin addicts)... identified as ‘gay cancer’ by the American and European press in 1981” (Llamas, 1998, p. 177). Pablo Santoro (2019) describes how, in the 1980s, the social marking of HIV+ bodies emerged, involving governments, media, families, and other social actors. This was driven by moral panic, framing HIV+ individuals as a societal

threat. A lack of scientific understanding in the USA contributed to prejudiced etiological hypotheses, delaying effective responses and producing the homosexualisation of AIDS.

Despite clear knowledge of the aetiology and treatment of monkeypox (World Health Organization, 2022), a virus disease continues to be used to fuel stigmatisation of those engaging in non-heterosexual practices, particularly group sex involving drugs and no condoms. Mainstream media has, paraphrasing Ricardo Llamas (1998), gaysexualised and drugalised the 2022 monkeypox outbreak, echoing the moral panic surrounding homosexual and drug-using bodies during the HIV crisis of the 1980s. While this article does not delve into these issues further, it highlights the persistent media-driven stigmatisation of marginalised groups following historical patterns of moral panic.

I explore how this panic permeates various aspects of my life. Using autoethnography, I argue that when marginalised groups like gay or MSM substance users assume risk, it triggers societal panic aimed at regulating our behaviours. I contrast this with activities like extreme sports, which involve risk but are celebrated. Employing the metaphor of off-road motorbiking, I challenge the sexual panic surrounding BB in chemsex, showing that such practices are not solely driven by substance use. Both off-road motorbike racing and BB in chemsex involve exploration, pleasure, interaction with others, and inherent risk, offering a more nuanced understanding of these experiences emphasising the complexity of these practices and the need for a broader understanding.

The research question central to this autoethnography is: How do my personal experiences of chemsex and BB challenge dominant psychobiomedical discourses and societal narratives surrounding sexual panic to BB in chemsex? The objective of this article is to offer a nuanced perspective on BB in chemsex by connecting my personal lived experiences with cultural analysis, advocating for a re-evaluation of the moral and medical narratives surrounding these practices. This work interrogates the complexities of risk and cultural stigma, calling for a more informed and multifaceted engagement with these sexual practices.

This study critically remarks the pathologisation of sexual practices among MSM and other sexual categories. It seeks to unravel how these sexual practices, often deemed risky, are embedded in broader socio-cultural contexts, thereby challenging moral and medical frameworks that reduce such behaviours to public health concern. The study contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions in the fields of queer studies,

sociology of health, chemsex studies and cultural theory, by offering an alternative lens to view non-normative sexual practices beyond their pathologisation.

In the following section, I will explore the definitions and implications of chemsex and BB, and how these practices are situated within the broader discourse of sexual panic. By doing so, I hope to illuminate the complexities of this phenomenon and challenge the simplistic and often pathologising narratives that dominate mainstream and scientific discussions.

Chemsex, Barebacking, and Sexual Panic

Biomedical disciplines have broadly taxonomically classified the use of drugs to facilitate sexual encounters as sexualised drug use (Tomkins et al., 2019). In particular, the use of psychoactive substances in sexual contexts by MSM and other identity categories in order to enhance the intensity and duration of sexual encounters has been categorised as chemsex (Fernández-Dávila et al., 2016). Research indicates that this phenomenon has primarily emerged in urban centres, with dating Apps playing a central role, and that it is closely linked to the proliferation of new synthetic drugs (McCall et al., 2015). The colloquial names for these encounters varies depending on the socio-cultural context; they are referred to as “intensive sex partying” in Australia, “party and play” in the USA, and “colocón” or “session” in Spain (Fernández-Dávila et al., 2016). I will refer to these encounters as “chills”, as per colloquial usage in Barcelona.

The defining characteristic of chemsex as a psychobiomedical field of study lies in its positive correlation with HIV seroconversion, hepatitis C infection, and various risky sexual behaviours such as condomless sex and engaging with multiple sexual partners. Additionally, the development of substance dependencies that adversely impact life and societal participation has been studied as another negative effect (Javaid, 2018; McCall et al., 2015).

The emergence of the phenomenon in the last two decades has been accompanied by the development of a robust body of knowledge, anchored in the pathologising paradigm in which “behaviours are exclusively risky, and the individual is helpless or irrational” (Milhet et al., 2019, p. 12). At the same time, through this paradigm, the body of the users has been classified within the conformation of a subject who solely experiences adverse mental health effects. This perspective excludes pleasure from the focus of study in order to look closer at the problematic nature of the phenomenon. Following on the terms of David Moore (2008), it is clear that there is subjugation of knowledge in this area. In this hegemonic order, disciplines such as medicine,

epidemiology and psychology enjoy greater legitimacy and credibility. Their main areas of study are sexual risk behaviours and negative biopsychosocial impacts excluding pleasure.

