THE CLIMAX OF THE STORY:

QUEERING WOMEN'S SEXUAL HISTORIES AND PLEASURE NARRATIVES

by

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This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, who was my first teacher that set me on a path of self-love.

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The Climax of the Story: Queering Women's Sexual History and Pleasure Narratives

Abstract

by

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This dissertation analyzes narratives of women speaking about their sexual history and pleasures, with a focus on how women conceptualize their own experience and compare it to others. Additionally, this study strives to understand how women create meanings that are important to their sexual experience, and how this is related to their gender and sexual identity. By using a critical framework, this study explores and interrogates the organization of power and domination—by this, I mean social, cultural and political stakeholders who benefit from maintaining a particular understanding of female pleasure and women's bodies. Using a queer feminist lens, this research explores the historical and current issues surrounding the common understanding of female sexuality. This research seeks to fill a gap in the literature on sexual histories, sexual pleasures, orgasms, and queer narrative by centering the voices of women.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"If we move to allow women to tell us about their sexual lives – to open a window into the web of impulses, desires, pressures, and emotions they experience during fake or real orgasms – we can better challenge the overly-medicalized, reductive lens through which women's orgasms are typically viewed." (Fahs, 2014: 985)

The purpose of my research is to explore the organization of power and domination, with interests in the interrogation of intersecting hierarchies of power, and the lived experiences of gender and sexual identity within said hierarchies of power (Creswell, 2012). Using women's sexual histories and pleasure narratives, this study considers the social, cultural, and political stakeholders who benefit from maintaining a hegemonic understanding of female pleasure and the female body. It also explores how women perpetuate or deviate from this dominant narrative in their day to day lives.

This research fills a gap in the literature on sexual histories, sexual pleasures and orgasms by privileging the voices of women themselves. Each narrative leads us down a path to learning, engaging, and changing the "single story" of sexual pleasure for women (Fine, 1983; Fahs and Frank, 2014).

In this first chapter, I introduce my research questions and provide a brief overview of women's sexuality in academic research. Along with this historical context, I describe the social construction of sexuality, the performance of gender and sexuality, and how this translates into emotional labor and heteronormativity in sexual behavior. I conclude by discussing my theoretical lens, queer theory, and its importance when analyzing queer, femme, and genderqueer individuals.

The second chapter centers on my methodological approach. My study entails a qualitative methodology, using purposive snowball sampling to collect life story narratives of 30 women. I used a constructivist grounded theory to frame my analysis.

In contrast to traditional scientific methods, narrative methods, including life stories, highlight the participant's voice and uses stories as "data for understanding social processes" (Erdmans 2007:11). Narration has been understood as a mode of representation, where we learn and make sense of both the social world, and our social identities connected to it (Somers, 1994; Ochs and Capps, 1996). Therefore, narrative holds a pivotal role in sense-making activities of social actors, and is it through narrative that the self is constructed (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Additionally, I extend my methodology section to include a segment on the significance of validity, reflexivity, and use of voice in qualitative data collection and analysis.

In the third chapter, I begin the first segment of data analysis. I examine ways that participants in my study talked about emotional labor and gender scripts within their sexual narratives. Their stories reproduce many of the previously formed understandings of emotional labor and gender scripts in the bedroom, such as the phenomenon of faking an orgasm, while extending the literature in many ways, by examining and centering queer women's experiences, as well as discovering the importance of anxiety and the mental load.

The fourth chapter looks at how sexual scripts are enacted and shaped by intersections of social structure, particularly gendered 1) body image, and 2) sexual assault. Gender proves to be the dominant structure, whether embodied or forced upon the participants, that influences how sexual scripts are executed and depicted.

In my final chapter of findings, I show that sexual liberation and agency are enacted within the participant's sexual history and pleasure narratives. More specifically, this final chapter found sexual liberation within these participants lives in three ways: 1) queering sexual pleasure, 2) entitlement to sexual pleasure, and 3) sexual pleasure representation. What I didn't expect to find was that the respondent's queered my own preconceived notions of sexual pleasure to encompass pleasure beyond producing orgasms. Their narratives allowed myself, as a researcher, to reflect on and critically examine how I perpetuated heteronormative understandings of sexual pleasure in my research.

Within my conclusion, I summarize what themes and results were found within the research, reflect on how this study may influence sexuality scholarship, address the studies limitations, and make suggestions as to how future policy and sexuality research may extend the scope of this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My research sits at the center of the intersection of gender and sexuality, unpacking the subjective interpretations of sexual behavior, and examining how these reflections of sexual behavior may work in conjunction with and possible resistance to gender and sexual identity[1]. In other words, I set out to uncover how gender and sexuality influence narratives of sexual pleasure. I argue that there is fluidity in sexual practices that deviate (and queer) our preconceived categories within sexual identity, and build on this foundation through women's storytelling.

[1] Throughout this study, I will be speaking specifically of one cultural construction (i.e., colonialist, Americanized-Westernized) of sexuality, gender, and pleasure.

This study challenges historical interpretations of single stories of sexual pleasure and aims to document the sexual history and sexual pleasure experience through the personal accounts of women from diverse social locations. I ask two research questions:

R1: How do women create meanings that are important to their sexual experience and how are these meaning-making processes related to their gender and sexual identity?

R2: How do intersecting hierarchies of power influence women's narration and experience of their sexual history and pleasure?

BACKGROUND

> "Dr. Helen O'Connell was the first to extract the full female clitoris from the body in 1998. We put a man on the moon in 1969." (The Dilemma of Desire, 2020)

What is an orgasm? In both academic literature and everyday culture, the female orgasm remains a misunderstood phenomenon. Throughout history, we witness the process through which institutions of power socially inscribe women's sexuality into the most appropriate gender norms and ideals as to what it means to be a woman. This literature review will delve into the issues surrounding the social and cultural construction of female sexuality. More importantly, this research aims to deconstruct and reframe our current understanding of women's pleasure through the narratives of women speaking about their sexual history and pleasures, with a focus on how women conceptualize their experience within the larger, preconceived body of sexual knowledge at public disposal.

BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

The social construction of female sexuality by those in positions of power has not served women well. Starting from the early nineteenth century, the female body has been a contested site for scientists, researchers and academics to navigate and progressively rework gender norms and heteronormativity. In the following overview, I point to salient constructions in the history of sexuality and women's bodies, such as the two-sex model, the "discovery" of the clitoris and its ramifications for women's pleasure, and the standard orgasmic platform as defined by Masters and Johnson (1966).

Early Years: Where's the Clit?

Until the nineteenth century, females were believed to be a lesser version of the optimal male specimen, with a woman's key trait being genitals that were inside out and flipped versions of men's (Laqueur, 1986). Although a two-sex model was constructed in the early nineteenth century, it failed to include the biological differences in relation to the (cis) female body, such as the clitoris (Rye, 1997; Humphris and Cioe, 2009). Even within a two-sex model, women's bodies were still compared to men's, and in this comparison, they were seen as being deficient. Rather than noting physical differences between men and women, women's bodies were categorized according to what they did *not have* (i.e., a penis) (Laqueur, 1986; Rye, 1997). This hierarchical understanding of women's bodies effectively meant that because a man doesn't have a clitoris, then a clitoris isn't researched or discussed.

Starting in 1905, Freud began to develop his theory on female sexuality coined "transfer theory (Freud, 1955; Burgess and Palder, 1997). Freud asserted that in fact, women *do* have a sexual organ called the clitoris, which young females may find arousing and use to masturbate. However, Freud also deemed this form of sexual arousal immature and a form of penis envy (Freud, 1955). Consequently, when the clitoris *was* finally acknowledged[2] within psychoanalytical and medical research, it was deemed a transitional or less mature stage of sexual pleasure that is not only unhealthy, but stimulation of the clitoris was thought to breed contempt towards men via 'penis envy' (Freud, 1963).

By defining pleasure from the clitoris as a phase a girl grows out of once she becomes a woman, Freud states that this transition (transfer) is due to a woman desiring more mature forms of sexuality, such as the vaginal orgasm with the penis (Freud, 1955; Tuana, 2004). Prior to this maturation of the female, Freud (1955) emphasized that the girl had a "male libido" but soon realizes her clitoris is inadequate compared to the size of the male penis. If this maturation and transition fails to occur in the female, psychological problems such as "penis envy, hostility toward men, hysteria, and neurotic discontent" are likely to occur (Gerhard, 2000). This theory made both gains and setbacks for female rights in relation to sexual expression, as Freud created a dialogue surrounding the otherwise ignored clitoris, while simultaneously restraining this dialogue to fit gender roles. In a sense, Freud was saying there is in fact, a clitoris, but *real* pleasure can be actualized only through penetration by a penis. What underscores Freud's theory is that women need men in order to be sexually pleased.

[2] Prominently by Freud in the beginning of the 20th century.

Consequently, these claims on the primacy of the vaginal orgasm demanded more than sexual expression. Gerhard (2000) argues that Freud utilized this transfer theory to demand heterosexuality and stress "the erotic underpinnings of reproduction" in which women mature into a state where they desire sex for the sake of becoming mothers. Drawing on this theory, 19th century physicians worried that the use of the clitoris for sexual satisfaction would make the penis, or the desire or use of the penis, futile—or even encourage same sex interactions. Furthermore, physicians grew concerned that relying on the clitoris for sexual gratification meant that women were straying from their inherent and natural need to be mothers—something that could only occur through vaginal intercourse. Women were seen as both mentally sick or promiscuous if the desire for sexual interaction stepped outside of the boundaries of reproduction. Should a woman desire sexual gratification for its own sake, rather than with the intent of becoming pregnant, the medical doctors saw her as deviant. Freudian theory, therefore, established a hierarchy of "appropriate" sexual interactions a "healthy" and "natural" woman should desire.

Consequently, doctors applied this Freudian theory of the clitoris (as solely a mechanism of promiscuity) to examine female masturbation as a phase one transfers and grows out of, and reconstruct gendered barriers around women's bodies in and outside of the bedroom (Fahs, 2014). Historical records reveal that in the 19th century, some doctors treated 'compulsive' masturbating women as both promiscuous and mad, and sent them to mental hospitals for treatment and cure (Fahs and Frank, 2014). By creating a medical condition that labeled women as "sick" if they touched themselves, those women who were diagnosed as such were sequestered from society and pointed to as examples for

other women. The "sick role," according to Talcott Parsons (1951), is a social role that deviates from normal life function and relationships. Importantly, the sick role is characterized by patient compliance (to the social control of the doctor) and deviancy mitigation (Parsons, 1951). Gender norms were therefore reinforced through threat of being perceived as 'sick' and forcibly removed from participation in society. Because medical experts tied clitoral pleasure to deterioration of women's mental health, many couples worried that manipulation of the clitoris by the partner or by the woman herself would lead directly to compulsive masturbation, nymphomania, or an outright rejection of intercourse (Freud, 1963; Tanahill, 1989; Maines, 1999). It is during this time that women's pleasure and navigation of their bodies came under complete physician control (Maines, 1999).

Anxiety about the clitoris and its potential to unsettle heterosexual hierarchies also permeated medical representations of the organ itself (Gerhard, 2000). Early nineteenth century anatomy textbooks noted the existence of the clitoris but believed that, unlike the supposedly analogous penis, the clitoris was passive and unimportant to female sexual expression (Meston, et al., 2004). By the early twentieth century, most textbooks, including the industry standard *Grey's Anatomy*, did not label the clitoris or discuss its function despite their knowledge of its existence (Gerhard, 2000).

Freud's transfer theory continued to define the dominant narrative about women's sexuality in subsequent research, which defined the clitoris as an inferior player due to it being understood as a little penis (Freud, 1955; Freud, 1964; Humphris and Cioe, 2009). Again, this devaluation of women's pleasure illuminates the rigid gender constructs that dominate how research is conducted in relation to women's bodies and pleasure

(Humphris and Cioe, 2009). In fact, Helene Deutsch (1944:116) illustrated this claim perfectly when she asserted that a woman's sense of pleasure could only be fully realized through healthy values of "subordination, passivity, dependency, and maternity." Many of Deutsch's well-known writing on female sexuality assert a criterion of healthy ways, or proper intentions, for women to pursue sexual interactions such as: an undying desire to be a mother, love of their husbands, and acceptance of their position in society (Chilman, 1974; Gerhard, 2000). In other words, Deutsch reinforced the prevailing medical ideology that women should only experience sexual arousal and gratification through using their vagina as a mode of reproduction and in their desire to be a mother. To emphasize this point, Deutsch proclaimed that if a woman could not enjoy vaginal intercourse, she was not performing her role as a woman properly.

Taking these perspectives into account, when using a social constructionist lens, it is evident there is a close relationship among gender roles, reproduction, sexuality, and sexual performance for women (Braun, 1997; Gerhard, 2000). Psychoanalysts after Freud followed in his footsteps of embedding sexism and homophobia into scientific research. For example, labeling and medicalizing women as 'frigid' if they were unable to reach orgasm through intercourse, were too sexual or too aggressive, or enjoyed foreplay such as oral or clitoral stimulation (Gerhard, 2000).

Mid-century: Things become a little clearer

After the 1960s, things for women started to improve. Despite the continued male-dominated research surrounding female sexuality, when women became involved as both subjects and as research assistants, the narrative changed. Most notably, William H.

Masters and Virginia E. Johnson discovered an "orgasmic platform," where orgasm was not dependent on sexual intercourse[3], and found no distinction between a clitoral and vaginal orgasm (Masters and Johnson, 1966; Clark, 1970; Singer, 1972). Rather than separating them, the researchers showed the clitoris and vagina were connected through a network of nerves and musculature that together constituted female sexual response (Singer, 1972). Not only did Masters and Johnson provide groundbreaking work in sexuality research, but they also broke stringent sexist boundaries by including women in academic and sexuality-oriented research.

However, while Masters and Johnson provide strong evidence for clitoral orgasms and defended them as the sole predictor of female arousal, their thesis perpetuated the idea that there was a "normal" or singular way for women to experience pleasure (Singer, 1972). Masters and Johnson arrived at this conclusion through the collection of a large amount of psychological data from their participants, discovering that the strength of "vaginal contractions" had little to do with the intense, satisfactory feeling a woman may have. In fact, they found participants to have a variety of high and low rates of vaginal response where the subjective experience may have been "fantastic". These findings discovered that the female orgasm was inherently psychological and subjective (Clark, 1970; Kalmbach and Pillai, 2014). In focusing solely on the use of the clitoris for sexual stimulation, it is necessary to note that this discovery may have opened the discussion for many feminists, but also neglected every other kind of stimulation a woman may experience and define as a "sexually pleasurable" (Clark, 1970; Singer, 1972).

[3] Directly suggesting masturbation, oral, or "petting"

Until fairly recently, work developed by Masters and Johnson (1966) on the human sexual response cycle (HSRC) was utilized as a framework for understanding and attempting to treat sexual functions and disorders. The HSRC illustrated the sexual cycle as linear, temporal, and taking place in three stages developed by Masters and Johnson as: desire, arousal, and then orgasm. Academics and physicians now critique this model as constructing a positivistic 'ideal type' for sex that may miss out on the variable, unique ways in which someone may consider their sexual response cycle to be functional, or dysfunctional (Sherfey, 1972; Hite, 1976; Mah and Binik, 2001). Given the primacy of Masters and Johnsons work for so long, this critique was groundbreaking in that is started to ask how a bottom-up approach, or patient perspective, may impact how we understand and define sexual dysfunction and satisfaction.

To this day, the sexual responses of women remain poorly understood, with many definitions depicting orgasm quantitatively as a "peak" state that may not differentiate orgasm adequately from a high state of sexual arousal. Despite their primarily biological orientation, Masters and Johnson (1966:133) stated that "[f]emale orgasm...remains a potpourri of psychophysiological conditions and social influence." As seen in this quote and other works, Masters and Johnson (1966) were groundbreaking by deviating from a solely biomedical script. That is, the dominant scripted nature of social interactions in general (Goffman, 1956) was moving from understanding sex as solely for procreation and beginning to incorporate an erotic script into the discussion that considered pleasure (Mitchell, Wellings, Nazareth, King, Mercer and Johnson, 2011).

Along with Masters and Johnsons' well-known research, scholars at the time were starting to incorporate a critical lens and use feminist critiques to interrogate how

sexuality was defined, and by *whom*. Undoubtedly, Masters and Johnson made strides in legitimizing the clitoral orgasm. Yet, by establishing it as the *sole* predictor of female orgasm women were once again given strict guidelines of appropriate or legitimate orgasm. Or worse, women could compare their experience to an academic understanding of "normal" orgasm or climax and find themselves excluded from the dominant narrative of female pleasure if their mode of pleasure is different.

Research after Masters and Johnson began to interrogate these assumptions of a singular measurement of female orgasm. In 1970, Anne Koedt, a radical feminist and writer, attacked the role sexual practice played in upholding what she deemed as an oppressive gender ideology. Koedt (1970: 201) wrote:

> The worst damage was done to the mental health of women, who either suffered silently with self-blame, or flocked to psychiatrists….looking for a cure to a problem that has only lead a woman on an endless path of self-hatred and insecurity. For she is told by her analyst that not even in her one role allowed in a male society—the role of a woman—is she successful.

Koedt and others attempted to disrupt the chain of significance that linked sexed bodies, proper gender roles, and sexual desire together under the ideology of innate heterosexuality. By doing so, they hoped to liberate women into a fuller sense of sexual empowerment and social agency (Altshuler, 1986; Gerhard, 2000).

Women's sexual pleasure and ability to orgasm, consequently, has become a paternalistic concern for society to the point of informing women they cannot orgasm in varying, multifaceted ways (Braun, 1997; Salisbury and Fisher, 2014). Framing female pleasure as an either/or proposition disregards the particularities and subjectivity of the individual sexual experience with different partners, with different practices, for different purposes, in different moods, venues and so forth. Sex, sexual pleasure, and even sexual

desires vary hugely according to this range of variables. As a result, orgasms have remained a medical problem and tied to *performance* (Kalmbach and Pillai, 2014).

By the 1960's and 1970's, researchers began recommending clitoral stimulation during intercourse, although often as treatment for "anorgasmic" women who are unable to orgasm during intercourse (LoPiccolo and Lobitz, 1972). By the 1970's, there was also a shift in discourse of how women talked about their pleasure (or perhaps, because researchers were actually asking women about their pleasure), remarking on the importance of clitoral stimulation. In two groundbreaking studies of the time by Shere Hite[4] (1976) and Fisher (1973), 25 percent of women reported that they required clitoral stimulation to experience an orgasm during intercourse. Additionally, during masturbation, it was found that majority of women use external clitoral glans stimulation, with less than 5 percent of women reporting that they can achieve orgasm solely through vaginal stimulation (Hite, 1976; Gebhard, Johnson, & Kinsey, 1979). Taking these findings into consideration, sexologists begin to posit that all orgasms women experience during penetrative sex are *internal* stimulation and rubbing of the clitoral complex (Hite, 1976). This meant that vaginal orgasm was in fact, another form of clitoral stimulation.

Alongside Hite (1976), other feminist scholars begin to assert that patriarchal influence can be witnessed in sexual behavior and that, in fact, sexual subjugation was a component of maintaining sexist gender relations (Koedt, 1970; Atkinson, 1970; Dodson, 1974; Rubin, 1975). Resistance to these patriarchal norms can be seen in movements of

[4] Shere Hite's publication, *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality* it known to have flawed statistics in regards to "representiveness." Nevertheless, this text was groundbreaking in sex research. Hite (1976) challenged myths on female sexuality, reworked notions of sexual pleasure, and advanced the Second Wave of feminism. The first-person testimonials of women's sexuality and pleasure experiences encompass majority of Hite's study, and is what will be focused on within this study.

the time, such as "Our Bodies, Ourselves," which centered around discussions of women's bodies, *by* women. The movement encompassed workshops, women's health book clubs, and most importantly, publishing an economically accessible book (75 cents) (Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 2011). The book "Our Bodies, Ourselves" was revolutionary, and ranging from topics of abortion to masturbation. Conversations pertaining to women's bodies, by and for other women, allowed for an integration of agency and an entitlement to pleasure to enter the conversation. For example, Hite (1976: 241) attests to the underlying agency women exhibit in their sexual pleasure, stating: "Orgasm is most likely to come when the woman takes over responsibility for and control of her own stimulation. You always, in essence, create your own orgasm."

As I will discuss in a following section, decentralization of androcentric (cis) men and their (lack of) necessity in women's achievement of pleasure and orgasm, threatens both heteronormativity and gender roles (Koedt, 1970; Gerhard, 2000).

Contemporary Discourse: Heteronormativity is Critiqued

By the 1980's and 1990's, more research started to critique the (cis) male-centered understanding of sexual interaction, primarily the construct that sex and sexual pleasure as were limited to penetrative sex, and that a women's primary organ to experience forms of orgasm was being ignored (Hite, 1987; Graber and Kline-Graber, 1979; Wilcox and Hager, 1980; Janus and Janus, 1993). Scholars argued that defining absence of clitoral stimulation as 'normal' or 'regular' demonstrated how the patriarchy is embedded in our understanding of sexual scripts and created a gender-based orgasm gap during partnered, heterosexual intercourse (Hite, 1987; Laqueur, 1990; Tisdale, 1994;

Haavio-Mannila and Kontula, 1997; Maines, 1999). This orgasm gap has maintained itself through the years, as Reece et al. (2010) discovered: a cis-man's orgasm rate with a partner is 91 percent, whereas for a cis-woman, it is only 64 percent. For masturbation, on the other hand, cis-women have orgasm rates over 90 percent (Hite, 1981).

By the 2000's, penetrative intercourse remains the most common heterosexual behavior in the United States between partners, despite it centering around cis-male pleasure (Rotermann and McKay, 2009; Reece et al, 2010; Santos-Iglesias, Byers, and Moglia, 2016). It seems that even in modern day conversations around sexuality, sexual scripts are resilient, and maintain a penis-centered model of sexuality. Salisbury and Fisher (2014) suggest that women may be anxious to request clitoral stimulation during penetration intercourse, in fear of making their partner feel inadequate. Consequently, a prominent discussion in sexuality research is how women do emotional labor in the bedroom by literally performing sexual ecstasy, otherwise known as the faking of the orgasm, in order to appease their cis-male partners ego (Potts, 2000; Nicolson and Burr, 2003; Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010; Frith, 2013; Fahs and Frank, 2014). This "performance imperative" as Tyler (2004) coins it, brings a new discourse of work and management within the bedroom in which women's agency is encouraged so long as it is limited to their capacity to provide pleasure, readily engage in sex, and to experience penetrative orgasm (Machin and Thornborrow, 2003; Ménard and Kleinplatz, 2008; Gill, 2009). In sum, the brief history of female sexuality has shown how women's sexual pleasure has been relegated by patriarchal actors to reinscribe gender roles.

Jackson and Scott (2007) suggest that we have *to learn* to recognize an orgasm and also learn its cultural definitions, similar to Howard Becker's (1953) argument that

marijuana users must learn to relate their 'symptoms' not only to the action of the drug, but also to deem them enjoyable and comparable to the 'symptoms' experienced by other users and thus appropriate. A similar process is necessary for women to learn to 'do' orgasm. Women's sexual pleasure, as Jackson and Scott (2007) argue, is so embedded in cultural scripts of gender that we must acquire the cultural competencies that enable us to 'know' what it is, and to 'recognize' it in ourselves and others. 'Feeling' requires reflexive decoding of our own sensate embodiment.

This brief history of women's sexuality research does not touch on sexuality research on queer, non-heteronormative sexuality. I will touch one these in later chapters. My purpose in this section is to establish the history and problematize the heteronormative, sexist 'knowledge' surrounding women's sexuality. My study aims to add to the growing body of work on queer, non-heteronormative sexuality, and examine how women prioritize, narrate, and experience their pleasure/orgasms (via partners and self-stimulation) in light of cultural norms surrounding gender and sexuality. Before discussing the ways in which women's pleasure aligns and breaks away from heteronormativity, it is important to discuss my constructivist research paradigm in which I place my research and study interests. The next section discusses the social construction of sexuality.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

"Sexuality is not simply a biological function; rather, it is a system of ideas and social practices that is deeply implicated in shaping American social inequalities." (Patricia Hill Collins, 2004:6)

Sexuality is socially constructed. To say something is socially constructed is to illuminate the ways in which society and culture have built concepts, values, interests, and belief systems, that these constructs do not exist independent of society, and are continually reshaped and understood. Thus, a constructionist asserts that many things are not discovered, but rather produced (Turner, 2004). This is not to say that facts and norms about sexuality in everyday life hold no value, rather, it stresses a need to consider sexual and gender "social facts" in the sense that social communities *produce*[5] them (Foucault, 1964; Turner, 2004).

In their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann introduced the term "social construction" into social science

[5] One of the most salient social forces shaping human society is the economy. In this regard, capitalism not only influences sexuality, but also actively shapes sexual culture to fit its needs (Evans, 1993; Reiche, 1979). In this vein, anything that may interfere with the maximization of production, such as erotic emotion, is a barrier to production. Seidman (2010) posits that in the market economy of the nineteenth century, it made sense to value sexuality only in its ability to produce more workers, however, as capitalism shifted from an industrial to service sector economy, a new reframing of sexuality was required. Consumer capitalism required sexuality to be reworked to be a platform to sell commodities (Seidman, 2010). Consequently, within the 21st century, capitalism placed a new value on sex as a source of pleasure. In fact, Seidman (2010:16) argues, "If sex can be marketed as pleasure or championed as an authentic form of self-expression or identity then sex becomes a valuable marketing resource." My understanding of sexuality when I'm connecting it to issues of the economy and power, suggests an affinity with a Marxist lens. Despite the newfound 'positive' orientation towards (particular forms of) sexuality, Marxists would argue that this pleasure-oriented culture does not promote "real sexual freedom." Indeed, a society that drives purchase power under the guise of sexual freedom results in nothing other than bringing "work" into the bedroom via performance and superficial drive for gratification (Evans, 1993). Janet Hyde and John DeLamater (1997: 261) discuss this capitalistic understanding of sexuality succinctly, stating: "Our discussions of sex tend to focus on orgasm rather than pleasure in general. Orgasm is that observable 'product,' and we are concerned with how many orgasms we have, much as a plant manager is concerned with how many cans of soup are produced on the assembly line each day."

discourse. With this in mind, it is imperative to take a closer look at many facts we take for granted. Knowledge may be defined by the social production of circumstance and interests—interests founded by those in power. Power entails the ability to have one's perception treated as absolute and authoritative (Turner, 2004).

This argument provides us a clear look into just *how* sexuality is constructed and maintained and reminds us that even within academia, researchers did not "discover" new territories of sex and sexuality, but rather they have repackaged sexual pleasure into a new form of knowledge and social regulation that has, in the past, been ignored (Weeks, 1981; Weeks, 1986).

Foucault reminds us that disciplinary control relies on the ability and power to *normalize* ideas, because normalizing ideas lends itself to the ability to control and mold said ideas (Foucault, 1980). Therefore, normalizing particular forms of sexuality, creates an ability to control people that extends into their private, sexual lives (Foucault, 1980). In the same vein, Seidman (2010: 32) states: "Controlling peoples' sexual feelings, behaviors, and identities makes possible a great deal of social control over their bodies and actions."

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that persons and groups interacting in a social system indubitably over time create concepts of each other's actions, and those actions eventually become habituated roles played by the actors. Knowledge and people's belief or conceptions of what reality is consequently becomes embedded into the fabric of society and institutionalized. The argument that society is constructed allows us to examine how roles and scripts are key elements that structure social interaction. Roles and scripts allow us to create shared, constructed definitions of a situation. Thus, these

micro interactions between actors influence the social construction of society in very powerful ways.

Sexuality has been shaped and modified over the years based on how it bests suits patriarchal agents of power. Research on sexuality and power via a Marxist lens tends to look at macro level structures, which is important in understanding the significance and impact the concepts have on a large scale. However, to better grasp the day to day production of sexuality, I prefer to use a micro lens to ask: how does this social construction of sexuality affect the everyday lives and identities of people and how do they understand sexuality? Inquiring into how an individual acquires gender roles and sexuality via socialization and how this process maintains the larger, macro structures of economic and institutional power requires a feminist lens. A feminist approach provides a critical lens that considers the intersections of power and varying identities.

Feminism argues that we are not born men and women, rather, we develop gender identities through cultural and social processes of learning (or coercion), and these identities are harmful to particular groups of people (i.e., minoritized identities such as woman, people of color, queer folk) (Rich, 1980; Beauvoir, et al., 2010). Sexual desires and preferences are considered to be deeply embedded within our gender status, and consequently, feminist scholars propose that individuals acquire a sexual orientation as they develop a gender identity (Rubin, 1984; Rich, 1980).

However, there are hierarchies of sexual and gender identity that lead to particular social groups defining women's sexuality in a way that best benefits them. For example, in male dominated America, a "normal" (heterosexual) woman is to prefer vaginal intercourse with the underlying goal of reproduction (Chodorow, 1978). Not only does

this view necessitate a seemingly difficult task for some (climax via penetration), and demand heterosexuality, but also defines women, at their very core, to desire to be a mother (Chodorow, 1978).

I link the self and social structure[6] through an investigation of the social processes related to emotional labor and sexual scripts via the micro processes of roles. For now, I turn to *queering* the social constructions of gender and sexuality.

Moving Towards "Doing" Gender and Sexuality

Gender is not about whether we accept or deviate from ascribed identities, but that we enact them; we "do" gender every day. That idea of gender as a performance, is itself, is an inherently queer way to understand gender. In *Gender Trouble,* Judith Butler (1990) first suggested a *performative* theory of gender identity that is particularly salient for analyzing sexual identity. Butler argues that we hold this "truth" in our society that nature has created two distinct sexes because we live in a culture that organizes itself around two sexes via heterosexuality, marriage, and the nuclear family. It therefore seems natural and correct to view men and women as holding biologically different, dichotomous gender roles because it complements our already patriarchal system. Consequently, those who choose to challenge established gender roles threaten the "natural order" and truths about the world. More alarmingly, they challenge the norm of heterosexuality and the expectations of marriage or the nuclear family.

[6] I discuss the macro concepts of social constructionism to emphasize the importance of power and how sexuality and gender are socially constructed within a particularly historical and structural context. In other words, gender and sexuality are not established and maintained within a void. As I analyze women's narration of sexual history and pleasure, it is important to consider how a macro level approach would analyze the impact of powerful actors on my concepts in day to day production.

Although they are social constructions and not biological, these sexual and gender identities are also real in how we experience them and their consequences. These performances are embedded within a system of heteronormativity that exerts social pressure on every individual to perform a particular and appropriate gender and sexual identity. In other words, we must not only understand gender as a role a person embodies, but rather, as a *behavior* one is constantly attending to (West and Zimmerman, 1987). When discussing 'gender display,' Goffman (1956) gets at this performance or doing of gender by stating that gender display involves an individual's dramatization or portrayal of idealized, socially inscribed notions of femininity and masculinity. In essence, socialization is to learn and consequently produce conventual understandings of gender. West and Zimmerman (1987: 136-137) contend that this "doing" of gender requires the interpretation and assessment of gender behavior:

> While it is individuals who do gender, the enterprise is fundamentally interactional and institutional in character, for accountability is a feature of social relationships and its idiom is drawn from the institutional arena in which those relationships are enacted. IF this be the case, can we ever NOT do gender?

Gender is continuously reproduced through our actions, which are continuously interpreted and assessed by others, which in turn, perpetuates gender differences that maintain gender inequality. In fact, Barrie Thorne (1980) posits that by solely considering gender to be a role, we inhibit its ability to impact and influence *other* roles. Gender may influence particular modes of power and inequality; for example, how gender may influence being a sexual partner. I now turn to the micro level processes by which gender and sexuality identity are maintained, specifically through the key sociological concepts of roles, identities, and scripts.

Roles, Identity, & Scripts

Herbert Blumer (1969) coined the term "symbolic interactionism," a perspective that argues people act based on the meaning things have for them, and such meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation. Roles, as discussed through the theoretical works of George Herbet Mead (1934) and Talcott Parsons (1951), are seen as the social performance and behavioral expectations based on an individual's social status. In feminist discourse, gender roles are a set of societal norms dictating what types of behaviors are generally acceptable, appropriate and desirable for a person based on their actual or perceived sex. Gender roles are socially constructed, perpetuated, and reinforced through every day interaction.

Roles do not dictate whether you accept or *desire* the role prescribed to you, nor does it necessitate that the performance and impression management of such roles be synonymous with one's identity. For example, whether to reproduce heteronormativity or to actively resist it, sexuality is understood as an integral part of an individual's identity. Identity seemingly "peer pressures" behavioral commitment to one's role. However, identity also involves choice and agency. Despite this, when an individual is prescribed a role, it is commonly linked to societal institutions such as the role of mother being linked to the institution of family. In other words, institutions help define role behavior and expectations, and such stability and socially-accepted "meaning" in these roles commonly influence, or pressure, an individual in moving beyond role performance and establishing the role as a part of their identity. After all, fitting in and acceptance feels good, and is rewarded socially.

Despite the prevailing understanding of sexuality as an ascribed identity, many theorists have come to understand the social construction of sexuality, and consequently, the constantly changing, fluidity of sexuality. Sexuality, Kinsey, Martin, and Gebhard (1953) explain, is an adjective or verb, not a noun. We have been taught to understand sexuality as distinct categories one may firmly align with; however, Kinsey et. al (1953) suggested that we must view sexuality as a continuum, where a rich and diverse array of sexual preference exists between the poles of heterosexual and homosexual. In fact, they argue to not only consider sexuality itself as a continuum, but also fluid, in that a person's sexuality may change throughout their lifetime.

It is important to reiterate that human cultures are organized around roles, particularly when looking at *gender* roles, as they influence our sexual behavior. Individuals can easily become complacent in a society that commends them for performing the role proscribed to them—and consider how an individual may rationalize and internalize such roles to create meaning for themselves[7]. This is not to ignore the possible benefits of roles; rather, to critically consider how powerful actors may benefit from proscribed role performance, and how others are unjustly restricted.

[7] Roles are how you enact identities, and you may resist or embody those identities. For example, consider the identity of being a woman. Traditional gender roles would exemplify or embody this identity (as a performance for others to identify). Defying those gender roles would mean that you deviate from that ascribed identity (or that its salience for you is not high). However, as much as we may hope that we are free to exert free will and agency—the power of societal norms and structure—is much more restrictive than we may first presume. Gender roles are pervasive; we internalize our desire to ascribe to these identities that have been given to us. It is critical to acknowledge the agency that women have in resisting these prescribed narratives of what it means to be a woman-- but it is also necessary to acknowledge how gender roles are embedded within our society so deeply, that to negotiate our performance of gender often results in resistance, oppression, and violence. Navigating the world abiding by preconceived notions of what it means to be a "woman," frequently means safety. It is doing a disservice to women to not acknowledge that there are advantages to acting out traditional femininity (whether in your ability to get a job, have a family that accepts you, etc.) Simply, there are reasons *to not* resist the gender norms society gives you. As Stryker and Statham (1985) argue, the concept of role *connects* the individual with social structures. I address this to recognize the macro, structural restraints that impact choices women make.

Rituals assist in this role maintenance, and are a part of our everyday life, whether or not we are aware of them. Goffman (1956) remarked that every day ceremonies, or rituals, give *meaning* to our collective existence. He (1956: 35-36) states:

> To the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs, we may look upon it as a ceremony—as an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community…the world, in truth, is a wedding.

In essence, rituals give meaning to our collective existence and therefore our reality.

Scripts are narratives that fit roles, but are not confined to such roles. Scripts can be understood as what is normatively done in particular situations, thus are contextually and situationally defined. Simply put, scripts are fluid, so long as they stay within particular boundaries and expectations of one's role. That is, a certain amount of improv is allowed within the behavioral boundaries. Scripts, however, are much more than just words. Rather, scripts also involve "costume" and "props", to continue with Goffman's metaphor of the stage. As stated prior, roles and scripts are influenced by situational and contextual influence, however they are *also* linked to one's position in society (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.).

John Gagnon and William Simon (1973) proposed a script theory of sexuality, which instead of understanding humans as being born sexual, posits that sexuality is socially learned. They theorized that we are taught by society what desires, feelings and emotions count as sexual and which may be considered appropriate scripts for sexual behavior. Seidman (2010: 26) remarks: "Sexual scripts tell us where, when, and with whom we are supposed to have sex, and what it means when we do." In essence, sexual scripts are cognitive schema that permeate the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, and

influence an individual's sexual behaviors and beliefs (Simon and Gagnon, 1984; Gagnon, 1990; Parker and Gagnon, 1995).

Sexual scripts perpetuate gender inequality. In fact, upholding gender scripts of women being sexually submissive creates a lack of communication and inability to express themselves sexually (Sandchez, Fetterold, and Rudman, 2012), as well as internalize the demure, submissive role (Impett and Peplau, 2003; Kiefer, Sanchez, Kalinka, and Ybarra, 2006). Furthermore, sexual scripts are a point of interaction between gender structures and the individual, shaping beliefs, behaviors, and even desires (Tolman, 2002; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Gavey, 2005). For example, traditional sexual scripts for men encompass having high sex drives, initiating sex, desiring for recreational sex over relationships, and being sexually skilled (Byers, 1995; Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003). Such gendered sexual scripts give us meaning behind how to understand and act in sexual situations (e.g., men want sex and women want love; men pursue sex at all times and women are gatekeepers), that frame and reify traditional gender norms and heterosexuality (Connell, 2002; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009). Consequently, gendered scripts are powerful tools that shape how people choose to sexually interact with one another, while maintaining traditional gender expectations (Laws and Schwartz 1977; Wiederman, 2005).