Amidst this global knowledge production, critical voices challenging dominant discourses have emerged. Scholars such as Mitena Milhet et al. (2019) shift the focus towards the pleasure experienced by participants, diverging from the pathologising approach. Responding to the need to complexify the knowledge about the phenomenon, Critical Chemsex Studies was born, emerging “at the interstices of the sociology of health, drugs studies, cultural studies and media studies and is drawn together by feminist and queer theoretical orientations towards power, identity and affect” (Møller & Hakim, 2023, p. 548) focusing on the productive aspects of the phenomenon.

Regarding BB, Javier Sáez defines it as sexual practice without a condom or protection. It is the “most widespread practice among the heterosexual population” (2017, p. 34) but now predominantly associated with anal sex between men. Jeffrey Weeks (2011) focuses on the cultural and social dimensions of BB, emphasising negotiation and ritualisation within a socio-cultural framework. From here, BB is located collectively as opposed to as an individual act. On the other hand, psychobiomedical discourse tends to pathologise BB, seeking to identify its causes and propose solutions to what is considered a public health concern (Berg, 2009), focusing research on the risky behaviour.

Considering the above, it is not the causes and drivers of BB that I am investigating in this article. Instead, I strive to give texture to its productive aspect linked to pleasure. I conceptualise it experientially from my practices and performance, in which I also include the use of pre-exposure prophylaxis medication (PrEP). Mark Davis (2002) makes room for bareback narratives to define the practice in terms of modern rationality and its link to identity. On the other hand, Tim Dean locates BB as part of an elaborate subculture that has developed “around men who fuck without protection precisely in order to become infected” (2009, p. 17). In these conceptualisations, the categories of intentionality, behaviour and identity are not sufficient to understand the movements and practices of this subculture.

My position is close to the postulates of Kane Race (2007) who states that BB can certainly be linked to the questioning of the construction of a contagious or deviant subject or individual. If the construction of the barebacker subject were to occur at all, it would be multiple and contextual, always performed in diverse socio-historical relational contexts. These questions also challenge the construction of responsibility

and individualised intentionality that has led to surveillance of the body or the individual who does not use a condom. This author also points out that there is no single narrative for thinking about BB, therefore it is not possible to understand it as a coherent subculture or with universally unified meanings.

Let us set aside the notions of chemsex and BB for now and return to the outset of this article. It could be said that I have sought to render intelligible the events recounted in the opening narrative of this piece and aspects of the scientific discourse on chemsex through the theoretical construct of sexual panic (Vance, 1985). It links moral and social fears with certain sexual practices, allowing dominant cultural forces to exert control. Sexual panic legitimises structures of domination with concrete consequences, including even the creation of laws. It can be found in the media, in scientific knowledge, in the health system and in the population. To quote Janice Irvine “the panic of moral panics legitimises enhanced state power through fostering the illusion of a singular public mobilized in support of traditional values” (2008, p. 3), being a social reaction that operates as social control.

Following these authors, I understand the theoretical construct of sexual panic as a morally based fear or aversion to certain sexual practices, actions and imaginaries. It spreads like an infectious agent to produce concrete actions that seek to control other bodies, just as my friends in the opening story of this autoethnography were infected. Sexual panic is produced and infected in specific historical and social contexts. In this production, there is a performance as a reaction that allows someone to detect determined and concrete scripts to give authorisation to what is possible in sex. In this way, particular ways of thinking about sex in the public sphere, delimited ways of practising it, and even behavioural ways of referring to it are legitimised.

The reaction of sexual panic performed by the people in the introductory account made me feel as if I had come out of the closet a second time. This reaction was presented as a negative exteriority against which my sexual practices unfolded. I stopped sensing that encounter as a safe space and began to speculate about how sexual panic has extended into other spaces, including the healthcare system. These people delegitimised my practices and my pleasures by placing them within a good-bad binary categorisation. I was categorised as an irresponsible person, enrolled into a system of evaluation that determined that my body was susceptible to intervention by the health system.

In the same vein, the mainstream press which states that the origin of monkeypox is in chemsex and the gay community reacted with sexual panic in the face of the 2022 outbreak. These media reacted to events in such a way as to promote

the generation of citizen and political movements in which force and power enable action on bodies. These bodies have been marked as sources of zoonosis and thus rendered susceptible to intervention. Dion Kagan (2015) tells us how the media in Australia reacted from a place of sexual panic in 2007 due to a case of alleged reckless transmission of HIV linked to BB; as I have already mentioned, sexual panic is not new or unprecedented in our society.

In a critical review of the psychobiomedical discourse on chemsex, it is possible to detect a certain level of sexual panic. An exhaustive exploration of the scientific production is far beyond the scope of this article, but nevertheless, I raise this discursive tension. In the following, I cite Aliraza Javaid as an example: chemsex “encouraged condomless sex” (2018, p. 197) by being seen as more adventurous, intense and pleasurable.

As I will mention later, some of us have done BB before using substances and continue to do BB outside of chills, just as some people have done BB before starting to take PrEP (Lima et al., 2023). However, when using verbs with an epistemic modality related to the factual status of the proposition (Ferrari, 2016) such as encourage, increase and facilitate, some studies express a causal and linear relationship between BB and chemsex.

Additionally, they construct a taxonomy in which users are classified as risky bodies. Studies indicate that individuals engaging in chemsex often forget condoms due to the disinhibiting effects of drugs. Research highlights that substances reduce inhibitions and increase sexual arousal, leading to prolonged and intense sexual sessions with multiple partners, often without condom use. It also highlights that chemsex can impair judgment and negotiation skills, making it more challenging for individuals to insist on condom use. The allure of heightened pleasure and sustained arousal during chemsex sessions would contribute to the reluctance to use condoms, despite the known risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) transmission (McCall et al., 2015). Furthermore, the use of dating apps and engagement in group sex are significant factors that correlate with chemsex and reduced condom use (Rosas et al., 2023).

From this field of knowledge, it is also established that are healthy and appropriate sexual behaviours in the exercise of the sexuality. As a truth extracted by science, a universalising discourse is established that denies or makes invisible the different possibilities of this exercise. As a counterpoint to the sexual panic deployed by my close social circle, the media and the psychobiomedical discourse, I use my experience as an autoethnography.

Methodology: Autoethnography

The exploration of chemsex, barebacking, and sexual panic in this article is not merely a detached academic exercise; it is rooted in my own lived experiences. To navigate the complex terrain of these themes, I have chosen autoethnography as my methodological approach. Autoethnography, as Tony Adams et al. (2015) describe, allows researchers to tell stories of/about the self through the lens of culture, blending personal narrative with critical analysis. Autoethnography enables me to interrogate intersections between the personal and the collective. For me, autoethnography is a way of conducting meaningful research generated from personal experiences, which can often be unique and irreproducible. It is a way of investigating in the silences of representation.

Autoethnography “is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). My writing style is closely aligned with analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Ellis & Bochner, 2006), as I place greater emphasis on cultural aspects rather than individual ones that intersect with my experiences. By using my personal experiences as a foundation, I delve into and elucidate broader cultural phenomena. This method blends personal narrative with critical and reflexive analysis, linking my individual experiences to cultural, political, and social issues. The objective is to foster a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics and their impact on both personal and collective experiences.

To systematise my experiences of substance use in sexual contexts, I maintained a field notebook, documenting my participation in sexual encounters involving substances through written and oral recordings. The main procedures I carried out were note taking, recording ideas and analytical sketches of what I experienced. I documented my reflections and impressions shortly after these encounters or in the days that followed, maintaining a chronological record. My analysis is centred on short accounts or descriptions of experiences in which a great deal of affectivity is certainly present. These accounts mobilise my feelings and ideas, and they are also embedded in a cultural fabric that exceeds me as an individual participant. In the following section, I will share some of these reflections and notes. On some occasions, these notes are reflections or impressions of something that happened in “situations that stand out from a background of feeling like eyes outlined with phosphorescent paint in the darkness of a party without light” (Field notebook, 21 January 2022). In addition to BB, risk and masculinities, the themes in which I have been grouping my

annotations are bodily experience, body aesthetics, ritualisation of certain techniques, homonormativity, and pleasure (what I have called the *rich* in the field notebook).

From December 02, 2021 to April 24, 2022 I participated in 7 chills in Barcelona. Regarding the substances I used and their routes of administration, these were mainly cathinones (snorted), methamphetamine (smoked), and sildenafil (oral). I have also used MDMA, 2CB and microdoses of LSD in group and non-group sexual encounters on several occasions. A significant experience in chemsex encounters is slamming or the practice of injecting methamphetamine; as I have never done it, this story lacks that experience. I do not assert superiority in a hierarchical system of truth-telling about the chemsex phenomenon because of having experimented with substances in these encounters. One of the reasons for this is that I understand that truth is constructed and contested in a web of power; furthermore, it is not in my interest to contribute to such hierarchical production. However, what I do seek to propose is that these experiences allow me to question, problematise and contrast knowledge in order to, as I have already mentioned, make it more complex. This research has received approval by a Commission of Ethics in Animal and Human Experimentation, and it keeps anonymity of all specific places and participants in the encounters, except for me, according to recommendations outlined in the World Health Organization's Guidelines on Biobehavioural Surveys in Populations at Risk of HIV (2018). Below, I share notes from my notebook that allow me to discuss and complexify knowledge.

Off-Road Motorbiking

With someone in a chill, we discussed at length our practice of having sex without a condom. Our conversation was a bit unusual in the context for two reasons: firstly, in the chills I participated in, extended conversations were infrequent; "it was action, short dialogues, multiple dialogues, gestures, materiality and movement that mainly monopolised the space and my attention" (Field notebook March 24, 2022, Sants). There was little room for long dialogues and extended discussions, creating a relational atmosphere charged with materiality. Secondly, I hypothesised that most if not all participants had sex without a condom, or were on PrEP, or were undetectable, or that the majority were HIV+. These hypotheses arose inductively, based on several mechanisms, movements, and actions observed during the encounters. These cues included: participants contacted in Apps stated that they liked BB, the presence of BB guests, declaring to be on PrEP in the descriptions of the Apps and verbally in front of other participants, declaring to be undetectable in the same Apps, the use of Apps for people who exclusively do BB, the almost non-existent request for condoms, among others. I don't remember being asked to use a condom or anyone hinting to use one. "I

also suspect that all participants were informed of the possibility of transmission of viruses or infectious agents” (Field notebook April 24, 2022, Ciutat Vella).