Institutions provide settings and structure to enact the performance of rituals and scripts. For example, schools require rituals and often have their own set of scripts, such as the scripts involved in the ritual of sex education. If one examines what is considered appropriate and inappropriate topics in sex education, or if sex education is even provided, one sees an array of scripts. In fact, the purposeful lack of sex education may

also be a part of the script around sexuality and defense of gender roles. Even strip clubs are a ritual that requires a particular script dependent on one's role: a female stripper is expected to perform a particular kind of exaggerated sexualized femininity through the expectation she will wear high heels and little to no clothing. When interacting with patrons, conversations are mediated according to what is appropriate in such contexts (such as a stripper refraining from speaking about their husband or wife). Of course, when applying race, gender, religion, or even varying cultural traditions, these rituals and scripts may vary. For example, if a female customer comes into a strip club, they are often picked for free lap dances to appease the male gaze by fetishizing "straight" woman on woman sexuality.

This use of ritual leads into Schutz's conceptualization of social behavior, which in turn draws on Weber, that social interaction or action occurs when actors are aware of others and attribute meaning to their common situation. Rituals provide "social lubrication" in such instances, and supply a "script" one can "read from" that the participants are aware is permitted or even condoned within their particular situation or circumstance. For example, having sex with a new partner may be uncomfortable, however, by following the sexual script of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity may provide a lubricant in the social interaction.

Such ritual enactments reinforce cultural symbols and expectations, and conserve or maintain the status quo "ideal"—a shared reality that ranges from simple exchanges when talking to a friend about your partner, to elaborate ceremonies such as a wedding ceremony[8]. These sexual scripts not only organize interactions between men and women,

[8]Alfred Schutz (1967) extends beyond ritual, defining "reciprocity of perspective", as a shared and reciprocal perspective of things; agreement of unverified presumptions we share. Varying from ritual,

but specifically *privilege* men over women (Lips, 1981; Gagon, 1990; Wiederman, 2005). As a result, sexual scripts create a sexual double standard (men are encouraged to be sexually promiscuous while women are expected to be selective and sexually demure), as well as pose outright danger to women's safety (men have a 'right' or 'entitlement' to sex) (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty, 2010; Sanchez, Fetterold, and Rudman, 2012).

The Third Shift: Emotional Labor in the Bedroom

With gender roles and sexual scripts in mind, what does this look like when we study these concepts in actual sexual interactions? In her prominent study, *The Second Shift,* Arlie Hochschild (1989) explored the unseen or hidden labor that working women faced once they came home from their paid labor positions outside the home (e.g., housework, childcare). Hochschild contended that unequal societal demands and expectations about the division of labor in the home resulted in women working a "second shift" of unpaid labor. Importantly, this "second shift" is placed within a gendered framework, where Hochschild argues there is a "leisure gap" between men and women.

The Second Shift widened our scope on the research of labor to include *emotional* labor, a key component of domestic work. Hochschild (1983:7) defines emotional labor as labor that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward

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which is surface level social interaction, reciprocity of perspective is about things under the surface that we don't talk about but still agree upon. Schutz argues that such shared constructs and assumptions allow people to interact and engage in joint projects. This micro approach emphasizes and critiques the ways actors construct social reality in a unique way, in that Schutz is not stating ROP (reciprocity of perspectives) is shared meaning that arises out of the process of interaction, but rather is a pre-predicative meaning that is necessary for the existence of any process of constructing and sharing meanings. This argument pushes further to posit there is "stock of knowledge" that structures and frames social interaction between actors—such as within culture. It is not the element of culture but the fact that one knows it is culture: it is the silent, implicit assumptions of it that we share. Thus, Schutz (1967) argues there are implicit shared experiences and meanings that impact the structure of social interaction itself.

countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others." Emotion work, she contends, sits at two levels: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting is when women present themselves as calm, friendly, and demure even if they feel otherwise, whereas deep acting is when women internalize their performance, convincing themselves they really *do* experience the emotions expected of them (Hochschild, 1983). Such emotion work is another form of unpaid labor, and in a heterosexual relationship, studies have shown that women disproportionately take on the majority of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Hochschild, 1989; Erickson, 2005)[9]. Research further has shown the power of gender roles in performing and assigning emotion labor: the more men closely identified with traditional notions of gender roles, the less emotion work they did (Stevens et al, 2006). Despite women reporting low satisfaction with the inequality of emotional labor, they continued to perform the majority of emotional labor (Stevens et al, 2006).

Given that dissatisfaction, why do women continue to take on majority of emotional labor? Hochschild (1989) posits that women have underlying feelings of guilt surrounding expectations of traditional gender roles and their obligation to these roles, which result in them taking on familial labor. Simply, women may feel an underlying

[9] This construction also includes the process of *naming* in emotion, which reaffirms the power of language constructing our reality (Stets, 2005). For example, naming and defining one's feeling as anger, satisfies one's desire to interpret their emotion and legitimize it to one's peers. Naming can also be confining in that some emotions are more complex and by trying to simplify it, we lose the full range of emotions we experience. However, if we can label it, it helps us to understand, interpret and categorize it. Social locations such as gender, race, social class, and other forms of power stratification define how emotions are interpreted (e.g. women being too emotional and thus inferior). *Embodiment* is another key player in emotions, and it is important to be reminded that the physiological and cognitive have elements in this ability to label. We may externalize and internalize an emotion by which roles we play, and which emotions are appropriate for that role. For example, a woman may feel gendered obligations to embody and preform sexual pleasure since their male partner "deserves" and is "entitled" to give them an orgasm to properly perform their masculinity).

sense of guilt that both society and their partner expect particular demands out of them due to their identity as a woman (and therefore, as a wife and mother), and may accommodate these expectations and needs in an effort to stave off that guilt.

In the context of sexuality, Hochschild's concepts of "the second shift" and emotional labor provide a useful template to conceptualize emotional labor in sexual interactions. Emotional and sexual pleasure inequities exist, in part, because emotion labor is linked with gendered scripts of femininity. In fact, Fahs and Swank (2016) investigate this very relationship between gendered emotional labor and what they call "the third shift": women's emotional work within their sexual lives. Fahs and Swank (2016) suggest that Paula England's (2010) argument on a stalled gender revolution, in fact, reaches into women's sexual lives as they struggle to meet men's needs while negotiating their own entitlement to pleasure. Their study found that almost every woman who participated was undertaking emotion work in the bedroom. Women typically viewed their partners' "expectation" or "demand" of their own orgasm as validation to their partners masculinity and prowess, rather than as something they were entitled to or wanted (Fahs and Swank, 2016). This finding suggests that women prioritize their male partner's expectations around her sexual pleasure, leading to women performing what they call a "third shift."

Elliott and Umberson (2008) found sexual emotional labor is apparent most often in women's long-term relationships and for married women in particular. This may be for varying reasons, such as an exchange of work (e.g., having sex in exchange for a male partner doing more housework or providing more income), or they felt a "duty" or

"obligation" to provide their partner pleasure surrounding their role as a wife (Braun et al., 2003; Elliott and Umbersom, 2008; Fahs, 2011).

What does emotional labor in sexual interactions *look* like? The most prominent example of 'third shift' labor is in the phenomenon of faking an orgasm. Faking an orgasm is exactly as stated: when women exaggerate or fabricate sexual pleasure and orgasm (Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010; Fahs and Swank, 2011, 2014; Frith, 2015). Due to the fact women's sexual pleasure has been organized around the coital imperative, to have an orgasm during penetrative sex is understood as the 'real' or truly 'validated, biologically natural' climax. Consequently, faking an orgasm both validates a partner's efforts as well as reifies one's own ability to achieve sexual fulfillment (Roberts et al, 1995; Jargose, 2010; Muehlenhard and Shipee, 2010; Fahs, 2011).

Research shows that over half of all cis women have faked an orgasm (Hite 1976; Darling and Davidson, 1986; Wiederman, 1997; Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010; Fahs, 2011; Fahs 2014; Opperman et al. 2014). A study by Bryan (2001) found that women faked orgasms in around 20 percent of their sexual encounters. Women's explanations for faking an orgasm center around sexual emotional labor such as: enhancing pleasure for their partner, avoiding conflict, desiring sex to end, and worrying for their partners feelings (Bryan 2001; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010; Frith 2013; Fahs 2014; Fahs and Swank, 2016).

Beyond faking an orgasm, gendered scripts of sexuality require women to conduct emotional labor through prioritizing their partner's needs and desires (McClelland, 2011; Nicholson and Burr, 2003), resulting in consequences such as tolerating sexual pain (Elmerstig, Wijma, and Bertero, 2008; DeWitte, van Lankyeld, and Crombez, 2010;

Elmerstig, Wijma, and Swahnberg, 2013) and engaging in sexual activity even when they do not desire to (O'Sullivan and Allgeier, 1998; Impett and Peplau, 2003; Kaestle, 2009). Women extend their "caretaker" role into the bedroom, ensuring their partner feels desired, loved, and enjoys themselves (Fahs, 2011).

A study conducted by Sanchez, Crocker, and Boike (2005) found that women who conformed to gender norms were more likely to predicate their sexual satisfaction on their *partners'* approval and satisfaction (i.e., "If my husband enjoyed himself and thought the sex was great, then I am satisfied"). In fact, even when women *do* experience an orgasm, studies have found it is often because they feel obligated to provide their partner with satisfaction and pleasure (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips, 2003; Fahs, 2011; Fahs, 2014). Other research has found that women consider their partners sexual pleasure *more important* than their own, which exemplifies the "deep acting" level of emotional labor (Nicholson and Burr, 2003; McClelland 2011). Such findings indicate that women's entitlement to authentic sexual pleasure and agency are a low priority (McClelland, 2010; Fahs and Swank, 2016). Fahs and Swank (2016: 62) demonstrate this prioritization of male pleasure in their analysis of interviews with women:

> Shantele's especially poignant description of watching with delight the facial expressions of her male partner during orgasm, all while giving up on the possibility of her own orgasm, symbolized much larger themes in women's sexual lives: they witnessed, watched, or felt joy in seeing another's pleasure, but did not expect (authentic) reciprocity for themselves. This again suggests that women's so-called "sexual liberation" has quite a long way to go in order for men and women to truly experience sex on a similar plane.

The common trend in faking an orgasm can be related to the above quote's main point: entitlement to pleasure. Heterosexual interaction shows a clear gender differentiation of power, agency, emotional labor, and how sexual interaction itself, is

both enacted and understood (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips, 2003; Bell, 2013; Fahs and Swank, 2016).

Emotional labor is pivotal in analyzing how women narrate their sexual history and pleasures. Despite the growing literature and research on gender roles and emotional labor in heterosexual relationships, there are gaps in the research. In particular, how gender roles and emotional labor unfold within queer relationships, how women establish agency in their pleasure, and how women's sexual experiences developed over the course of their lives.

When using gender roles, sexual scripts, and emotional labor to analyze women's pleasure narratives and sexual histories, it is critical to foreground analysis with the understanding of gender as performative rather than static and biological (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is not wholly an individual attribute or biological characteristic. Rather, gender is performative, and may be conceptualized as being "done and undone" in everyday social interaction (West and Zimmerman, 1987). That is, gender is a verb that is created through performance and embodiment. The following section will discuss the importance of incorporating a queer lens when analyzing women's sexual narratives.

(Un)Changing Culture Surrounding Heteronormativity

Despite the growing diversity in sexual identities and expressions, heterosexuality remains the comparison group against which all other forms of sexuality are measured (Foucault, 1978/1990). To maintain a heterosexuality identity is to maintain a socially privileged status, or "normal" sexuality, whereas deviations from heterosexuality have

been socially stigmatized (Goffman, 1963; Katz, 2007). At a fundamental level, the heterosexual/homosexual binary is constructed and organized to privilege the former while simultaneously establishing the regulation of heteronormative bias that upholds everyday life (Warner, 1993). For example, consider how we organize all sexuality that *isn't* heterosexual around the acronym LGBTQIA+, despite the drastic and fundamental differences between these multiple sexualities (and gender identities). This is because those who fall within LGBTQIA+ are socially positioned in comparison to what they are *not:* they are not in line with heterosexuality, and therefore are 'othered' and lumped together to compare against the dominant, or 'normal' understanding of sexuality[10] (Marinucci, 2011). It is this 'othering' and perception of the LGBTQ community as deviant that results in marginalization, discrimination, and social violence (Marinucci, 2011).

In fact, heterosexuality encapsulates more than just sexual intercourse between a cis male and cis female. The gender and social roles attached to heterosexuality are embedded, oftentimes unnoticed, in our day-to-day lives. It is a form of social organization, and consequently, a system of representation (and for some, a purposeful lack thereof) (Ashcraft, 2004). The term heteronormativity encapsulates this process and structure. Heteronormativity is the set of idealized norms and mores that structure our sexual beliefs, ideologies, and behaviors (Warner, 1993; Coates, 2013). At the foundational level, heteronormativity is the understanding of heterosexuality not only as a form of sexual preference, but also as the moralistically, biologically normal and *correct*

[10] This acronym (LGBTQIA+) is constantly expanding as more identities fall under non-hetero, rendering this binary even more obvious in its heteronormative intent. The additional acronyms change constantly. Heterosexuality doesn't.

sexual category that is to be used to compare all others (Foucault, 1978; Warner, 2002). Heteronormativity also cultivates the idea of a dichotomous relationship of sex and gender—that only two sexes and genders exist, and that these two go hand in hand (for example, if you are masculine presenting, you must be a cis male) (Giddings & Pringle, 2011). Heteronormativity is not simply a way of understanding and organizing sexual beliefs and behaviors, it is *the* standard for social organization; oppressive, violent results are common for those who refuse to conform to this standard (Yep, 2003). We can see this fear of deviating from heteronormativity in our verbiage for those who finally choose to inform their community: coming out, or, coming out of the closet.

Heteronormativity is defined by what it is *not*, and reinscribes itself through forms of heterosexism and homophobia (Camara, Katznelson, Hildebrandt-Sterling, and Parker, 2012). As Gayle Rubin (1984) puts it, heteronormativity is a sex hierarchy that encompasses more than just heterosexual relations. Rather, it encompasses the idealized identity of monogamy of being married and reproducing children, while simultaneously steering away from "low tier" forms of sexuality inclusive of fetishism, sex work, porn, BDSM, genderfluidity, and promiscuity. Seidman (2010:152) argues:

> By normalizing heterosexuality, they [scientific and medical reformers] were also declaring the naturalness and normality of gender order that linked being male with masculinity and with men's roles as rulers while connecting being female with femininity and roles centered on caregiving.

Given these rigid standards, heteronormativity fundamentally is unachievable, even to most heterosexual couples, yet persists as the standard (Rubin, 1984; Warner, 1993).

Nevertheless, assumptions surrounding heterosexuality as correct, natural, and healthy sexuality, result in those who align with heteronormativity being granted full political rights and privileges. To be heterosexual means to be afforded the right to a

family recognized by the state and other social institutions. To be heterosexual means to see yourself represented in art, music, movies, literature, medical and/or scientific knowledge, political office, even advertisements (Rich, 1980; Ingraham, 2008). Due to it permeating every aspect of culture, heteronormativity establishes itself as an institution to organize and shape life. Consequently, to be within the queer community isn't solely an identity surrounded by one's sexual orientation and preferences: it is also a political stance that challenges the compulsory status of heteronormativity (Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1990).

As addressed above, the focal point of accepted sexual behavior in heteronormativity is penetrative sex. Scholars have called this the "coital imperative" which argues that penetrative sex is the normal, natural, expectation in heterosexual intimacy (Gavey et al., 1999; Braun et al., 2003). This coital imperative establishes intercourse-derived sex as the correct form to achieve orgasm, despite research concluding that women's orgasms derive from clitoral stimulation (whether direct or indirect) (Masters and Johnson, 1966). This is not to say vaginal orgasms do not exist, but rather, that the clitoral system is a complex network that resides primarily within our bodies, and is where our pleasure is derived from.

CONCLUSION

To experience pleasure and/or climax, from vaginal penetration, is to stimulate the venous plexi, or "underside" of the clitoral root system; hence, all orgasms, are clitoral orgasms (Masters and Johnson 1966; Sherfey, Mary, 1972). However, research has shown that to stimulate the clitoral network vaginally is not easy or physically

possible for many women, and consequently, it is often preferable to stimulate the glans of the clitoris, which is what many would understand to be the external, visible part of the clitoris that sits above the vaginal canal. (Fisher, 1972; Fisher, 1973; Hite, 1976). In fact, many women who state they orgasm during coital penetration are only able to do so by using manual stimulation (having either their partner, or their own self, stimulate their clitoris) (Masters and Johnson; Fisher, 1972; Fisher, 1973; Hite, 1981). This data exemplifies how heteronormativity has created a coital imperative that quite literally denies many women, regardless of sexual preference, pleasure. Furthermore, as discussed prior, the inability to orgasm during intercourse creates a discourse around treating women as sick and dysfunctional—consequently creating the rise of "faking orgasms" in order to not be perceived (or diagnosed as) frigid." (Masters and John, 1966; Masters and Johnson, 1970).

Ignoring the lived realities of women's sexuality results in the perpetuation of an orgasm gap, as shown through recent sexual surveys and research (Richters et al., 2006). However, due to the current "orgasm imperative" that expects women to experience orgasm via sexual intercourse, some women have interpreted this gap as a result of their own deficiency, and have thus pathologized their inability to orgasm, or simply accepted that it must be "hard" for women to orgasm (Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009; Moran and Lee, 2011). Findings such as these show the importance of building on sexuality literature with qualitative narratives about sexuality. These will in turn provide a more complex picture of the complexity of sexual pleasure and navigation in the bedroom.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

John Creswell (2012) delineates four theoretical camps or general schools of thought; post-positivism, post modernism, critical theory, and social constructivism. This study is grounded in critical theory. By taking a critical approach, my research aims to provide an inquiry and exploration into the organization of power and domination, with interests in the interrogation of hierarchies of power, intersecting hierarchies of power, and the lived experiences within hierarchies of power (Creswell, 2012).

Extending this critical perspective, my research will utilize a feminist perspective. According to Olesen (2013: 236): "Feminism encourages provocative and productive unpacking of taken-for-granted ideas about women in specific material, historical, and cultural contexts…it generates new ideas to produce knowledge's about oppressive situations for women, for action or further research" Furthermore, a feminist perspective is necessary to create research that prioritizes and centers the diversity of women's experiences. Importantly, a feminist perspective actively works against painting a "grand narrative" or "universalized" woman (Freud, 1960; Laqueur, 1986). For example, Patricia Hill Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) argues for research focusing on the perspectives of Black women—that there is an interlocking system of race, gender and class that has given Black women a distinct experience we fail to include in scholarship. Thus, a feminist lens stresses that knowledge is socially situated, and that actively choosing to include marginalized voices into the conversation consequently changes the production of knowledge.

Within this feminist perspective, I will use queer theory. Queer theory came out of feminist theory in the early 90's (Seidman, 1995). Feminist theory has historically used the body as a site to examine gender inequality (that is, interrogate the role of gender at the micro or individual level) (Al-Saji, 2010). Queer theory, however, found that feminist theorists at that time (early 90's) were using gender to define and understand the role of sexual identity in stable, fixed categories. Queer theory, conversely, argued for a rejection of sexual identifiers altogether, which they argue are rooted in heteronormativity. Instead, queer theory advocates for notions of fluidness, plurality, and intersectionality that reject the practice of naming and defining sexual behavior. [11]

Although the term may be known as a sexuality identity itself (e.g., "I identify as queer"), or an umbrella term encompassing the LGBTQ community (e.g., the queer community), queer *theory* is not solely concerned about sexuality (Seidman, 1994). Rather, queer theory focuses on the mismatches between sex, gender and desire, and seeks to deconstruct heteronormativity. It encourages scholars to take these notions of fluidity and deconstruction and apply it to other preconceived notions (Teresa de Lauretis, 1991; Ahmed, 2006).