Before delving further into the conversation on the chill, I would like to briefly address the use of PrEP and the sexual panic that surrounds it. The prevailing narrative links this pharmacological device to an increase in high-risk behaviours and a rise in non-HIV STIs. However, this association lacks epidemiological evidence and systematic analysis to substantiate it (Lima et al., 2023). It is not merely a matter of needing to belong to a high-risk group to qualify for a PrEP programme what impact me; it is that the use of PrEP itself is often perceived as enabling socially unacceptable sexual behaviours (Golub, 2018). The former frames my body among others as a threat to societal values. Although it is beyond the scope of this research to explore this issue in greater depth, acknowledging this context allows us to situate the use of PrEP within an environment charged with moral panic, while underscoring the critical considerations raised in this article.

Returning to the conversation during the chill, we said that BB was “like riding a motorbike and in a chill it was like off-road motorbiking. With this guy we said that with or without drugs we still didn’t fuck using a condom” (Field notebook January 21, 2022, Sants). He and I have always ridden motorbikes. Although we have driven cars, we prefer motorbikes. I don’t drive cars. I have tried, in fact, I have taken car driving courses twice, but I suspect I never will. Here, driving a car is like wearing a condom. Using this metaphor, I make it clear that prior to using substances during sexual encounters in Barcelona, Chile, or other countries; I had already not used condoms. In other words, I have always preferred riding a motorbike to driving a car. “I like the motorbike; I enjoy it. I relish feeling the other body with my own... between us, it is the fluids and the dirt. With a car, I don’t feel the wind, literally” (Field notebook January 21, 2022, Sants).

I am aware that several studies have demonstrated a decrease in condom use in recent years. For instance, Eugene Davids et al. (2021) observed a significant decline in condom usage among adolescents and young adults. Key factors contributing to this trend include a perceived reduction in the risk of STIs and others. According to their findings, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this decline. Similarly, Marta Rosas et al. (2023) examine the prevalence and characteristics of drug use and chemsex among individuals attending to a STI clinic. Their study identifies significant associations between chemsex and reduced condom use, and other high-risk sexual activities, particularly among cis-gender men. In line with these studies, I have also observed an increased tendency not to use condoms. I agree that the non-use of condoms is part of the range of practices and relationships. However, I also think that attributing

chemsex as a universal cause of this practice during a chill is a mistake. I propose that we should rather understand BB in chemsex within a cultural context that extends beyond the encounters themselves and any specific sexual practice.

For me, substances add a heightened sensory dimension to the *richness* of BB experiences, evoking indescribable intensity and diverse sensations. They bring a higher quality and *richness* to ride on a bike, off-road motorbiking does not necessarily involve riding at high speed, but it involves an intensity of sensation that is unparalleled. The road is suddenly curvy, and its texture is felt in the body. I relish rough roads, “I prefer the rough over the smoothness. It is a practice that requires great demand on the focus of attention and to be there constantly” (Field notebook January 21, 2022, Sants). When I have fucked bare (always) in a chemsex encounter, it has been necessary to be alert on the track because a curve or obstacle is only a second away. It requires integrating all sensory input into a channel of mastery and integration of information in the production of a high visual, spatial, bodily and temporal level of excitement.

The term BB, in English, comes from the metaphor of riding a horse without a saddle or bareback (Sáez, 2017; Weeks, 2011). In the conversation at the chill, we use the word motorbike and not horse, because of the intensity and pleasure generated by riding such a vehicle, in addition to the fact that our social class does not allow us to go horseback riding or polo. Bearing in mind the differences with motorbike racing, when doing BB in chemsex I faced, managed or experienced risks analogous to those depicted in the sports media, especially relating to male figures in motorsports. An example of such media is the online media *Sport* from Spain quoted in the introduction of this article. Here, the risk could be from seroconversion to STIs+ or overdosing or psychological/physical discomfort or all at the same time.

The association between masculinity, risk, and extreme sports intersects psychological, sociological, and cultural dimensions, offering a unique context where traditional and evolving concepts of masculinity are expressed and challenged. Although I find it challenging to disentangle my experiences in a chemsex encounter, I endeavour to distinguish the psychological, social, and cultural aspects for analytical purposes. This approach has enabled me to elucidate the metaphor of off-road motorbiking in the context of extreme sport and masculinity, while also shedding light on the sexual panic that affects my practices and my body.

Psychologically, extreme sports participants are often driven by excitement and sensation-seeking behaviour, not just for thrills but to manage and confront fear, which ties into masculine ideals of bravery and control. The concept of edgework, by

Stephen Lyng (2005), involves engaging in risky activities where life and death are closely intertwined, allowing men to test their limits and demonstrate resilience and control, attributes traditionally linked to masculinity (Lyng, 2008). When off-road motorbiking in an encounter:

I am very attentive or perhaps rather my whole being is given over to the excitement, even letting go is being focused on that, I never stop riding the bike on the *rich*, dirty and unstable trail... I want the limit, to dominate it and to stay on it, to pass it. (Field notebook April 24, 2022, Ciutat Vella)

Sociologically, extreme sports serve as a stage for performing and negotiating masculinity. Jason Laurendeau (2008) discusses gendered risk regimes, where men engage in riskier behaviours to conform to social expectations of male bravery and toughness. I have been into that regime when:

I drive badly and I make a mistake and I get into an accident, I'm in trouble anyway, I break a bone, well I've had injuries to my rotator cuff and I've been hospitalised, it's part of the sport. I've also had gonorrhoea and other STIs that I might have picked up in chemsex encounters, but maybe not, because I also ride my bike outside of these encounters. (Field notebook January 21, 2022, Sants)

This is evident in activities like BASE jumping, where risking one's life becomes a statement of masculine identity (Laurendeau, 2011). Extreme sports communities often perpetuate hegemonic masculinity, valuing physical strength, endurance, and emotional control (Robinson, 2008). Within these communities, men may feel pressured to take greater risks to maintain their status and acceptance, further linking masculinity with risk-taking behaviours. I am not suggesting that I have felt pressured to engage in BB during encounters. However, within a broader social context beyond these encounters, risky practices are often positively valued and associated with masculinity.

Culturally, extreme sports respond to contemporary societal conditions. Victoria Robinson (2008) suggests that increasing participation in extreme sports may reflect a need to escape the monotony and perceived emasculation of everyday life in a controlled and routinised society. Extreme sports provide an arena where men can reclaim a sense of agency and potency, both personally and collectively, as these activities often involve subcultures that celebrate risky behaviours as markers of true masculinity (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2013). I have often felt a sense of belonging within a community where those who engage in BB practices during chemsex also participate in activities associated with what some might describe as dirty or pig play. I am not sure if the right word is community, but at least interaction or net. "It's like when I

used to go out on a motorbike with other guys” (Field notebook March 24, 2022, Sants).

In addition to the above points, that *rich* was the dirty part, it was the possibility of getting muddy on the bike, it could happen, but it wasn’t obligatory or necessary.

So I was all excited, devoted to what I was doing. Maybe it was the desire to feel alive... maybe I had waited too many routine days! It seems that I unified myself with the excitement and the dirty to get out of having to set the alarm clock. (Field notebook April 24, 2022, Ciutat Vella)

This departure from a controlled and routinised life, away from monotony, is not directly linked to an inability to express masculinity due to an emasculating society or culture. Instead, it is more closely related to Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection (1982). Particularly in how I feel and perceive, in how I guide my movements towards other materialities, and in how I construct subjective reality. The author engages with phenomenology to examine how the body encounters the abject, not merely as a symbolic concept, but as a tangible, lived experience. In my experience, abjection is closely tied to confronting the order and constraints imposed by neoliberalism. This order, marked by gentrification, accelerated living, individualism, job insecurity, consumption as identity, social inequality, and racism, inundates my daily life. When I ride my dirt bike, I am not evading neoliberalism; instead, I am actively creating a disruptive space of experiences. In this space, amidst the dirt, one feels the roughness, the intensity, the curves, the fluids, and the colours, all amidst a sense of excitement and surrender.

I experience off-road motorbiking (doing BB in chemsex) as the management of exposure to risk and the creation of sensory intensities to generate pleasure in a specific context. This pleasure is intricate with the joy of getting muddy with excitation, micro-organisms, fluids and disruption. In this experience, the relationship between masculinity, risk, and extreme sports intertwines psychological, sociological, and cultural elements with phenomenological ones.

Off-road motorbiking is not merely an activity but intricate blend of narratives that shape my experiences. When I first started doing it, I was unaware of the profound implications it would have on my understanding of masculinity, risk, and social interactions. The act of riding itself activates a series of physiological processes that push the boundaries of what the body can achieve, engaging the senses in a form of exploration and experimentation that is both exhilarating and demanding.

As I became more involved in off-road motorbiking, I found myself drawn into interactions with like-minded individuals who shared a passion for the sport. The

activities with them have become a space where we exchange knowledge, share frustrations, and offer support. Through these interactions, I have come to appreciate how off-road motorbiking is more than just a solitary endeavour; it is a relational experience, one that connects me to others who also navigate the complexities of masculinity, risk, pleasure and disruption.

The concept of risk itself is a relatively modern construct, one that emerged alongside the desire to control and plan for the future in a rapidly changing world (Spink, 2019). In the context of motor racing and other extreme sports, risk has taken on a positive connotation. It is often associated with character-building, personal growth, and even economic mastery. However, this positive framing of risk management is not universally accessible. It is often reserved for those in positions of power and privilege, leaving others, like myself, to navigate the perils of risk on less favourable terms (Spink et al., 2007).