[11] Queer theory represents itself as a corrective to earlier forms of lesbian and gay identity politics, which were organized around the liberation of an essential or natural lesbian or gay self. Queer theory would argue that there is no true "gay or lesbian self," and that in fact, these identifiers work to conceal an exercise of normalizing power. Queer theory doesn't seek to normalize queer identities, but rather destigmatize queer sexuality, and rework our understanding of identities altogether. Especially because when we "normalize" sexual identities, it is a very particular brand. The face of the LGBTQIA+ movement is often middle class gay white men, because that is the most palatable to heteronormativity. So queer theory argues that within feminism and gay and lesbian studies, hegemony, racism, and heteronormativity were historically imbedded within its foundation. Queer theory in many ways, rejects sexual identifiers that seeks to control queer folk. Audre Lorde evoked this idea in relation to racial equality: "For the masters tools will never dismantle the masters house." Queer theory takes this same sentiment, and argues that sexual identities are just a way to perpetuate heteronormativity, and consequently, sexism, racism, and classism. This is how queer theory separates itself from feminist and gay and lesbian studies.

The term “queer theory” was coined by Teresa de Lauretis in 1991, in the article “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities”, in which she explains that queer theory has three intersecting goals: 1) to refuse heterosexuality as the benchmark for sexual formations; 2) to critique the ways in which race shapes sexual bias; and finally, 3) to challenge the assumptions that lesbian and gay studies is a singular entity.

Queer, feminist scholars have made great strides in deconstructing social categories (e.g., Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990), including within the queer community itself. Sedgwick (1991) pushed against the notion that sexual orientation is confined or bound to boxes of identity (e.g., Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian). Akin to West and Zimmerman’s (1987) understanding of “doing” gender, Sedgwick argues that queer is a verb that is in constant flux (1993: xii). She writes: “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, troublant" (8). It is:

> the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically (8).

In other words, queer identity is not just one’s placement within the margins of a sexual hierarchy. It is also an active challenge to destabilize heteronormativity, rather than seeking to be placed and assimilated within it (Feagin and Vera, 2001). Ahmed (2006: 161) reinforces this, stating “To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things.”

Queer theory, then, is both theory and political action (Cohen, 1997). It explores the oppressive power of norms dominating society via a micro level perspective. To use the term “queer” is to connect studies of sexuality to research of non-normativity in other various academia areas in the pursuit of social change (Bersani, 1995; Green, 2002;

Zielinski, 2007). Consequently, queer theory situates itself as not simply "gay and lesbian" studies. Instead, queer studies are the critique of these terms which are rooted in the very systems that maintain the binaries of heterosexual/homosexual and man/woman. To end gender and sexuality-based oppression, it is necessary to deconstruct our notions of gender and sexuality, which are based on heterosexuality as natural (Sedgwick, 199l). Queer theory, then, seeks to deconstruct heteronormativity in both the academic and through social movements.

Foundational queer theory pulls from theorists such as Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, and Eve Sedgwick to explore the limitations of heteronormativity, the gender binary, and fixed identities (Foucault, 1978; Sedgwick, 1990; De Beauvoir, 2010). In his work on sexuality, Foucault (1978) said sexuality was a production or presentation, rather than an essential, biological, or innately natural part of a human. He argued that the newfound explanation of sexual categories as social identities was directly bound by power and domination. By this, he meant that power acts to make sexuality seem like a hidden truth that must be discovered and named (e.g., naming sexual identities at all, such as gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, asexual). Foucault refused to accept that sexuality can be clearly defined at all, and notes that by expecting individuals to name and associate ourselves with constructed sexual identities, we consequently constrict and bound ourselves in newly formed boxes. Foucault would argue that just by adding more boxes of sexuality, doesn't mean we still don't have a binary of constrictive boundaries that limit our sexual selves—that creating more sexual identifiers gives the illusion of fluidity, when in fact, it is a mode of societal control.

Foucault (1978) also argued for the importance of studying the body, because the body is both the site where socio-cultural power is enacted and the manifestation of that power. In other words, we are both the product, and the producers, of larger systems of power. According to Foucault, the body is a way to exemplify the social construction of sexuality, but also, how the body is socially disciplined through sexuality in our attempt to name it, and consequently, restrain it. Foucault shows this by going through the shifts in naming sexual identity and behaviors throughout history, and how social institutions of power use these identifiers to control individuals.

As queer theory has developed, queer scholars such as Cathy Cohen (1997) make the case for a more inclusive understanding of queer identity. She argues that the scope of queerness must be inclusive of all non-normative sexuality that interrogates heteronormativity, ranging from single motherhood to sex work. Cohen reminds readers that heteronormativity works to reinforce institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation, all of which intersect with the lives of those labeled "heterosexual," and that an inclusive, intersectional queerness is required to destabilize those in power. Indeed, queer scholarship has provided a space within social research to break apart preconceived notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, to disconnect these concepts from one another and re-align them in unexpected and new ways. Overall it seeks to prioritize fluidity and plurality.

Queer scholarship allows for plural sexualities, and encompasses non-normative sexual acts, experiences, and consciousnesses (Rubin, 1984). Cohen (1997: 439) speaks to this understanding of queer theory, stating: "In queer politics, sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change, movement, redefinition, and

subversive performance—from year to year, from partner to partner, from day to day." Applying the lens of queer theory when researching women's sexual histories and pleasure narratives critiques identity politics that may rely on static, essentializing identity categories. A queer framework further encourages an exploration of taken-for-granted truths encompassing societal constructions of desires, gender relations, and embodiment. Consequently, my research sits at the center of the *intersection* of sexuality and gender, and how this may reify, or rework itself, in sexual expression.

In sum, a queer feminist lens critically examines ways in which powerful identity categories shape lived experience, while also providing space for those identities to adjust and re-adjust in multiple, varying ways. At the center of queer theory is the interrogation and destabilization of identity, utilizing the margins as an avenue to illuminate and expose the inner workings of taken for granted "truths" (Rubin, 1983; Epstein, 1994; Stein and Plummer 1996). Cohen reiterates this idea with a caveat, stating: "I want to be clear that what I and others are calling for is the destabilization, and not the destruction or abandonment, of identity categories" (1997: 459). Identities are critical to not only our own sense of self but also to the ways we navigate the world as embodied beings. In sum, queer theory problematizes the assumed connections between sex, gender and sexuality, and encourages the investigation into how we can re-theorize lesbian/gay identity (Esterberg, 1996).[12] Therefore, I use queer theory to examine ways in which women complicate, resist, perform, embody, navigate, and make sense of their intersecting gender and sexual identities.

[12] Halberstam (2005:6) gets at this use of queer theory, remarking that "[queer theory is] nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time."

CHAPTER 2: METHODS & METHODOLOGY

My study employs a qualitative methodology, using purposive snowball sampling to collect life story narratives of 30 women. I used a constructivist grounded theory to frame my analysis.

Narrative Methods: The Life Story

For this study, I chose to use life story interviews to collect data in nuanced, emergent ways. Micro paradigms such as phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology are known to offer a rich perspective of actors—cultural processes, meaning systems, identity, routines, language, discourse, self-presentation, performances, situations. These operate with an underlying purpose to "drill down" and gain depth in hopes of coming closer to understanding how culture works and operates. This "drilling" is a necessary tool in doing critical research, in that it provides an opportunity to look at the cogs and wheels that make society turn, and thus allows us to not only recognize the power of the individual, but also how they are both products and producers of culture. However, despite many foundational and groundbreaking (drilling, if you will) think-pieces deriving from micro-sociology theories, much criticism has been voiced in its ability to bring the 'focused lens' back out to the larger picture: macro, structural dynamics.

In contrast to traditional scientific methods, narrative methods, including life stories, highlight the participant's voice and uses stories as "data for understanding social processes" (Erdmans 2007:11). Narrative holds a pivotal role in sense-making activities

of social actors, and is it through narrative that the self is constructed (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Life story interviews are broad, and may be understood as more of a prompt rather than an interview guide, allowing for the participant to tell the researcher what is important to them (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Bertaux and Kohli (1984: 215) argue that life stories are collected to better understand the "symbolic in social life and meaning in individual lives." By this, they mean we may use life stories to better understand how larger, seemingly abstract concepts are enacted and created in the day to day lives of individuals. Geiger (1986) contends that using life story methods, particularly when studying women, allows subjects to (re)present themselves, and consequently, co-constructs the knowledge the researcher understands and interprets.

Narration has been understood as a mode of representation, where we learn and make sense of both the social world, and our social identities connected to it (Somers, 1994; Ochs and Capps, 1996). Somers (1994) argues that identity is embedded within overlapping, intersecting networks of relations that change over time and space—that we and our participants' identities are not fixed categories, as fixed categories leave no room to considering power relations that change and reconstruct themselves throughout time. With this in mind, Somers (1994: 614) argues that it is important to incorporate a re-framed narrative, as it is not merely a "representation" of lived experiences, but rather, we must examine how:

> social life is itself storied and that narrative is an ontological condition of social life….that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations and memories derived from a multiplicity

> but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives.

The dynamic created between participant and interlocutor, then, leaves room for both agency and structure within participants social knowledge and marries narrative with both identity and action research by examining narratives as connected relationships that are embedded within time and space.

This method is especially useful in gender and sexual health research, as the voices of women who have been experiencing sexual pleasure have largely been absent from research, health policy and academic discussions. Life story methodology also addresses or even disrupts "systems of power, prestige, privilege, and authority [that] serve to marginalize individuals who are from different classes, races, and genders (Creswell 2006a: 35)." In essence, narrative-based research places collected data within a historical, social, political, and economic context, inclusive of their "self". As a result, using this approach opens opportunities for micro-sociological paradigms to not only utilize their methodology to look through a microscope at the individual, but also look through the individual as a prism to see larger processes of structure.

Ethnographers Weis and Fine (2012) address similar connections between micro and macro analysis. As Weis and Fine (2012) remark, we must "connect the dots" by uncovering the relationships held between participants and their larger historical, social, political, and economic forces, otherwise we seemingly suggest that one's interactions, identity, and experiences are constructed separate and isolated from society itself. Put simply, we cannot immerse ourselves in the individual and interactional processes of life and not expect to see the lived, intersectional experiences of race, gender, social class, and other "larger social constructions" emerge. Weis and Fine (2012) press that it is our

duty to both recognize these inner workings of structural dynamics, and work against injustices through activism.

Based on the characteristics of life stories and the rigor of narrative methodology, the life story method was most suitable for answering my two research questions: How do women create meanings that are important to their sexual experiences and how are these meaning making processes related to their gender and sexual identity? How do intersecting hierarchies of power influence women's narration and experience of their sexual history and pleasure?

Last, the life story method is appropriate for my queer framework, as I aim to center women's voices who deviate from heteronormativity and embrace the totality of my narrators' lives.

Reflexivity

"After delving into issues of voices and reflexivity, I find myself freer to think of but how to incorporate my own voice into a piece of work where I have no personal experience. I want a reader to understand that…I bring to the topic my own history and perspective. I still believe that my primary obligation as a social scientist is to tell the stories of the people I have studied. But I also find that the accounts they tell have been constructed through the dialogue that my respondents created in conjunction with me." (Rosanna Hertz, 1997)

Within qualitative studies, it is important for the researcher to reflect on how one brings their "self" into the field (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). With the recognition of the unequal power dynamic between researcher and participants, and the inclusion of self into the research, the focal point of much qualitative discussion has become: how does a researcher maintain the voices and rights of participants within such studies, and how do we address the ways in which we form and interpret the voices and experiences of our

participants? Reflexivity and ethics, consequently, became (and continues to be) a central concern in qualitative methods.

Even as a research proposal gains approval from an IRB board, the debate persists as to how one manages their positionality and voice—both within the field and within their writing. Fine (1994: 73) underlines this tension well, remarking:

> It has been argued that the relationship between the researcher and his subjects, by definition, resembles that of the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research, and to some extent, the quality of the interaction between him and his subjects.

In the shift from the positivist approach to qualitative methods, there has been a considerable reduction in the use of "third-person" description. Use of third-person seeks to provide a "pure representation," but leaves room to question how we may unintentionally continue to "other" our research participants by failing to fully incorporate our "selves" into our research (Reinharz, 1997; Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007).

What are our "selves"? We bring multiple selves into the field: namely, 1) our research 2) our brought self (who we are, our experiences and cultural understandings of the world, our personal dispositions and values), and; 3) our situated self (how we perform in certain situations, who we are in that situation) (Reinharz, 1997). It is evident there are multiple brought "selves" in the collection of research we need to pay attention to. This complexity leads many researchers to question, how does it affect what we learn? And how we learn it? These questions entail being reflective of ourselves (our dispositions, values, beliefs), what we are doing in the field, and what we learn in it (Malterud, 2001; Finlay, 2008).

Researchers (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Stake, 2008) remind us that interviews should never be considered sterile or neutral, but rather a space for knowledge

production. It is a process that requires continual reflexivity. Being reflexive entails writing ourselves into the text, and when making certain claims, ensuring you and your participants know where these claims are coming from (in part, at least always striving to achieve such) (Finlay, 2008; Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). This process is unique to social science in that it is also a recognition of the researcher being both a teacher and a learner, or as one coming to understand their self while also coming to understand their participant. Additionally, reflexivity requires *verstehen:* empathic understanding of human behavior. In other words, putting oneself in the shoes of another (Charmaz, 2006).

Voice is an important tool for reflexive researchers that leads many to question *how* they should position themselves in the text while ensuring the voices of the participants are not silenced. Guba and Lincoln (2011) have remarked that there are multiple dimensions to voice: First, using voice as 'the author'; second, as the presentation of research and respondents in the field; and lastly, as a vehicle to express their self within the research. This multiple voicing not only reclaims the voices of the researcher and the participant, but also reifies validity in one's work. It can be implemented in a plethora of ways, such as providing space to ensure the perspectives of the participants are in the text, or even allow them to read over the final draft and make remarks (Gergen and Gergen, 2011).

Alongside voice and reflexivity, there are other traditional forms of 'ethics' for qualitative research, such as Christians (2011) explanation of the "Code of Ethics". Christian (2011) aligns these ethical requirements similarly to the IRB protocol, including requiring informed consent, forbidding deliberate deception, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, and finally ensuring that data is accurate. A more "progressive" code of

ethics can be drawn from Ritchie and Rau (2010), that puts an emphasis on the value of exposing the diversity of realities, critiquing problems in relation to hierarchies of power relations, and working towards solidarity (Ritchie and Rau, 2010; Canella and Lincoln, 2011). Nevertheless, whether closely aligning to an active reflexivity (that considers how the self may influence their analysis), or simply uses a "code of ethics" akin to Christians (2011) format, it is essential that discussions surrounding ethics and reflexivity continue. Using reflexivity, I maintain the voices and lived experiences of the research participants, without losing my own.

Validity

> "Validity cannot be dismissed simply because it points to a question that has to be answered in one way or another: are these findings sufficiently authentic that I may trust myself in acting on their implications? More to the point, would I feel sufficiently secure about these findings to construct social policy or legislation based on them?" (Guba and Lincoln, 2011)

The question of both defining and measuring validity has been a contested issue, particularly as sociology (and other social sciences) has moved toward the recognition of multiple, complex realities and contexts. With a shift away from seeking ultimate, objective truths and knowledge, however, the need to express one's work as valid becomes more pressing than ever. As mentioned in the above quote, validity provides researchers a way to demonstrate that their interpretations and work has been rigorous, and more importantly, that it can be trusted and utilized in future research. Consequently, validity has become a form of authenticity. This form of "measurement," then, takes a notable shift away from focusing on method, to a critique of processes and outcomes.

Yet, the process of "retelling" a story, whether with reflexivity or not, changes and morphs information. Rather than utilizing a commonly suggested method of triangulation to validate one's work, Richardson argues we must use a matric similar to that of a crystal. By this she meant we must recognize that the interactions we study—as well as our selves—are not two dimensional, and thus necessitates the ability to combine a multitude of dimensions, angles, approaches in which they both "reflect externalities and refract within themselves creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends upon our angle of repose" (Guba and Lincoln, 2011: 276).

As discussed in the prior section of this prospectus, validity can be created through the use of reflexivity and multiple voices. Validity can be expressed through ensuring that *all* stakeholders' views, concerns, and voices are present in the text. Validity and verisimilitude are centered within an ongoing critique of one's role, impact, and overall relationship with the research (Guba and Lincoln, 2011). In turn, when questions of validity arise, these relationships are held up within the dialogue and text produced, creating "moral discourse" that abandons step by step "criteriology," and is refitted to compliment the critique of social problems as well as implement a variety of voices and perspectives.

Gergen and Gergen (2011) posit that language and dialogue are the crux from which the crisis of validity derives. It is from this recognition of the self within the research site and text, that we begin to problematize how our accounts and understanding of social interaction are influenced by our own culture, experiences, and sense making. Literary styling has been a groundbreaking form of verisimilitude, and reflects

Richardson's transgressive forms of validity by incorporating other forms of writing including poetry, fiction, or even autobiographical literary styles (Gergan and Gergen, 2011).

On a final note, further inquiry into validity and verisimilitude prompts different ways of expressing knowledge and self within their research. It provides a strong platform to support authenticity through social and political action that may have progressive social justice influence outside of scholarly discussion. As I went forward in sample and data collection, and subsequent data analysis, my intent was to keep reflexivity, voice, and validity in the forefront.

THE PRESENT STUDY: SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

When I first proposed this project, it was unclear how many participants would be necessary in order to reach data saturation. According to Schutt (2006), the saturation point of sampling is reached when the data is yielding little to no new information. For many scholars, at least 15 interviews are necessary to reach theoretical saturation (Morse, 1994; Bernard, 1995; Creswell, 2006). With this in mind, my research collected 30 participants, as this was when data saturation was achieved. The life story interviews were collected through purposive snowball sampling, recorded, and later transcribed verbatim.

A snowball strategy involves finding a respondent who fulfills the criteria for one's study and that person then assists in locating other respondents who fulfill the studies criteria via their social networks and community (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). For this research, the criteria include being raised as a woman/femme, and being willing

to discuss their sexual pleasure and history. This data collection strategy was useful in accessing populations that are more difficult to reach (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Brown, 2005).

However, limitations of using a snowball sampling technique for data collection include selection bias and a lack of representativeness (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). This means that results are not generalizable, and that selection bias occurs. For example, the people who choose to volunteer, and consequently who they choose to suggest, are people who are comfortable with talking about their sexual history and pleasures, and may only provide a limited perspective into sexual identity (Brown, 2005).