For example, in my off-road motorbiking, there is a constant negotiation between the thrill of the ride and the potential for injury. This negotiation is not just physical, but also deeply intertwined with the societal expectations placed upon me as a man who does not conform to traditional heterosexual norms. The media and broader societal discourses have naturalised the association of risk with masculinity, particularly in extreme sports, reinforcing a model of masculinity that is closely linked to heterosexuality or at least close to the athletic healthy body. This model does not fully accommodate the experiences of a person like me, whose practices fall outside these traditional boundaries.

Furthermore, the normalisation of risk within specific activities is often supported by media and psychobiomedical discourses that cater to unmarked, presumably heterosexual, healthy, and clean bodies. This normalisation does not extend to my practices but pathologising them rather than celebrating. There is an expectation that our adventurous behaviours should be modulated, further entrenching the marginalisation of non-heterosexual people who do chemsex. Prevention here is based on individual responsibility that locates the error in the person and success in safe practice (Ávila & Gras, 2014). In this way, seroconversion exists as a failure in personal health care, which implies that I and my practices are within personal failure. This logic is based on the right to self-choice which is highly prescriptive, conservative, and tends to demonise other practices (De Luiz & Spink, 2013). In that way, my body has been marked as a failure every time I have had an STI.

The pathologisation of risk in gay men is a well-documented phenomenon, one that has its roots in the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s. During this time, the media and

public health discourse often linked gay identity with disease, reinforcing negative stereotypes and contributing to the stigmatisation of gay men. This association has persisted as sexual panic, leading to a perception that participation in chills is inherently risky and negative, a perception that is not only damaging but also misleading. It fails to account for the social and cultural biases that underpin these narratives, biases that privilege the management of risk by some masculinities as the norm and marginalise any deviation from it.

In this manner, it appears that the utilisation or embodiment of risk and pleasure is configured within a biopolitical framework where certain bodies have privileged access to this management, garnering positive social valuation. The normalisation of risk in specific activities is facilitated, and enabled by the media, psychobiomedical discourse, and society marking, as described by Pablo Santoro (2019). I seek to complexify the understanding of human practices in conjunction with techniques, pharmacological processes, bodies, and artefacts. I question the axis of power that empowers only certain bodies to manage risk. It aims to establish and highlight a polysemy in terms of the ways in which risk is assessed, experienced and managed.

For some MSM, gays, or other identities who participate or have participated in chills, it means confronting the sexual panic induced by psychobiomedical discourse, the media, and friends. For other men, it means positive social valuation even if they lead a risky lifestyle (De Luiz & Spink, 2013), rewarding them with positive media exposure. In contrast, when in a chemsex encounter context, our adventurous behaviours (Javaid, 2018) are expected to be modulated.

Furthermore, managing the risk of a sexual encounter on the terms of a sporty man is neoliberal, placing the embodiment of responsibility and control of the future on an individual level. I am not interested in bringing a highly planned, controlled, and calculated life or sexual practices. Nor I am interested in embodying a governmentalisation of the body at the molecular level as a good citizen or managing my body to the neoliberal welfare norm (Rose, 2007). The motorbike I ride is off-road in terms of the pleasure, intensity, and disruption. It is also off-road because of the relational possibilities I have established with other materialities, including people and techno-pharmacological artefacts such as sildenafil, PrEP, and other substances.

This research has sought to unravel some complexities of doing BB in chemsex challenging societal narratives infected with sexual panic. By using my personal experiences and reflections, this study has advocated for a more multidimensional understanding of these practices. In engaging with the research question, the metaphor of off-road motorbiking serves as a critical narrative through which I

critique the binary discourses of safety and danger that permeate mainstream discussions of risk in sexuality.

Conclusion

This autoethnographic research has sought to challenge the dominant psychobiomedical and moral discourses surrounding chemsex and BB by offering a reflective narrative. Through the metaphor of off-road motorbiking, I have established the intricate relationship between risk, pleasure, and chemsex, positioning these sexual practices not as aberrant or pathological, but as part of a broader cultural and relational framework. The complexity of BB in chemsex, like the curves of an unpredictable motorbike ride, invites a critical engagement that transcends the simplistic binaries of health risk and moral judgement.

This work has illuminated the moral panic that arises when my body is marked and deemed socially deviant due to my engagement in and enjoyment of certain abject sexual practices. The reactions of my peers, the mainstream media, and the production of biomedical knowledge to such practices reflect deep-rooted anxieties about the control of sexuality, particularly in relation to chemsex practices. Chemsex, in this context, becomes not merely a matter of individual choice or risk, but a focal point for the regulation of non-conforming sexualities. The metaphor of off-road motorbiking has served to highlight the paradoxes inherent in how society valorises risk in certain contexts, such as extreme sports, while simultaneously pathologising other risk-taking in the realm of sexuality.

In this conclusion I highlight the importance of pleasure and personal experience, often overlooked in psychobiomedical analyses, in understanding chemsex and BB practices. By focusing solely on the negative effects of chemsex and BB, dominant discourses neglect the affective, relational, and experiential dimensions of these encounters. Like motorbike racing, these practices involve complex negotiations of control, vulnerability, and sensation. This autoethnography calls for an approach that addresses not only risks but also socio-cultural and emotional experiences. It advocates for recognizing the importance of the body and complexity of participants, moving beyond pathologizing frameworks, and invites further reflection on non-normative sexualities and their embodied practices.

Ethical statement

This study was approved by The Commission on Ethics in Animal and Human Experimentation of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (approval no. CEEAH 6101). No was needed any written informed consent.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to PhD Lupiciño Iñiguez-Rueda, PhD Isabel Piper Shafir and LAICOS IAPSE for the great support.

Funding

Beca Chile ANID Grant No. 72210491.

References

- Adams, Tony; Holman Jones, Stacy & Ellis, Carolyn. (2015). *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press.
- Anderson, Leon. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449>
- Ávila, Rubén & Gras, Pedro. (2014). “No sin él”: Análisis crítico del discurso de las campañas de prevención del VIH dirigidas a hombres que tienen sexo con hombres en España (2006–2011). *Discurso & Sociedad*, 8(2), 137–181.
- Berg, Rigmor. (2009). Barebacking: A review of the literature. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 38(5), 754–764. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-008-9462-6>
- Davids, Eugene; Zembe, Yanga; de Vries, Petrus; Mathews, Catherine & Swartz Alison. (2021). Exploring condom use decision-making among adolescents: The synergistic role of affective and rational processes. *BMC Public Health*, 21, 1894. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11926-y>
- Davis, Mark. (2002). HIV prevention rationalities and serostatus in the risk narratives of gay men. *Sexualities*, 5(3), 281–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460702005003002>
- De Luiz, George & Spink, Mary. (2013). The management of risk in the AIDS scenario: Strategies adopted by men who have sex with men in casual partnerships. *Athena Digital*, 13(3), 39–56. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/athenead/v13n3.950>
- Dean, Tim. (2009). *Unlimited intimacy: Reflections on the subculture of barebacking*. University of Chicago Press.

- El chemsex: El posible origen de la viruela del mono. (2022, May 24). *Marca*.
<https://www.marca.com/tiramillas/actualidad/2022/05/24/628c6a09268e3eb6538b45d3.html>
- Ellis, Carolyn; Adams, Tony & Bochner, Arthur. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>
- Ellis, Carolyn & Bochner, Arthur. (2006). Analyzing analytic autoethnography: An autopsy. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 429–449.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606286979>
- Fernández-Dávila, Percy; CEEISCAT & Stop Sida. (2016). Sesión de sexo, morbo y vicio: Una aproximación holística para entender la aparición del fenómeno chemsex entre hombres gais, bisexuales y otros hombres que tienen sexo con hombres en España. *Revista Multidisciplinar del Sida*, 4(7), 41–65.
- Ferrari, Laura. (2016). Marcadores de modalidad epistémica y evidencial en el análisis de las conclusiones de artículos de investigación de disciplinas distintas. *Aled*, 9(2), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.35956/v.9.n2.2009.p.5-23>
- Golub, Sarit A. (2018). PrEP stigma: Implicit and explicit drivers of disparity. *Current HIV/AIDS Reports*, 15(2), 190–197. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11904-018-0385-0>
- Irvine, Janice. (2008). Transient feelings: Sex panics and the politics of emotions. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14(1), 1–40.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-021>
- Javaid, Aliraza. (2018). The interconnectedness of chemsex, drugs, sexual promiscuity and sexual violence. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 26(2), 183–207.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0791603518773703>
- Kagan, Dion. (2015). “Re-crisis”: Barebacking, sex panic and the logic of epidemic. *Sexualities*, 18(7), 817–837. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714557663>
- Kristeva, Julia. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (Leon Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- Laurendeau, Jason. (2008). Gendered risk regimes: A theoretical consideration of edgework and gender. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25(3), 293–309.
<https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.25.3.293>
- Laurendeau, Jason. (2011). “If you’re reading this, it’s because I’ve died”: Masculinity and relational risk in BASE jumping. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 28(4), 404–420. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.28.4.404>
- Lima, Mónica; Gómez Vargas, Maricelly; Iñiguez Rueda, Lupicinio; Fernández, Emmanuelle; Vasconcelos da Silva, Luís & Mascort Roca, Juan. (2023). Prácticas afectivo-sexuales, profilaxis previa a la exposición al virus de la inmunodeficiencia adquirida y riesgos asociados. *Revista Gerencia y Políticas de Salud*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.11144/Javariana.rgps22.pasp>
- Llamas, Ricardo. (1998). La reconstrucción del cuerpo homosexual en tiempos de SIDA. In Ricardo Llamas (Ed.), *Construyendo sidentidades: Estudios desde el corazón de una pandemia* (pp. 153–185). Siglo XXI.
- Lyng, Stephen. (2005). *Edgework: The sociology of risk taking*. Routledge.