To begin the snowball sampling process, I posted (IRB approved) inquiries on social media, in areas such as a local women's Facebook support group. My respondents chose the day, time, and interview location, to ensure that they felt comfortable enough to speak candidly with me. I suggested either one of our homes, or a neutral public space that provides privacy such as a park bench or coffee shop. Due to the Covid pandemic, Skype, Zoom or other online forms of communication were available as an option to ensure their health and safety. In-person interviews required 6 feet of distance and mask coverings. Hand sanitizer was provided. The day before the interview would take place I sent out a message/email reminder, to confirm the appointment with the respondent. All interviews were recorded.

Prior to the interview, I would offer to send my consent form (IRB approved) via email to provide the respondent space and time to look it over. Whether they chose to look over it or not, at the time of the interview I would read through it, out loud, in person. Importantly, the respondent was assured that they may stop the interview at any

point, as well as choose to skip any questions they may not want to answer. They were also reminded that the interview is for research purposes only. Therefore, they were assured there are no wrong or right answers, and that any identifiers would remain confidential. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, I carried a list of resources for my respondents to access. For example, if by working through their sexual history, a respondent brought up a sexual assault and decided they wanted to seek medical attention (whether physically, mentally, or counsel), I would provide a variety of phone lines or local women's and/or LGBTQIA+ health centers to access such resources.

Many respondents expected a more traditional "question and answer" style of interview, whereas I sought to create a more open, organic space where respondents felt comfortable in both telling their narrative and maintaining an active conversation. Fontana (2002) argues that researchers should move away from the more traditional "interview" process of detached, sterile interviewing, and instead acknowledge their role in the co-construction of knowledge. Drawing on this model, I worked to create the space and platform for the respondent to tell their narrative while also acknowledging my collaborative construction of the story (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). That meant that I answered their questions and offered comments; I was engaged in the conversation. Once the interview was over, I would stop the recording, and thank them for taking the time to meet with me and tell their story. After the interview, I would write up field notes. I reached out once more via email to thank them for their time and emotional labor.

Sample characteristics

This study utilized qualitative data from a sample of 30 adult women and people who were assigned female at birth (AFAB)[13] (mean age= 30.8, SD= 6.63) who were recruited throughout 2019-2020 in the Midwest of the United States. Participants were recruited through social media, predominantly through "women/femme" Facebook support groups. The recruitment inquiry asked for: "women who are 18+ and interested in relaying their sexual history and pleasures narrative." Since this study was examining sexual behavior as it relates to being raised as a woman and how this relates to pleasure pertaining to having a vagina, having a vagina was a prerequisite for participation.[14]

For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 13% (4) straight/heterosexual participants, and 87% (26) participants who identified within the LGBTQIA+ community, or women who I refer to as queer women or AFAB. To honor my participants' sexual fluidity, I list their sexual identities as they defined them: 40% (12) bisexual participants, 6.6% (2) pansexual/polyamorous participants, 6.6% (2) pansexual participants, 3.33% (1) fluid sexuality/heteroromantic participants, 3.33% (1) sexually ambiguous participants, 3.33% (1) bisexual/queer/homoflexible participants, 3.33% (1) bi-light participants, 3.33% (1) homoromantic/bisexual participants, 3.33% (1) bisexual/demisexual participants, 3.33% (1) queer/bisexual/gay participants, 3.33% (1) queer/homoromantic participants, 3.33% (1) bisexual/pansexual participants, and (1) bisexual/queer.

[13] Throughout the rest of the study, I will be using assigned female at birth (AFAB) to refer to genderqueer individuals. That is, agender, nonbinary, or questioning participants who have a vagina.
[14] Not all women have vaginas. Not all people who have vaginas are women. For the focus of this study, those who have a vagina was pertinent.

For self-reported gender identity, there were 23 cisgender women participants, and 7 AFAB individuals including 4 questioning[15] participants, 2 nonbinary[16] participants, and 1 agender[17] participant. Five of these participants shifted their gender identity after the interview, whereas two already identified as nonbinary before they participated in the study. These seven genderqueer/gender nonconforming participants felt comfortable including their narrative in this study because of their past experiences of being treated as women when they were growing up, as well as their current experiences of having a vagina. Throughout the rest of this study, analysis will refer to participants in my study as "women and AFAB folk," the latter being a term they agreed with.

The sample included 60% or 18 participants ages 18-31; 33% or 10 participants ages 32-45; and 7% or 2 participants ages 46-59. For self-identified race and ethnicity, the sample included 70% (21) white participants, 10% (3) Black participants, and one each Chinese/Taiwanese participant, Palestinian participant, Syrian participant, Latinx participant, Vietnamese participant, and Filipino participant. Participants reported a wide range of occupations, familial status, educational backgrounds, and religious affiliation (see Appendix C for full list of respondent demographics).

[15] May be understood as questioning their gender identity; unsure.
[16] May be used differently dependent on the individual. Generally, nonbinary is understood as a term to describe a person who may experience a gender identity that is neither exclusively woman or man or is in between or beyond genders. Often used for identities that fall outside the man/woman dichotomy, or resist the gender binary altogether.
[17] May be used differently dependent on the individual. Generally, agender is understood as 'non-gendered' or 'genderless.' A person who does not have a specific gender identity, or identify as having a gender at all.

Narrative Analysis and Data Management

Throughout my analysis, pseudonyms were used for any names, locations, education institutions or partners mentioned in my respondents' narrative in order to protect their identities. Each audio narrative was then transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. I requested that the 'uhms,' 'ahs,' 'likes,' and pauses remain in the transcript, so I could personally clean the data to determine whether significance or meaning is lost based on the delivery of the statement. Additionally, I listened to the recordings while also reading the transcriptions, taking notes on how things are said. For example, if the respondent told me something with a clearly sarcastic tone, or with the sound of holding back tears, I made note of it.

Throughout my cleaning transcripts, coding construction, and interview analysis, I wrote memos. Memo writing is an integral process that happens throughout the entire process of the study. It allows social researchers to better understand their data, while tracing the development of concepts and theory grounded in the data. The process enables the researchers to form a deeper understanding of codes, hypothesis, and concepts formed (Charmaz, 2013).

I coded the interviews line-by-line and assigned codes to chunks of data to preserve the narrative using NVivo, a qualitative software service. Similar codes were grouped together to create meta-codes. I also wrote analytic memos throughout the data collection and data analysis phases of this project, including field notes after each of the interviews, codes that make up each meta-code, and my own impressions, thoughts and theoretical connections.

I employed queer theory to frame my concepts and guide my interview themes, as well as throughout my coding and analysis process. To maintain their voice in their narrative, I used the respondent's own language to create the codes. For example, if a respondent said they were "anxious" or feeling "anxiety" when discussing sexual interactions with a partner, I coded "anxiety". Alongside explicit codes, I also created conceptual codes. For example, I created codes called "queer" and "empowerment," where I noted moments in participant's narratives that elicited deconstruction or fluidity in their conception of sexual pleasure, and moments of entitlement to pleasure or resistance to heteronormativity. My intent was that in the process of narrowing and expanding the codes, I would begin to notice trends or patterns in their stories of sexual pleasure.

After coding, I created separate document "overviews" for each respondents' narrative by cutting and pasting excerpts from their transcripts. I included my analysis, thoughts, and interpretations, in italics at the top, but the rest of the document was a "write-up" of key pieces of their story, in their own words. By choosing the pieces of their narrative for inclusion in their document, what was highlighted and possibly integrated into my study exemplifies the co-construction process that occurs in narrative methodology (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995).

This process also means that although I may try not to influence my interviewees responses, I will impact the narrative nonetheless. It was crucial that I maintained my participants voices and keep their story within the context and frame they intended their story to be heard, while also not losing my own voice as a researcher in the process. Keeping a queer lens in mind, I gave participants the space to speak and tell their story in

their own words, and subsequently, allow myself as a queer femme researcher space to analyze said narrative.

A strength of narrative methodology is the opportunity to keep respondents' narrative intact by using long excerpts and quotes to better understand one's story in the context of their lived experiences. As Fontana (2002) reminds us, there is not one universal truth that we are trying to glean from the respondent; how a respondent chooses to interpret, respond and understand concepts and their story are important kernels of information to capture. Therefore, I utilized these reconstructed participant summaries in the findings section to present my findings while centering women's voices.

Grounded Theory

I used grounded theory to frame my analysis. This method requires an inductive process, with the collection and subsequent analysis of data conducted via identification of concepts, themes, and patterns that emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2002). Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is often understood as a methodological theory that allows findings to emerge organically during the data collection process (Charmaz, 2002; Bowen, 2008; Mills, Bonner, and Francis, 2008). This intentionally inductive process allows for unexpected or surprising results to arise, creating a more authentic analysis.

Through reflexivity and considerations to voice and representation, I used a "constructivist" grounded theory approach. As Olesen (2005) states, it is necessary to consider how attitudes and expectations may impact observations and interpretation of the data. A constructivist grounded approach encourages a researcher to reflect on what

they bring to their analysis (e.g., relationship to the participant, knowledge in research topic, personal experiences with research topic, experience in academia) and encourage a flexible process of co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participant. This methodology approach is "grounded" in participant experiences and narrative, and seeks to explore a social process and construct knowledge that is not generalizable but "transferable." Transferability refers to how findings of a study may be transferred to another context or setting—to generalize on concepts.

Thus, grounded theory establishes a more flexible analysis, because it doesn't confine researchers to the parameters of a particular theoretical framework. Rather, this methodology encourages theoretical frameworks to assist in data analysis, while reminding researchers to not limit their data and analysis to strict parameters. Employing this strategy, I studied how women construct meanings that are important to their sexual experience, and related to their gender and sexual identity, as well as how hierarchies of power influence women's narration of their sexual history and pleasure.

Critical narrative work allows a link to be made between the personal and the political, in that it foregrounds deeply personal researcher experiences and participants voices alongside social justice issues. When we study ourselves or our own group, incorporation of a narrative method provides a deeper sense of reflexivity into how social forces shape us and our own networks, while in turn, providing a sense of verisimilitude to the readers. Furthermore, both researcher and participants are *always* located within a historical, social, and political context. As social research scholars, it is our responsibility to recognize, interpret, and reflect on such intersections of contexts within our study. As

Denzin and Lincoln (2013:9) have emphasized, qualitative researchers should show the readers that:

> Research is an interactive process shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting…the product of the interpretive bricoleur's labor is a complex, quilt-like bricolage, a reflexive collage or montage—a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations.

Rather than hide, avoid or even deny this fact, Denzin and Lincoln (2013) encourage scholars to take command of their data, and embrace the "weaving" of interpretational knowledge—that in fact, there is untapped value in reflexive, transparent research that problematizes grand narratives.

This research is the start to my career in academic research and social justice-oriented work. My career goals are deeply rooted in the desire to identify persistent inequalities and work to overcome them through qualitative rigor and activism. It is not my intention to take sensitive life stories out of women's lived experiences and use them to my academic advantage; doing so would be antithetical to my professional and personal goals. Life stories allow for researchers to take a back seat, and for participants to take the lead on where the research goes. It is this type of relationship with individuals that I enjoy so much with this work, and it is their (or our) story I am attempting to tell. By working closely with these participants, hearing their stories, I was further empowered to dedicate my career to providing a means to elevate their voices and stories on sexual pleasure.

As it has been shown in the literature review, women's sexual pleasure has been ignored, mistreated and misunderstood. Noting this inequality is not new or groundbreaking. Rather, it points to the need for critical research on the ways in which

women experience sexual pleasure, and how these experiences resist or perpetuate the larger sexuality narrative. I intend for this research to not only be a way for the interviewees to express their experiences, concerns and needs, but to also be a stimulus for women to converse and collaborate on normalizing future discussions of female sexuality.

Initial Researcher Reflections

Before I begin the analysis of my participant's sexual histories and narratives, it is important to discuss the climate that I conducted this study in, and the important consequences that affected the collection of my data. My data collection for just under half of my study (13 interviews) were conducted during the COVID pandemic over zoom or in six-feet distanced spaces. Not only did the pandemic influence the way in which I collected sexual narratives, but it also influenced participant's lives, and therefore their stories. Along with their sexual narratives, some folk told stories of unemployment due to COVID, some of isolation, and some disclosed new gender identification following their initial interview.

In my overall study, there are 2 non-binary[18] folk, 1 agender[19] individual, and 4 questioning[20]. This is not entirely surprising, as Briana McGeough remarks "I suspect that as folks have been isolating more, that has given a little bit of distance and freedom

[18] Nonbinary may be used differently dependent on the individual. Generally, nonbinary is understood as a term to describe a person who may experience a gender identity that is neither exclusively woman or man or is in between or beyond both genders. Often used for identities that fall outside the man/woman dichotomy.
[19] Agender may be used differently dependent on the individual. Generally, agender is understood as 'non-gendered' or 'genderless'. A person who does not have a specific gender identity, or identify as having a gender at all.
[20] Questioning their gender identity; unsure.

from some of those gender norms, as well as providing a little bit more time to reflect." (in Thorne, 2020). I have since reached out to participants with new gender identification to ensure that they were comfortable with their narrative still being included in my study. For nonbinary, agender, and questioning participants, their narratives still weave a story of embodiment and resistance to gendered existence, as AFAB[21] folk navigate the larger societal structures and institutions that attempt to "gender" them. However, future research on the underrepresented narratives of nonbinary folk and their sexual histories is necessary to appropriately capture their voices and experiences.

CONCLUSION: WHY IS WOMEN'S SEXUAL PLEASURE A SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE?

> "To love women, to love our vaginas, to know them and touch them and be familiar with who we are and what we need. To satisfy ourselves, to teach our lovers to satisfy us, to be present in our vaginas, to speak of them out loud, to speak of their hunger and pain and loneliness and humor, to make them visible so they cannot be ravaged in the dark without great consequence, so that our center, our point, our motor, our dream, is no longer detached, mutilated, numb, broken, invisible, or ashamed." (Eve Ensler, The Vagina Monologues, 1996)

Although today there is more discussion between a female and her physician regarding sexual satisfaction or performance, there is still an absence of discussion between women and their peers, education courses, and their partners. There is, as Tuana (2004) states, an "epistemology of ignorance," where our current understanding of female sexuality refuses to be discussed and debated openly (outside of the "professional" in a medical institution). Ignorance around women's bodies and experiences is not unintentional, nor is it an unintended lack of resources or information. Ignorance is constructed, maintained, and disseminated and is linked to issues of power and

[21] Assigned female at birth.

knowledge production (Tuana, 2004). It is crucial to look at how much in our knowledge of female sexuality we *don't* know, as much as we do know.

This ignorance stunts girls from actively learning about their own anatomy. They don't learn about the vulva, clitoris or labia, the complex system and size (both aroused and unaroused) of the clitoris that contains over 8,000 nerves fibers, about varying forms of masturbation and use of vibrators, and the endless preferences females prefer for stimulation and arousal. Conversely, this information in relation to men's anatomy and pleasure is common knowledge (Nicolson and Burr, 2003; Tuana, 2004; Salisbury and Fisher, 2014). Further, this invisibility extends to women's "private" lives, with different interpretations women have about entitlement to pleasure, techniques for managing their own and others' sexual needs, and, ultimately, their feelings about the "sexually normal" body (Nicolson and Burr, 2003; Sarin, Amsel, and Binik, 2013). This invisibility creates a need for positive views of sexual pleasure at all levels:

> The intrapersonal (self-acceptance of sex for personal pleasure), the interpersonal (acceptance of one's partner(s), friends, family, etc., as enjoying sex for pleasure reasons), and finally, the overarching cultural scripts (schemas for the sexuality of men, schemas for the sexuality of women, environments that reinforce rather than punish the concept of sexual pleasure for pleasure's sake) (Rye and Meaney, 1997).

This is not to say we must force the responsibility on women to educate themselves about sexuality; rather, to show how the depth and epistemology of ignorance permeates in both male and female's lives.

Although the orgasm remains the central medical focus in being sexually "normal," only one third of women within a study conducted by Nicolson and Burr (2003) always had orgasms in the way the medical institution defines them. When taking a closer look as to how professionals in the medical institution are taught, the majority of

scientific anatomy books in college classes do not provide detailed pictures or explanation of the clitoris (unlike that of the male penis, which is detailed carefully), nor depict the actual average size of the vulva and clitoris (making the illustration of the genitals smaller) (Nicolson and Burr, 2003; Tuana, 2004). What may commonly be considered ordinary knowledge of women's sexuality remains hidden behind a social construct of gender norms and heteronormativity.

When watching films, reading scholarly articles, or flipping through a magazine, it is eerily easy to ignore the lack of representation of women's voices when discussing sex or sexual pleasure. When we discuss women in the bedroom, we too often talk ABOUT or FOR them, failing to recognize that when we make assumptions of what a woman desires or should be, we write a script of what it means to be a "normal" woman—a mold many women may fail to fit. Understanding how complex and diverse female sexuality is experienced, as well as who benefits and who loses when defining female sexuality is imperative in striving toward equitable pleasure, and creating safe spaces for women to discuss and explore their desires. Addressing the root causes of social injustice in women's sexual life stories is the first step in creating a discussion surrounding the long-held taboo: female sexual pleasure.

CHAPTER 3: NAVIGATING GENDER SCRIPTS, EMOTIONAL LABOR AND ANXIETY IN THE BEDROOM

In this chapter, I examine ways that participants in my study talked about emotional labor and gender scripts within their sexual history and pleasure narratives. Their narratives reproduce many of the previously formed understandings of emotional labor and gender scripts in the bedroom, such as the phenomenon of faking an orgasm, while extending the literature by examining and centering queer women's experiences, as well as discovering the importance of anxiety.

As was described in Chapter 1, emotional labor is the suppression or creation of feeling and emotion for the benefit of another's interpretation and state of being (Hochschild, 1983). To recap, in *The Second Shift,* Arlie Hochschild (1989) explored the unseen or hidden labor that working women faced once they came home from their paid labor positions outside the home (e.g., housework, childcare). Hochschild contended that unequal societal demands and expectations about the division of labor in the home resulted in women working a "second shift" of unpaid labor. Importantly, this "second shift" is placed within a gendered framework, where Hochschild argues there is a "leisure gap" between men and women.

The Second Shift widened our scope on the research of labor to include *emotional* labor, a key component of domestic work. Hochschild defined emotional labor as labor that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others. (1983: 7)" Emotion work, she contended, sits at two levels: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting is when women present themselves as calm, friendly, and demure even if they feel contrary,

whereas deep acting is when women internalize their performance, convincing themselves they really *do* experience the emotions expected of them (Hochschild, 1983). For example, a woman who smiles, moans, and sighs in contentment, even as she privately thinks how she can't wait for a sexual interaction to be over with, is enacting surface level emotional labor. In this scenario, the woman is aware of her own dissatisfaction, but on the surface, she presents an ulterior presentation of self for the sake of her partner.