- Lyng, Stephen. (2008). Risk-taking in sport: Edgework and the reflexive community. In Michael Atkinson (Ed.), *Tribal play: Subcultural journeys through sport* (pp. 83–109). Emerald.
- McCall, Hannah; Adams, Nomi; Mason, David & Willis, Jamie. (2015). What is chemsex and why does it matter? *BMJ*, 351, h5790.
<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h5790>
- Milhet, Mitena; Shah, Jalpa; Madesclaire, Tim & Gaissad, Laurent. (2019). Chemsex experiences: Narratives of pleasure. *Drugs and Alcohol Today*, 19(1), 11–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/DAT-09-2018-0043>
- Møller, Kristian & Hakim, Jamie. (2023). Critical chemsex studies: Interrogating cultures of sexualized drug use beyond the risk paradigm. *Sexualities*, 26(5–6), 547–555. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607211026223>
- Moore, David. (2008). Erasing pleasure from public discourse on illicit drugs: On the creation and reproduction of an absence. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 19(5), 353–358. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2007.07.004>
- Qué es el chemsex: La práctica en cuyo origen estaría el brote de viruela del mono. (2022, April 23). *Sport*.
<https://www.sport.es/es/noticias/fuera-de-juego/chemsex-practica-cuyo-origen-estaria-13695166>
- Race, Kane. (2007). Engaging in a culture of barebacking: Gay men and the risk of HIV prevention. In Kelly Hannah-Moffat & Pat O'Malley (Eds.), *Gendered risks* (pp. 99–126). Routledge-Cavendish.
- Robinson, Victoria. (2008). *Everyday masculinities and extreme sport: Male identity and rock climbing*. Berg.
- Rosas Cancio-Suárez, Marta; Ron, Raquel; Díaz-Álvarez, Jorge; Martínez-Sanz, Javier; Serrano-Villar, Sergio; Moreno, Santiago & Sánchez-Conde, Matilde. (2023). Prevalence, characteristics, and associated risk factors of drug consumption and chemsex use among individuals attending an STI clinic (EpITs STUDY). *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, 1285057.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1285057>
- Rose, Nikolas. (2007). *The politics of life itself: Biomedicine, power, and subjectivity in the twenty-first century*. Princeton University Press.
- Sáez, Javier. (2017). Bareback. In Lucas R. Platero, Maria Rosón & Esther Ortega (Eds.), *Barbarismos queer y otras esdrújulas* (pp. 34–38). Edicions Bellaterra.
- Santoro, Pablo. (2019). Encarnar el virus: Exclusión, normalización y medicalización en las políticas de salud pública entorno al VIH/Sida. In Silvia López & Lucas R. Platero (Eds.), *Cuerpos marcados: Vidas que cuentan y políticas públicas* (pp. 87–108). Edicions Bellaterra.
- Spink, Mary Jane. (2019). Suor, arranhões e diamantes: As contradições dos riscos na modernidade reflexiva. *Athenea Digital*, 19(1), e2501.
<https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/athenea.2501>
- Spink, Mary Jane; Menegon, Vega; de Souza Bernardes, Jefferson & Lapa Coêlho, Angela. (2007). Language of risk in psychology: A social constructionist

- analysis of a psychological database. *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, 41(2), 151–160.
- Thorpe, Holly & Wheaton, Belinda. (2013). Dissection action sports studies: Past, present, and beyond. In David Andrews & Ben Carrington (Eds.), *A companion to sport* (pp. 341–358). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
<http://doi.org/10.1002/978111832526>
- Tomkins, Andrew; George, Ryan & Kliner, Merav. (2019). Sexualised drug taking among men who have sex with men: A systematic review. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 139(1), 23–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757913918778872>
- Vance, Caroline. (1985). Pleasure and danger: Toward a politics of sexuality. In Caroline Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality* (pp. 1–28). Routledge & Paul.
- Weeks, Jeffrey. (2011). *The languages of sexuality*. Routledge.
<https://archive.org/details/languagesofsexua0000week/page/n9/mode/2up>
- World Health Organization. (2018). *Guidelines on biobehavioural surveys in populations at risk of HIV*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/978-92-4-151301-2>
- World Health Organization. (2022). *Mpox (monkeypox)*. <https://www.who.int/es/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/monkeypox>



Este texto está protegido por una licencia [Creative Commons 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Usted es libre para Compartir —copiar y redistribuir el material en cualquier medio o formato— y Adaptar el documento —remezclar, transformar y crear a partir del material— para cualquier propósito, incluso comercialmente, siempre que cumpla la condición de:

Atribución: Usted debe reconocer el crédito de una obra de manera adecuada, proporcionar un enlace a la licencia, e indicar si se han realizado cambios. Puede hacerlo en cualquier forma razonable, pero no de forma tal que sugiera que tiene el apoyo del licenciante o lo recibe por el uso que hace.

[Resumen de licencia](#) - [Texto completo de la licencia](#)