Deep emotional labor, however, may be understood as when a woman prioritizes her partner's pleasure, and in her own reflection, sincerely internalizes the belief that they really *do* experience the traditional gendered emotions expected of them. For example, deep emotional labor may look like providing oral sex but not receiving, forgoing an orgasm if their partner has already climaxed, tolerating painful sex, having sex when they don't want to, or doing sexual activity they don't enjoy. In other words, deep level emotional labor moves expression of appropriate emotion from a faking, suppressing, or modifying, into the realm of internalizing and managing the emotions one actually feels, to correspond with expectations. (e.g. 'I don't mind tolerating certain painful positions or behavior if it makes him happy—if he's happy and turned on, I'm happy!')

Such emotion work in the bedroom is another form of unpaid labor, and in a heterosexual relationship, women disproportionately take on the majority of the work (Hochschild 1983; Hochschild, 1989; Erickson, 2005). Yet, despite women reporting dissatisfaction with the inequality of emotional labor, they continued to perform the majority of emotional labor (Stevens et al, 2006). Research has shown the power of gender roles in performing and assigning emotion labor: the more men closely identified

with traditional notions of gender roles, the less emotion work they did (Stevens et al, 2006).

In the context of sexuality, I use Hochschild's concepts of "the second shift" and emotional labor provide a useful template to conceptualize emotional labor in sexual interactions. Emotional and sexual pleasure inequities exist, in part, because emotion labor is linked with gendered scripts of femininity. In fact, emotional labor has been shown to be an important factor in examining gender relations in sexual interactions, which has been coined the third shift (Fahs and Swank, 2016). Fahs and Swank (2016) investigate the specific relationship between gendered emotional labor and women's emotional work within their sexual lives. Their study found almost every woman in their study was undertaking emotion work in the bedroom. Women typically viewed their partners' "expectation" or "demand" of their own orgasm as validation to their partners masculinity and prowess, rather than as something they were entitled to or wanted (Fahs and Swank, 2016). This finding suggests that women prioritize their male partner's expectations around her sexual pleasure, leading to women performing what they call a "third shift".

What is the difference between emotional labor and simply being a generous, thoughtful, sexual partner? Emotional labor in the bedroom may be seen in phenomena such as faking an orgasm, prioritizing men's pleasure over one's own, and engaging in sexual activity they do not desire (Potts, 2000; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010; Frith, 2013; Fahs and Frank, 2014). Simply put, emotional labor is at the expense of one's own pleasure and comfort. Therefore, emotional labor is not just about predominantly providing more oral sex than one's partner—it's about tolerating pain,

denying self-pleasure. These forms of emotional labor are bound within a patriarchal system. To enact emotional labor in the bedroom, therefore, is an intimate, micro representation of the larger hegemonic society. Critically examining emotional labor in sexual interactions is, consequently, examining the embodiment of gender roles and power of the larger, patriarchal system.

Why is emotional labor within sexual interactions an examination of gender roles and power? Sexuality is socially learned, and therefore, "socially appropriate" sexual scripts are formed that influence an individual's sexual behaviors, beliefs, and desires (Simon and Gagnon, 1984; Gagnon, 1990; Parker and Gagnon, 1995). The enactment of emotional labor in the bedroom is an example of traditional gender roles and sexual scripts, which in turn exemplifies the interaction between gender structures and the individual. In other words, examining these seemingly private, micro interactions between individuals allows us to see how larger concepts such as gender structure and patriarchy are embodied, reconstituted, and resisted. It serves as a reminder that gender (larger picture) is compiled of individuals (small details) that uphold the system. Examining these smaller interactions offers a unique perspective as to how the hegemonic, heteronormative system is maintained, or breaking down.

Along with women who identify as heterosexual, this study examines emotional labor and the enactment of gender scripts within sexual behavior of queer women and AFAB folks' narratives. As most studies center straight women when considering the role of gender within sexual interactions, it is necessary to center queer people's experiences and examine how these narratives many align, differentiate, or intersect with current literature. A representative U.S sample of orgasm frequency, conducted by

Frederick, St. John, Garcia, and Lloyd (2018), shows that an orgasm gap persists between heterosexual men and women, with heterosexual men as most likely to say they usually-always orgasms when sexually intimate (95%), followed by gay men (89%), bisexual men (88%), lesbian women (86%), bisexual women (66%), and finally, heterosexual women (65%). With this study in mind, my participants narratives allow us to go deeper into what this differentiation looks like, particularly for queer/bi women, and where the discrepancy in orgasm is happening.

For this study, I extended the analysis of emotional labor enacted within sexual interactions to include additional factors. Questions I considered include: What does emotional labor look like when women *receive* sexual pleasure, such as oral? Why do some women prefer to give pleasure over receiving it? Additionally, what does emotional labor within sexual interactions look like when we consider queer women? These questions both extend and queers conversations about gender, emotional labor and sexual pleasure.

In this chapter, I discuss the participants' experience of receiving oral, their experiences of providing oral, the resiliency of faking orgasms, and how queer women navigate gender sexual scripts. Emotional labor is interwoven among all these experiences. Throughout the chapter I argue four things: 1) That the gendered power dynamic women and AFAB folk experience with cis men in sexual interactions is creating not only emotional labor through penetrative sex, but within oral sex as well, 2) that this gendered power dynamic is so salient, women and AFAB folk feel a persistent anxiety that influences their sexual behaviors and preferences with cis men, 3) That women and AFAB folk conduct forms of emotional labor such as faking orgasms for

varying reasons, but consistently find difficulty in communicating their own emotional, sexual, sensual needs, and 4) queer women and AFAB participants embody many of these aforementioned gendered scripts and forms of emotional labor (around cis men), while also exhibiting forms of resistance and queering preconceived notions as to what sexual pleasure and sex actually entail. In other words, my participants accommodate gendered power dynamics in sexual interactions with cis men in many ways, while also deconstructing notions of sex equating to production of orgasms, and advocating for "giving" in bed as an inherently powerful and equitable process. Again, the larger patriarchal influence cannot be ignored, as in these narratives we see cis men maintain their role in inhibiting women and AFAB folks' entitlement and access to sexual pleasure, regardless of their sexual orientation.

ORGASM IMPERATIVE AND ANXIETY

One noticeable theme that appeared over and over in the women's narratives was anxiety: 18 out of 30 respondents brought anxiety up. They expressed anxiety about achieving an orgasm, anxiety about receiving oral sex, even anxiety about having pleasure. This anxiety is related, I argue, to their emotional labor. Prior sexuality literature has not addressed this concept, with the exception of one article by Salisbury and Fisher (2014). Their study demonstrates that women may feel too anxious or nervous to ask a partner for clitoral stimulation during intercourse out of fear of hurting their partners feelings. This anxiety, however, extends beyond asking for clitoral pleasure from partners. Anxiety is also related to receiving oral pleasure, alongside an expectation to produce an orgasm. Within my study, participants don't seem to have a problem

providing oral sex to their partners, but are anxious about receiving it. In this section, I will focus on women and AFAB folk receiving oral pleasure, as a way to better understand the power dynamic and hurdles they navigate in sexual interactions.

This traditionally gendered dynamic of not expecting reciprocity and the anxiety it produces was seen in my interview with Valerie (36, white, cis, bisexual). Valerie touches on the surface level emotional work she has experienced with cishet[22] male sexual partners, even within the process of receiving oral pleasure. She provides an example of how deeply a "pleasure imperative" is embedded within sexual interactions. Under this imperative, even during an interaction that is supposed to be centralized around her pleasure, she finds herself obligated to perform emotional work by receiving sexual attention that doesn't necessarily feel pleasurable for her. During our interview, Valerie is sitting across from me on the couch in her home, while her husband and son are away at the gym. As she walks me through her formative sexual experiences as a teenager, she begins to paint a picture of her experiences of receiving oral sex:

[Spencier]: Okay, so, okay. So the first time then, you perform oral is in college.

[Valerie]: College, yes.

[Spencier]: And how was that experience?

[Valerie]: I enjoy doing it, always have. Yeah. Like I see…both college boyfriend and first husband are like, "you don't find this degrading?" and I don't know why I would, like this is fun, I enjoy this, like sit back, please. Um, man, I don't remember if college guy ever reciprocated. It wouldn't surprise me if he didn't. But also, oral doesn't really do a whole heck of a lot for me. At this point, like current husband, ex-husband, maybe college guy, I mean, those are the only three guys I've ever slept with and oral just doesn't—I mostly feel a lot of pressure, like okay, I'm supposed to lay back and enjoy this, I'm thinking of my grocery list, because really it's just like there's a lot of saliva going on down there, and you're just not hitting the spots like my fingers can or like I can help your fingers, maybe

[22] Cis-gendered and heterosexual

> can we just do something else, because like I know that they're like, my ex-husband especially was like I find this really erotic, I really, I want to do this for you, and it's like okay great, you're framing it as a gift to me, except it doesn't really do a whole lot for me because you're not very, like you're not very good at it, and/or it just doesn't trip my trigger.

Valerie defines oral sex as something inherently passive and unappealing, as well as something she is only willing to receive to appease her partner, rather than for her own enjoyment. Valerie makes a point to explain oral sex as something her partner's frame as a "gift", that she feels obligated to receive despite her partners' inability to provide her sexual pleasure through this method. Elliott and Umberson (2008) found sexual emotional labor is apparent most often in women's long-term relationships and for married women in particular. This may be for varying reasons, such as an exchange of work (e.g., having sex in exchange for a partner doing more housework or providing more income), or they felt a "duty" or "obligation" to provide their partner pleasure surrounding their role as a wife (Braun et al., 2003; Elliott and Umbersom, 2008; Fahs, 2011). This seems to translate, for Valerie, into allowing her partner to "gift" her oral sex, even if it is greeted with internal ambivalence.

Riley (25, nonbinary, Vietnamese, pansexual) tells a similar story surrounding ambivalence in receiving oral pleasure, however, they also describe anxiety experienced in receiving oral, as well as pressure or obligation in experiencing pleasure. Riley is sitting across from me at a bar, in the middle of the day. It is their place of employment, but they are on their day off. They pick a booth off in the corner of the bar as the bartender begins their opening shift routines for the day.

[Spencier]: Then at what point do you first receive oral? How old were you when you first were receiving that?

[Riley]: Seventeen, was when college started for me.

[Spencier]: Okay.

[Riley]: I started college around um, seventeen, so at seventeen and a half, going into eighteen. Nobody should have really been having sex with me at that time. [CHUCKLE] Age of consent in California I'm sure was not sixteen at the time. I don't remember, [CHUCKLE], but nobody realistically should have been having sex with me at that time, because I was way too young to be in college. And everybody I was having sex with was in my, in like my um higher credit, you know, unit courses.

[Spencier]: Yeah.

[Riley]: Where I'd be like, I was really into sex ed, so I did sexual psychology, like 609, like was I supposed to be in that class, no. How did I get in? No idea. But, one of my regular sex partners at the time was somebody that was from that class, and he was, he was twenty-three at that time. He should not have been having sex with me. [CHUCKLE] Yeah. Um, but so that was the first time I received oral. You know. Um, after that it, I'm still shy about receiving myself, it's just been dumb internalized right now in my brain that it's something that's like my partners rarely do it for me, there must be something wrong, and I'm really trying hard to break out of that mentality. Not going so well. Um, but, you know, hopefully it will be better soon in the future.

[Spencier]: Do you enjoy it or is it too overwhelming for you to even enjoy it? Or do you just not enjoy it?

[Riley]: I do enjoy it. The anxiety that I do get from it does make it so it's less enjoyable. With certain people I'm able to get over that anxiety, but for the most part it's just [trails off] I'm just uncomfortable the entire time, you know? Even though it feels good, it's just like, I mean I could be doing other things, you know what I'm saying?

[Spencier]: And then how often would you say you receive oral in comparison to the amount you give oral?

[Riley]: Amount I receive verses the amount I give? I definitely give more than I receive. Like I said, I mean, it's not on anybody's part, that's, definitely that's still my anxiety for the most part. Um, but I have no problem giving it, ever.

The anxiety in experiencing sexual pleasure from a partner aligns with the "orgasm imperative" that expects women to experience orgasm via sexual intercourse (Lavie-Ajayi and Joffe, 2009; Moran and Lee, 2011). These narratives suggest that an

underlying anxiety extends the orgasm imperative into other forms of sexual interaction with their partner, beyond just coital penetration. Women and AFAB folk in this study are experiencing anxiety around receiving oral sex, and a part of this may be due to avoiding the pressure of producing orgasms. For varying reasons, this expectation of producing an orgasm may induce anxiety in receiving oral sex, which will be explored further with Quinn.

Quinn (26, white, questioning, demi-bisexual) speaks to this "pressure" felt when receiving oral from her first sexual partner. Quinn is a service industry worker who has chose to be interviewed in my home. We both sit on the couch in my living room as she navigates her sexual interactions with her first (consensual) sexual partner.

[Spencier]: And you guys are regular with your sex then?

[Quinn]: Mm hmm.

[Spencier]: Does he ever end up going down on you?

[Quinn]: Yes. Yeah. He only did it a few times. I actually didn't like it for a long time. I felt like there was so much pressure for me to have an orgasm that I would start to psych myself out on it and I just didn't want it because I didn't want the pressure that came along with it.

Quinn weaves both agency and deep level emotional labor throughout her narrative, exploring the anxiety of taking too long to orgasm for a partner, hurting a partner's feelings if she fails to orgasm, while also vocalizing that she is sexually satisfied and intends to vocalize her needs in future encounters.

[Spencier]: Yeah. Do you consider yourself hard to get off or average or easy?

[Quinn]: I'd say probably difficult. Like the current partner that I have right now we have great sex but I barely ever get off from it. But I also fake it all the time…I fake it all the time. Again, it's the same reason why when I was

younger I didn't want someone to go down on me. I felt that pressure to cum. Well the few times that I have actually taken my correct amount of time to cum the men always complain about it. Like always. Like my current boyfriend doesn't complain about that stuff but it's like now because I've had people complain the only times that I've actually tried to wait and communicate that I'm not there yet like I feel like I don't know, that it's bothersome and annoying because they already came so the whole point of sex is over and done.

[Spencier]: Like an example of like what they would say as a form of complaining?

[Quinn]: Um, so I've at least been fortunate enough to not have anybody be too mean to me about it. But it's basically like… Like a general example of something that is said… I can't remember exact specifics but it would be like "are you going to cum or no?" or "am I doing something wrong?" And I'm like, "no, you were fine just keep doing that." And it's like, "well I'm getting kind of tired. I came forever ago." "Is this even doing anything?" Stuff like that.

[Spencier]: Is there a reason you do fake it instead of telling him, your current partner right now?

[Quinn]: Because I don't want him to feel self-confidence issues or to feel like he's inadequate. To me, I still am sexually satisfied, I feel satisfied when we are done having sex. But I don't want it to cause a bunch of issues within our relationship if it's something that isn't bothering me a whole lot right now. But it's solely for his self confidence in his sexuality. I feel like if you feel like you can never, ever get your partner off for real, then you would automatically assume that there's something wrong with what you're doing and that's not exactly the case. I think there's just more at play here.

[Spencier]: Okay. Would you say he's doing and performing the right way in regards to what you want, just not for long enough time or no, there's certain things he should be doing in regards to the way he pleasures you that would enhance your experience?

[Quinn]: I mean there's definitely a lot of things he could do that enhance my experience. But I'm also kind of taking it upon myself to teach him those things, slowly and surely. Whereas I've had sex with more than fifty people, he's had sex with five people. He's just not as experienced as I am. And I wouldn't expect him to be. So, I think that's something that I've really taken into account too. If I want him to do certain things I have to just teach him how to do it because he just doesn't know because he hasn't done it.

In this exchange it seems that Quinn is feeling this anxiety and "pressure" to orgasm—and that the responsibility falls on her shoulders. The responsibility, it seems, is two-fold. There is a responsibility to orgasm and experience sexual pleasure with a partner, as well as a responsibility to teach, or coach, their partner in how to please them without hurting their feelings. This sense of responsibility is what Fahs (2011) defines as women extending their "caretaker" role into the bedroom, ensuring their partner feels desired, loved, and enjoys themselves. Or as Erickson (2005) argues, women continue to put their partners needs above their own. This prioritization of pleasure, is deep level emotional labor.

Narratives such as Quinn's and Riley's break away from what we currently know about the gendered orgasm gap. A differentiation of orgasm between partners seems to be present in sexual interactions beyond the "coital imperative". In other words, an orgasm gap is seemingly occurring even when a partner is providing clitoral stimulation beyond the heteronormative understanding of "sex" and "sexual pleasure" as penetrative sex.

Olivia described a similar conflict in her also came interview (25, Black, cis, pansexual) when discussing oral stimulation:

[Spencier]: And then what about oral? In regards to your experiences with that, discovering that?

[Olivia]: I have mixed emotions about it. It induces my anxiety for a couple reasons. One because too much attention is on me. I feel like this person is focusing very much on me.

[Spencier]: Receiving and giving?

[Olivia]: Receiving. Giving—I'm fine with giving it.

As discussed in Chapter 1, research has found that women consider their partners sexual pleasure *more important* than their own, which exemplifies the "deep acting" level of emotional labor (Nicholson and Burr, 2003; McClelland 2011). Within these interviews, many participants express that expectations to experience pleasure with their partners creates anxiety that, perhaps, is a part of the road block denying them authentic sexual pleasure.

Pat (30, white, questioning, pansexual) speaks to the layered feelings of both anxiety and guilt when comparing her ability to orgasm with a partner to other women's experiences. Pat was interviewed during the Covid pandemic, so an online zoom meeting was conducted. Pat sat on her bed next to her cat, discussing how passively receiving stimulation to orgasm could be difficult:

[Spencier]: Hm-hmm [affirmative]. So, do you consider yourself hard to get off or normal to get off, easy to get off in comparison to other women?

[Pat]: I don't like to think it but I do think I have a little bit more difficulties. Like it's harder for me to get off, whether it be myself or someone else. Mostly because of stress or anxiety in different situations. So, for example, most of the time I'll get too anxious or nervous or I'll have thoughts, uncomfortable thoughts and I'll get out of it. My head space will just go and then I'll be turned off all of a sudden. So, sometimes it's real difficult and I'll just be like, "Okay, whatever, we're done with me, can we just move onto something else now?" I feel like with myself, I can force it and I can get done when I want to but when I'm with a partner and I start feeling like I don't think I can, this is taking too long or I start feeling guilty, like, "This is taking too long. Like you shouldn't have to do this this long." Then, that's when I'm like out of it and I can't. So, that can be what makes it more difficult for me to reach an orgasm.

Pat's self-reflection of her ability to orgasm as "difficult" reflects on what past research has found. Research shows that often women have interpreted the "orgasm gap" as a result of their own deficiency, and have thus either pathologized their inability to

orgasm, or simply accepted that it must be "hard" for women to orgasm (Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009; Moran and Lee, 2011). However, Pat knows she can orgasm, but places the responsibility and work on herself. She also says that she has problems getting herself off but that she can control this. She describes a sense of guilt about the time and work a partner must enact in order for her to achieve an orgasm—so much so, that the guilt and anxiety become a mental barrier from her achieving said orgasm.

Unlike Pat, however, most of these same women are masturbating with ease and orgasming under 10 minutes (some under one minute). The "orgasm gap," as we know, occurs once women interact with another person (Richters et al., 2006). Yet, even if a partner is focusing on a woman's sexual pleasure, this undivided attention can create an anxiety that perpetuates the orgasm gap. Whether due to length of time needed, improper technique and communication, or overarching anxiety of "having" to orgasm, many of the respondents seem to describe difficulties in orgasms with partners, even from clitoris-centered stimulation methods.

So *why* do women feel uncomfortable when sexual attention is given to them? Why do women squirm under the undivided attention? Why do women rebuke sexual attention and offer to provide the pleasure instead? Are they not used to it? Do they feel undeserving? Or does the act of prioritizing one's own pleasure deviate too much from traditional gendered norms and scripts, even as a queer woman? Do women feel so much pressure to orgasm, that they feel anxious about performing what their partner wants, to the point of simply faking an orgasm to appease a partner's desire to make them feel good? Where does this anxiety stem from? These are the questions that repeatedly surfaced during my data collection and pushed my analysis forward.

PLEASURE GIVERS: WHY THEY PREFER TO PROVIDE PLEASURE

Research has found that women provide oral sex more than they receive it (Braun et al., 2003; Chambers, 2007; Wood et al., 2016). A more recent study by Fahs and Swank (2020) has also examined forms of both deep and surface level emotional labor in relation to oral sex. In their study, Fahs and Swank (2020) have found that many women identify themselves as "givers" in an array of sexual behaviors with their partner, which is an example of gendered sexual scripts embedded within emotional labor in the bedroom. In other words, women find themselves within the traditional gender role of "caregiver", even within their sexual lives.

However, the majority of past studies examine straight women, and select research has found that women who conformed to gender norms were more likely to predicate their sexual satisfaction on their sexual partners' approval and satisfaction (Sanchez, Crocker, and Boike, 2005). What does a preference of "giving" sexual pleasure and oral sex look like for queer women, who likely defy gender norms in many ways? As witnessed in the last section, queer participants in this study find a way to weave acts of both resistance and embodiment of gender norms into their sexual interactions—particularly with cis men.

Fahs and Swank (2020) have argued that sexually "giving" and providing pleasure is a form of emotional labor that is embedded in women's beliefs about (men's) sexual entitlement. The following narratives reify Fahs and Swank's (2020) argument, while also adding an additional theme: power. "Power" was a word that came up many times in women's explanations as to why they may prefer to be "givers" in bed. For

example, Brianna (27, white, cis, bisexual) explains the power she feels, as well as the unwanted "vulnerability" required in receiving pleasure:

[Spencier]: What would you say is the ratio or rate of you performing oral to you receiving oral?

[Brianna]: It used to be much more heavily slated into me performing it than receiving it. I really do think that it comes from a place of feeling powerful versus feeling powerless. I didn't really ever like the feeling of vulnerability like that and I didn't really feel like I was ever able to fully let myself go enough mentally to be able to orgasm from it when I was younger. The few women that went down on me as well made me orgasm multiple times. I felt like between the first guy who did, Kip the lecturer and the women from the threesomes that I had, those were some pretty great experiences. Lots of great orgasms. I would say it's closer to being more evenly balanced now than it used to be. Maybe slightly more so in the me giving than receiving.

Perhaps what Brianna is speaking to when describing her preferences in "giving" oral, is similar to what other participants are trying to describe when navigating their discomfort in receiving oral and sexual attention, in that receiving pleasure requires a vulnerability and release of power/control of the interaction that they aren't comfortable in enacting. It is possible folk like Brianna prefer being "givers", because they can navigate the social interaction easier, as it aligns easily with their gender role, and therefore, may sincerely feel "better" about the interaction than when they receive oral sex. There is no role strain in providing oral pleasure for a partner.

By this, I mean there is a possibility that prioritizing cis male pleasure via oral sex does not deviate from traditional gendered notions of appropriate sexual behavior. Recall that in chapter one, traditional sexual scripts are undergirded by gendered power inequality, such as female sexual submissiveness and male assertiveness (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Simon and Gagnon, 1986; Gagnon, 1990; Sanchez, Fetterolf, and Rudman,

2012). Within this sexual double standard is the assumption that traditional gender roles are embedded in sexual behaviors, and consequently, men and women's sexual behaviors are judged by unequal standards (Petersen and Hyde, 2010). In fact, past studies show that sexually assertive men and women are evaluated differently (Marks, 2008; Jonason and Fisher, 2009; Sprecher, Treger and Sakaluk, 2013). Additionally, even as gender roles and standards surrounding them have changed considerably since the women's movement and sexual revolution (Bryant, 2003), research shows that most people acknowledge a sexual double standard exists between men and women (Milhausen and Herold, 2002; Rudman, Fetterold and Sanchez, 2013). One qualitative study showed that when women do enact assertive behavior or agency within sexual interactions, heterosexual men reacted negatively to or were ambivalent about their behavior (Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003). Therefore, the concept of being "giver" to partners, particularly cis male partners, aligns seamlessly alongside traditional gender roles.

However, being a "giver" isn't always out of sincere choice, but also out of verbal violence and blatant sexist behavior. Fin (25, white, questioning, queer/homoromantic) is a working single mom who woke up at 5AM to zoom call me before her shift. Fin sips some coffee while reflecting on her abusive long-term partnership:

[Spencier]: How would you say your sex and sexual interactions were with your past two long partners, long-term partners?

[Fin]: I think they—It's really complicated because my kids' dad was, like, abusive. So, it was definitely—Like, in the beginning, it was very much, like, me wanting to please him. Like, I always wanted to please him, but I also—I mean, we were together for, for, like, three and a half years, and I'm pretty sure that I only orgasmed with him, like, once.

[Spencier]: Hm-hmm [affirmative].

[Fin]: But, we were having sex, I mean, fairly frequently. I mean, I got pregnant twice at the beginning of our relationship. So, like, clearly, it was, it was happening often enough for that to happen, but I do remember, like, at the end of our relationship, like, not wanting to sleep with him anymore and him, like, guilting me about that. Like, "Do you know what it makes me feel like that you don't want to, like, fuck me or whatever," and stuff like that. And then, it was also, like, a big source of, like, material for him to use to, like, verbally attack me, like, when I separated from him and finally got out of that relationship. He would be like, "Well, no one's going to want you because you've had two kids, and you're all stretched out. And, nobody wants anything to do with—" Like, just, like, you know, it was like an attack point. So, it was this whole thing that, like, no man was ever going to want me again, and no man would be, like, into what I had to offer. And then, when somebody else took an interest in, in me, I, like, immediately jumped into a relationship because I was like, "Oh, you know, like, this person doesn't, like, think badly about, like, my body." But, unfortunately, like, that relationship was pretty toxic too, and it was, like, a situation where he, kind of, felt like, or he depicted it as though it was like a charity that he was doing. "I don't even want kids, and I'm in this relationship with somebody who has kids. And, "I feel like, you know, I do a lot just by being here." And, it became this thing where, like, he wasn't even working and was just living in my house and, like, getting drunk and, like, saying really awful things in front of my kids, until I finally, like, bought him a plane ticket and sent him home to his dad's and was like, "You know, you've got to go."

[Spencier]: Mm-hmm. How often would you say you receive oral in comparison to the amount of oral you provide, and how has that fluctuated throughout the years?

[Fin]: Okay. I definitely used to provide it way more than I received it. My kids' dad had this policy that he, quote/unquote, "does not eat the box." Yeah. So he was just a real winner. But, yeah, occasionally, that rule was broken, but for the most part, it was a thing that he thought that women were supposed to do for men. But in my most recent relationship which is with a nonbinary person, that was definitely reciprocated. And I felt like at the beginning of our relationship, I probably provided it more just because it was something that I was really into, wanting to please them. And then towards the middle of our relationship, it kind of evened out, and then I feel like they were probably providing it more and I was receiving more towards the end, but it was definitely reciprocal.

[Spencier]: Yeah. And do you enjoy providing oral?

[Fin]: Usually, yes. I think it's kind of complicated for people who have a penis, for me, because I have sexual trauma that's related to that, so it has to be somebody that I really trust. I really enjoy doing it, but there are certain things that can happen that can be a trigger, and then I'm like, "Oh, I'm not into this anymore."

Fin's reflection on her past relationships paints a picture of sexual "giving", certainly, but akin to the research by Fahs and Swank (2020), themes of "giving" result from 1) partner pressure (abuse), 2) no expectation of reciprocity, and 3) emotional labor. Additionally, Fin remarks that her ex-partner explicitly states that oral wasn't for women, and would refuse to perform it on her. Therefore, Fin's sexual "giving" is formed out of forced sexual compliance, which coincides with findings in a previous study on how women may experience forms of sexual coercion, that problematize the idea of consent (i.e., it isn't consent, if it was coerced or pressured) (Conroy, et al., 2015).

Fin remarks that she has moved on from this relationship and has since had a healthy relationship with a nonbinary partner, and is now single. She affirms that she enjoys oral, but that oral sex with a person who has a penis is particularly triggering due to past sexual trauma with their ex-partner. Research shows that many women feel a sense of duty or responsibility to provide oral sex more than they receive oral sex, however, in Fin's situation, her desire to appease her ex-partner was also bound within sexual trauma (DeMaris, 1997; Morgan, Johnson, and Sigler, 2006; Chambers, 2007). For Fin, being a "giver" in sexual interactions is all about gender, power, and agency. In her previous relationship, she had her entitlement to pleasure stripped from her, and so she is cognizant of the powerful social meanings held behind each of her actions. Fin's entitlement to pleasure was stripped by gender, her body (in this regard, motherhood),

and experienced the trauma firsthand of a cis male partner who embodies toxic hegemonic masculinity.

However, for others, understanding themselves as a "giver" may be a confluence of feeling in control, feeling pleasure from providing pleasure, and not wanting too much attention on themselves. For example, Felix (24, white and Asian, nonbinary, bisexual) begins to tell me how their orgasms are self-stimulated, even when they are with a partner, and transitions into explaining why they prefer to be a "giver" in bed:

[Spencier]: So, your first orgasm experience is from self-stimulation or masturbation.

[Felix]: Hm-hmm. [affirmative]

[Spencier]: And then, when's the first time you're able to have an orgasm with another person?

[Felix]: I was 15 or 14. And it was okay. Like, I will say that because, I mean, like, I felt like, it was, like… I won't lie. Like, I felt like I had to like, push myself to do it in order – you know what I mean? Not like, the act. It was more of like, push my orgasm out in order to like, actually orgasm. And I was like, did I just do it myself, or did that person do it? Like, I had to, like, question myself with that, so.

[Spencier]: So, that actually leads me to one of my questions is when you experience like, an orgasm with another person, is it from you doing some self-stimulation while you're having sexual interaction? Is it from oral? Or can you experience an orgasm through penetration? What is your typical orgasm experience?

[Felix]: Typical? I'm going to be honest. Like, I like doing it, like, self-stimulation while being penetrated, to be honest. Like, that's just like, my preference because, like, I – don't get me wrong. *I enjoy oral. But it just takes too long sometimes. And I like to give more than receive.* Like, I just feel like I'm like, more in the mood when I give. I'm just a giver, I guess. But, like, but I've only had like, a handful of times that I've like, came during penetration though. It's really hard for me to. [emphasis added]

[Spencier]: Hm-hmm. [affirmative] I think that's about the second time you've brought that up. So, what do you mean by that? What do you mean that you're a giver, that you –

[Felix]: *I almost like, get more pleasure out of like, pleasuring somebody like, than just being pleasured myself.* Because I like, get turned on by like, the person enjoying what I'm doing for them basically. So, like, I like to be on top. I like to be the one like, in control sometimes. Because like, that person is like, relaxed and like, okay with it. I mean, like, that's what I mean by that. Like, I like giving head more than like, receiving it too, so. [emphasis added]

Felix's narrative is similar to Brianna's, in that "giving" provides them power and control. They may be right. Although "giving" may be a form of role affirmation (gendered caregiver), it may also be understood as an act of resistance. Many actions and narratives of sex describe women as passive creatures that have little to no agency in the interaction; even the language used to describe sex acts, such as they "take in," or "receive." Although women often may not find the agency to communicate their sexual desires, they may find agency in being active in their sexual interactions through providing oral. Being in "control" or "powerful" through navigating the sexual interaction—determining where it goes, how the partner feels—being a "giver" may encompass a feeling of dominance. Additionally, as the first quote of this chapter expresses, Valerie quips that her partners ask "don't you find this degrading?" For some women, there may be a form of "taking back" their sexuality, and deconstructing gendered sexual scripts by providing oral sex, in that they get to determine what is and isn't appropriate for them to do in the bedroom (see Kennett et al, 2013).

Quinn points to being a giver because she wants to lead by example, and represent something that she, herself, doesn't get: time, attention, and patience to orgasm.

[Spencier]: And you mentioned this a little earlier in the interview but I just want to expand on it a little bit. So, no matter the partner, you like providing oral?

[Quinn]: Yeah. That, to me, is very satisfying to me because it feels like I'm… I don't want to say giving them a gift but it feels like it's something that they can't provide to themselves and sexually it does feel like a gift that I'm more than happy to give them but also it feels like I'm being given a gift of being able to do that. So, for me, it feels like… I don't know, all around it feels like something that should kind of be celebrated. Like people talk about how much they don't like doing it all the time but they don't talk about how much they like doing it. Like that I'm willing to spend as much time on you as you want. And I like not putting any stipulations on it and like actually giving them a chance to have as much time as it takes for them to cum given to them with no complaint or anything like that, to me is really important. And that's why I like doing it.

Quinn seems to be suggesting that no matter who she sleeps with, they deserve the time and attention to experience sexual pleasure in their own manner. Therefore, to Quinn, to be a "giver", is to be a good sexual partner and should be a two-way street. That sexual interactions should celebrate the act of giving, and to celebrate providing pleasure for another person. This way of understanding pleasure is queer, in that it critically examines and deconstructs why we have sex, and what sex entails. Quinn is reworking previous heteronormative constructions that demand sex entail not only penetrative sex, but also a selfish understanding that sex is for the individual and the individual only. That sex is for the sole production of self-orgasms. Although Quinn in previous sections discussed her lack of orgasms with male partners, she maintains a perspective that sexual interactions are for giving[23].

[23] Perhaps researchers are looking at this all wrong. What if, rather than examining why women are continuously "giving", we examine why men *aren't.* Perhaps women have it right. What if sexual interactions should be centered around the "other", and the act of "giving", but we are so consumed by the patriarchal understanding of what sex entails, that we examine women as if they are deficient? Perhaps we

Although the folk interviewed mentioned so far are queer, they don't discern a difference in their oral and orgasm experience dependent on the gender identification of the partner. Yet, a distinction is made among cis gendered, straight women such as Anne (28, Filipino-American, cis, straight), who discusses that this orgasm-gap happens particularly when she is with male partners. We met at a local coffee shop and picked a table on the second floor, secluded from other patrons. It is important to note that Anne (now) identifies as straight and currently has a long term cis-male partner, however, Anne has had long term relationships as well as varying sexual interactions with women. When I ask her about her orgasm experience, she remarks:

[Anne]: It maybe has something to do with like my [self] consciousness of who's around too, because I can please myself, like in the shower or like at home with my vibrators and I will squirt, but like when I'm with a partner, I, and we're doing that, like I'm like masturbating in front of them or they're stimulating me, I don't tend to, at least with the male partners that I've had recently.

[Spencier]: Um, and on average how long does it take you when you're masturbating to orgasm?

[Anne]: Like twenty minutes.

[Spencier]: And then does that change at all when you're with a partner?

[Anne]: It's longer. So, I don't really, okay, I don't really orgasm with the male partners that I've had, for this reason, like it's just, it's like I feel like, I feel like, do they care, but like are they patient enough, like do they like this stuff, is it gonna freak 'em out if I like squirt, like having those conversations is something that I just recently come into, like coming home to myself, learning what my body does and then where I can advocate for myself and where I can improve that communication about my sexual health. It's something that I appreciate in my relationship, and

critique women's "orgasm gap" because we continue to understand sex as the capitalistic production of orgasms through the male gaze of what sexual pleasure *is.*

I'm now learning that this is what I want for this person that I'm going to spend my time with, you know. So that's something that is kind of new.

[Spencier]: And would you consider yourself as hard, average or easy to get off?

[Anne]: I would say I'm hard to get off because of the fact that I, the things that stand in my way of, what I was mentioning before, like my partner, like I don't really cum with male partners, like I don't want him to feel like impatient, I would like it if he like expressed like, kind of almost like I think, I think it's sexy if you like kind of like show like you're attracted to it, like that it turns you on. Like that, I know it does, because he's hard still. I've been with people where like they're getting me off, and they get soft while they're doing it, and I'm like okay, what's going on there. That makes me feel weird.

Anne mentions that she struggles to cum with male partners since she fears they will feel impatient, while also voicing her concerns around their possible decrease in arousal. The anxiety surrounding her partners decrease in arousal is so consuming, that she denies herself orgasms and puts her (male) partners pleasure above her own. This aligns with the work of Erickson (2005) on why emotion work matters when considering the gender division of labor, in that women's prioritization of others results in a denial of one's own pleasure (Erickson, 2005).

Significantly, Anne remarks that this anxiety happens when she has sexual interactions with *men,* but does not balk at the idea of women putting in the labor and time into her orgasm. Again, we see women understanding their own body enough to understand the mechanisms necessary to reach climax (for Anne, consistent oral or hand stimulation), yet, continue to establish sexual interactions from a heteronormative lens. That is, as others have found, that sex encompasses shorter bouts of foreplay (oral, petting, kissing) which are precursors to penetrative sex, with the intention of male orgasm (Bryan, 2001; McClelland, 2010; Frith, 2013; Fahs and Swank, 2016).

These narratives demonstrate that women and AFAB folks experience an underlying anxiety in perception, and navigation of gendered sexual behavior, particularly as it pertains to cis men, which leads many participants in performing acts of emotional labor within the bedroom in some manner. In the following section, anxiety and emotional labor will be extended into the realm of appropriate "performance" of sexual pleasure.

Anxiety & Squirting

Anxiety surrounding performance of an 'appropriate orgasm' extends beyond the amount of labor and time it takes to achieve such. An interesting point that Anne mentions, is her nervousness around a male partner seeing her squirt. Squirting, otherwise known as female ejaculation, is an expulsion of fluid that is typically stimulated through the internal vaginal Gräfenberg spot (G spot) (Whipple and Komisaruk, 1999; Whipple, 2015). This type of orgasm, then, is typically created through stimulating the "underside" of the clitoris[24], and is understood as a normal part of healthy sexuality for many people with a vagina (Whipple, 2015). Akin to Anne's feeling of shame surrounding squirting, Gilliland (2009) found in their study that many women felt shame, humiliation, and embarrassment since they felt their orgasm was "abnormal."

However, research also shows that some women may find their "female ejaculation" as an enrichment of their sexual lives (Wimpissinger, Springer, and Stackl, 2013). The conflicting research pertaining to squirting make sense, as the phenomenon has historically not been adequately discussed in both research and sex education, with

[24] Squirting, or female ejaculation, is known to be created from a variety of stimulation efforts, dependent on the person, however it is commonly accessed through this method.

select researchers even denying its validity or existence, making many women navigate their experiences with little to no support or information (Sevely and Bennett, 1978).

Taylor (27, white, cis, bisexual/queer) sips her coffee in the library study nook, as she discusses how her perception of her own squirting has changed due to a supportive partner:

[Spencier]: When do you achieve your first orgasm?

[Taylor]: I don't know. Um, I really don't know. Um, I can tell you that the guy that I dated after the first boyfriend, I was still in high school and we dated for four years, um, that was definitely when I feel like I started to be a lot more comfortable with my body and with the fact that I would squirt. That boyfriend was like very like, 'it's fine, it's normal, like I don't mind it at all, you shouldn't mind it either, it's part of like who you are and what you do. It's not anything that you should be ashamed of. Um, so I feel like with that boyfriend I definitely had much better sexual experiences, so I'm sure with him I orgasmed for the first time. Um, but I feel like the first time that I had like really intense, clitoral stimulation, that either got me to orgasm or almost to orgasm was by myself, was through masturbating. Um, only because I was just much more explorative with myself at that time and we liked to kind of like push that limit of letting myself feel not anxious about like oh, how I was telling you before like with the other boyfriend, how I was constantly feeling like I had to almost tone myself down, um, so when I was by myself, I didn't have to feel that way.

[Spencier]: Right.

[Taylor]: So, I would say probably the first time I did have an orgasm was honestly probably by myself.

Even as Taylor expresses a newfound healthy and positive perspective on her ability to squirt due to a positive partner, she touches on the anxiety felt in her first relationship that caused her to "tone herself down". This reflection leads Taylor to realize that her first orgasm was something she created herself, through exploration and

masturbation of her clitoris. In narratives like Taylor's, we see an intersection of both agency and anxiety. Taylor creates her own first orgasm through self-exploration and masturbation, but it is due to her anxiety with her first boyfriend who does not perceive her squirting as an appropriate form of female orgasm. Consequently, Both Anne and Taylor show that folks with vaginas are navigating a double-edged sword of anxiety and performance: to create orgasms even in situations that don't facilitate them, but to orgasm in an appropriate way, or not at all.

So far, this section has examined emotional labor and anxiety in the bedroom within participants experiences of receiving and providing oral sex. In regards to receiving oral sex, participants felt anxiety around focalized sexual attention on themselves; taking too long and having a partner become impatient; not enjoying the methods their partner uses; worrying over their partners feelings and confidence, and; concern over squirting. Participants conveyed they prioritize providing oral sex to their partner because it's like providing a gift of pleasure. Among the reasons stated are they enjoy being in control of the situation; they felt pressured; they enjoy seeing their partner exemplify pleasure and joy; they get turned on by their partner's sexual pleasure, and; wanting to please their partner for approval. Overall, these narratives illuminate the anxiety embedded in emotional labor. However, as this next section will elude, this anxiety and emotional labor can extend into a tradition of feigning pleasure: faking an orgasm.

FAKING ORGASMS

Women may enact emotional labor in the bedroom by performing sexual ecstasy, otherwise known as faking orgasm, in order to appease their cis-male partners ego (Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010; Frith, 2013; Fahs and Frank, 2014; Potts, 2000; Nicolson and Burr, 2003; Wiederman, 1997). This "performance imperative" as Tyler (2004) coins it, brings a new discourse of work and management within the bedroom, where women's agency is encouraged so long as it is limited to their capacity to provide pleasure, readily engage in sex, and to experience penetrative orgasm (Machin and Thornborrow, 2003; Ménard and Kleinplatz, 2008; Gill, 2009).

Mack (28, Syrian, cis, bisexual) discusses how many of her sexual interactions included faking orgasms when she was with male partners, despite her ability to create her own orgasm when masturbating:

[Spencier]: Hm-hmm. Did you ever have an orgasm with your first boyfriend?

[Mack]: No. No, I actually—for a long time, a string of boyfriends, none of them ever made me orgasm.

[Spencier]: Do you remember your first orgasm you ever had, even if it's self-stimulated?

[Mack]: No, I was a babe. I was really young. I don't remember it. I mean, I remember like different instances of like orgasming when I was a really young child, but I don't remember the first one.

[Spencier]: And then, do you remember the first time you've had an orgasm when you were with a person?

[Mack]: Yes. Yeah, it was from oral. It was Sean. And I think I only came with him like two, maybe three times in the five-year relationship we had. I was never comfortable with myself to do it during sex myself or even show them or tell them. I thought, you know, sex felt great as-is. I can just cum on my own terms on my own time. I didn't have to do it during sex. It's

also like a little bit harder for me, so it takes like some work. And most guys don't want to put in the work, so I don't even bother asking them, because I don't want to feel like I'm making somebody do something they don't want to. But yeah, the first time was through oral with Sean, and I couldn't believe that he did it.

[Spencier]: How old were you?

[Mack]: I was 20 years old. But I had a few boyfriends before that, you know, and I never thought to have them stimulate my clitoris. For some reason, they think fingering's the way to go, which now I'm like, "No..."

[Spencier]: Okay. Do you consider yourself hard to get off?

[Mack]: Yes. I feel like it takes effort that not a lot of my partners wanted to make—put forth. It was—it felt like work like during sex with another person, versus when I do it on my own where it's for pleasure, for my own pleasure and relief. And it's not work for me, but when it's with another person, I feel like it's work for them.

[Spencier]: Hm-hmm. [Affirmative] Have you ever faked an orgasm?

[Mack]: Yes. Yeah. To please my other partner who was usually a male, to make them feel like they did it. I don't know why. It's like lying to ourselves, but I think they wanted it. They want to get me off, but don't want to actually put in the actual real effort, so I just fake it with them. It was a long time before I realized how to climax with oral. So with my ex, Sean, whenever he gave me oral, which wasn't often, I'd fake the orgasm. Honestly, half of it was because he just wasn't that good at it either, and I was just like, "All right. Let's just have sex." So I would maybe fake it in situations like that just to get it over with.

[Spencier]: Oh, what do you mean you didn't learn how to have an orgasm through oral yet? So, what is it for you to have an orgasm through oral?

[Mack]: So, I actually have to—it's a two-way street. I realized, instead of just letting them do whatever, I can actually tell them what to do, pointers, moving with it, holding their head, kind of guiding it. So that's what I mean by, like, I learned how to through oral. I never expected to get off from oral until my ex, Tim, was pretty consistent with that. But with Sean, he probably got me off two or three times, but that was over a span of five years, so I feel like that was a freak accident anyways. And he never really tried again, so that was that.

Mack conveys that her reasoning for faking orgasms was because it required work—that she could take care of her sexual needs on her own time, and that her partner didn't care enough to learn about her sexual needs. Mack mentions that she has been sexually active with herself for as long as she could remember, yet felt discomfort in experiencing an orgasm in front of a partner of over five years, and didn't feel comfortable telling him how to help her achieve one. Based on her comments, Mack performs the emotional labor of faking an orgasm with a male partner, rather than the labor of teaching them her sexual preferences. To Mack, her partner wouldn't care enough to learn, or ask her, so she didn't feel comfortable bringing it up.

However, faking an orgasm for a partner in order to "get it over with", also suggests that many women have developed techniques to both accommodate cis men in the bedroom, while creating, or navigating their access to exit the situation. In other words, faking an orgasm suggests that women developed techniques to establish agency (ending the interaction) in a way that is safe and the path of least resistance. People with vaginas may fake orgasms for a variety of reasons, but Mack's narrative allows us to examine emotional labor in a multifaceted way; namely, women's acceptance of emotional labor perpetuated traditional gender roles within a patriarchal system, but also created a safe way to navigate such.

Mack is not alone in her experience. Research shows that over half of all women have faked an orgasm at some point in their sexual lives (Hite 1976; Darling and Davidson, 1986; Wiederman, 1997; Muehlenhard and Shippee, 2010; Fahs, 2011; Fahs 2014; Opperman et al. 2014). A study by Bryan (2001) found that women faked orgasms in around 20 percent of their sexual encounters. In my study, 26 out of the 30 participants

interviewed have faked an orgasm before—for some, it was a regular or common occurrence. Past research indicates that women's explanations for faking an orgasm centered around sexual emotional labor such as: enhancing pleasure for their partner, avoiding conflict, desiring sex to end, and worrying for their partners feelings (Bryan 2001; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010; Frith 2013; Fahs 2014; Fahs and Swank, 2016). At the end of her explanation of faking orgasms, Mack reflects further, remarking that she doesn't know why she doesn't feel comfortable to communicate her needs to partners. This discomfort in communicating one's needs to their sexual partner seems to be a prominent issue that derives from the underlying anxiety participants feel in experiencing oral sex.

Jamie (27, white, cis, bisexual) describes faking orgasms with a long term cis-male partner as well, however, rather than feeling her partner is apathetic to her sexual needs, she discusses feigning pleasure to avoid hurting her partners' feelings, and, significantly, to avoid conflict and violence.

[Jamie]: But, yeah, so he–at that point in time, though, I wasn't, like, orgasming from intercourse at all. And so, like, I feel like maybe it was a pride thing or something. And I'm a very honest person. I don't like to lie about that. Back then I would just because I didn't want him to be upset.

[Spencier]: So, you would fake an orgasm?

[Jamie]: Yes.

[Spencier]: Was he the first person you ever faked an orgasm with, or have you even with your first partner?

[Jamie]: With my first partner too. It was more–It's just I didn't want to make them feel bad. And if I was sort of, like, not feeling it in the moment, but, like, I wanted to, like, make them happy, I was really more, like, just trying to make them happy in the beginning, especially, like, with my second partner

that I had, I don't think that I orgasmed from him, but maybe. I don't know. But with Carl, I especially did fake it sometimes unless he, like, went down on me, because I didn't want to deal with an argument or a fight or him breaking things. And then when we did break up–We did actually end up getting back together, and that was a mistake. I definitely learned a lot from it, though. Yeah. He just got a whole lot worse.

[Spencier]: In his aggression, his anger?

[Jamie]: Yes. When me and him broke up, it was because of his anger issues. Because besides his anger issues, I thought he was a wonderful guy, which he actually really was.

As Jamie exemplifies, even if some women feel comfortable resisting gendered stereotypes surrounding sexual pleasure, and in fact want to prioritize their pleasure, there are other barriers that don't allow women to communicate their wants and needs. Jamie shows that, sometimes, faking an orgasm is for more than protecting a partner's feelings—it can also be for personal safety or avoidance of violence (DeMaris, 1997; Morgan, Johnson, and Sigler, 2006).

Male violence is an underlying theme in many participants sexual narratives, no matter their sexual orientation. Within my study, 22 out of the 30 participants brought up sexual violence and trauma. For example, Sam (27, Palestinian, cis, straight) is newly divorced and reflects on why she feigned pleasure throughout her marriage.

[Spencier]: How do you think he would have reacted if you were honest and told him you didn't have an orgasm during like, a particular sexual interaction?

[Sam]: I think he would take it like it was a personal attack. Like, I tried to do that before, I think, like, a long time ago. And we got in like, a really bad – we used to fight really bad. Like, he wouldn't hit me or anything. But like, hold me tight and not let me go. And like, pushed me down on the bed and yell in my face. Like, and he hasn't done any of that for a long time. But he's like, you never forgave me for that stuff. And I'm like, no, I didn't. Like… I'm like, it was fucked up. I was, for the last four years, I ignored a lot of stuff because I was busy with school and work. And then I finished. And we hit quarantine. And I, every day, could not do it anymore. I used to think something was wrong with me. I'm like, maybe this is why I just don't orgasm. Like, this is it. You know? From sex. I'm like, maybe it's always just going to be toys. I didn't want to make him think something was

> wrong with him. A lot of what I do is motivated by guilt because I don't want to hurt people or make them feel bad.

Even with a partner who used anger as a tool to control Sam and deny her sexual gratification, she reflects on how she felt guilt and that something was wrong with *her*, by relying on sex toys and personal masturbation—a reflection that suggests deep emotional labor. At one point, Sam was internalizing her ex-husband's violence as a reaction to her perceived deficiency—an inability to orgasm during penetrative intercourse.

A qualitative study by Fahs and Frank (2014) found that their participants perceived masturbation as a source of joy, fun and pleasure, as well as a routine way to release tension. However, the study also found that participants associated masturbation as a threat to male dominance. Sam's interaction with her ex-husband shows how heteronormativity is intertwined with our conception of sex. Additionally, heteronormativity isn't just confining women's pleasures within the boundaries of *penetrative* sex, but also that we must passively *receive* the pleasure.

The expectation that participants felt to perform pleasure in confining and stifling ways suggests that self-stimulation, otherwise known as masturbation, can become an act of resistance. Self-stimulation allows women to not only orgasm within their sexual interactions with a partner, but also shows the respective partner what tempo, pressure, and method is best for future endeavors without anxiety of hurting their feelings through "correction". However, this may also perpetuate heteronormativity in that women are once again placed in the role of "caregiver" or "teacher", showing cis male partners how to properly stimulate themselves, while navigating their feelings and ego. Does teaching partners just place additional labor on women's shoulders, for the sake of an orgasm? Many women in my interviews are choosing to fake an orgasm over telling men how to

appropriately stimulate them. Based on their accounts, it seems there is already an inclination in these women's narratives towards placing themselves secondary in interactions with men, even if they are providing themselves orgasms in their own time.

These themes made me wonder: Are there forms of emotional labor that are easier to perform than others? It seems women make the choice to perform emotion work by faking orgasms because the labor that encompasses teaching a cis-male partner how to please them represents a deviation from traditional gender norms. There seems to be underlying shame and guilt of putting work (learning how to properly stimulate their partner) onto a male partner's shoulders. To demand their time, attention, and labor. Teaching a partner how to please you represents two forms of labor for women: the emotional labor in navigating how to teach their partner in a way that won't offend them or hurt their feelings *and* the labor in holding your partner accountable to put in the time and effort to give you the stimulation you need (not just location(s), but method, pressure, length of time, or toys).

Prior research suggests that the primary problem with orgasm gaps between men and women in bed is due to the assumption that penetrative sex is enough for women (Hite, 1987; Laqueur, 1990; Tisdale, 1994; Haavio-Mannila and Kontula, 1997; Maines, 1999; Rotermann and McKay, 2009; Reece et al, 2010; Santos-Iglesias, Byers, and Moglia, 2016). This assumption is in part is true, but these narratives tell a much more complex story: even if a partner provides clitoral stimulation, every woman has different preferences of stimulation. Without communication, women seem to be finding themselves in the same predicament: not having orgasms.

Research shows that communication in sexual interactions is an important predictor of sexual and relational satisfaction (Noland, 2010; Byers, 2011; Montesi et al., 2011; Noar et al., 2016). Yet, research also shows that many relationships, akin to the participants in this study, struggle to communicate with their sexual partners (Cupach and Metts, 1994; Noland, 2010; Byers, 2011; Rehman et al., 2018). If communication is the underlying solution to the problem, why do women and AFAB folk not communicate with their (male) partners? Perhaps there is another layer of anxiety, because by establishing accountability and education for women and AFAB folk's male partners is exhausting, uncomfortable work (and sometimes, unsafe). Communication throughout sexual interactions is inherently vulnerable, threatening, and may create feelings of self-consciousness (Cupach and Metts, 1994; Andersen et al., 2011; Rubinsky and Hosek, 2020). Additionally, women speak about the anxiety of being the focus of undivided attention, and communication with a partner demands just that: undivided attention, followed by the expectation of an (appropriate) orgasm. Consequently, it seems women are experiencing a confluence of things: performance anxiety, bound up in gender norms of "appropriate" presentation of pleasure, Western capitalist expectations of achieving something, alongside the gendered guilt of undivided time and attention placed on themselves. These intersections of gender norms, capitalistic ideology and heteronormativity then, establish a norm of embodying emotional labor.

What I found that may be surprising is that the anxiety and guilt that results in emotional labor is found within queer women's narratives as well. Destabilizing heteronormativity in the bedroom, even as a queer woman, is still an uncomfortable task—especially in interactions with cis, straight men. It is important to recognize that

gendered power relations are present for women of all sexual orientations. Heteronormativity is embedded within a patriarchal, hegemonic system, and consequently, is embodied even in queer spaces and bodies. Consequently, the underlying anxiousness women experience may stem from the gendered (power) relations that occur when interacting with a cis-male sexual partner, and the exhaustion of performing gender (West and Zimmerman, 2009).

Performance of gender, as touched on in chapter 1, is constant. As West and Zimmerman (2009) have pointed out, gender is an achieved status, not an ascribed one. Therefore, gender is inherently interactional, and defined by our social relationships and "accomplishment" of appropriate performance. To exhibit this performance in a space where women are supposed to be their most vulnerable while simultaneously always being "on" through performing the gendered sanctums of femininity (i.e. caretaking), it is no surprise women find this juggling of expectations exhausting (and consequently, find themselves filled with anxiety[25]).

Based on these narratives, not all women in my study were engaging in sexual interactions with men with the expectation of achieving orgasm. They are creating their own orgasms at home through masturbation. Therefore, some of these women aren't feeling necessarily "unsatisfied" with men in sexual interactions because they aren't expecting an orgasm. They're expecting sexual pleasure, sure, but not orgasms. They are there for the intimacy, or as Emory remarks, for sexual pleasure that doesn't necessarily

[25] Women are now expected to fill too many roles of both the "sexualized woman" that produces an appropriate kind of orgasm that is akin to a man's (penetrative, and if not, then stimulation of clitoris is expected to produce a FAST orgasm), while also being a traditionally gendered "caretaker" (ensuring their partner feels properly aroused and comfortable). Are women experiencing a newfound role strain? As expectations in the bedroom now expect women to have both the "orgasm imperative" in a space where they are still expected to provide primary emotional labor for their partner? Which for some women, may lead to anxiety and them pushing away sexual attention?

result in orgasms. Yet, as will be discussed in the following section, when queer women are interacting with women, they are not faking orgasms and they are having orgasms. And if they aren't, they feel comfortable telling their partners that they aren't. Although there is a clear gender differentiation in how queer women are sexually interacting with varying genders, the data shows that even queer women are embodying gendered sexual scripts as to what sex encompasses. This is interesting, since queer women are resisting sexual scripts in many ways by simply sleeping with women, yet continue heteronormativity in many ways when sexually interacting with men. The following section will examine select sections from queer women's narratives that speak to this navigation of gender in sexual interactions.

QUEER WOMEN AND GENDERED SEXUAL SCRIPTS

The majority of the women interviewed for this study identify as bisexual, pansexual, or queer (24 out of 30). For many of these women, they conveyed that their sexual difficulties happen with straight men. The data suggests queer women seem uncomfortable to push back against heteronormativity within sexual interactions with straight men, and continue to embody many of the gendered sexual scripts discussed in chapter 1. Again, sexual scripts are a point of interaction between gender structures and the individual, shaping beliefs, behaviors, and even desires (Tolman, 2002; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Gavey, 2005). For example, traditional sexual scripts for men encompass having high sex drives, initiating sex, desiring recreational sex over relationships, and being sexually skilled (Byers, 1995; Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003). Gendered sexual scripts

give us meaning behind how to understand and act in sexual situations (e.g., men want sex and women want love; men pursue sex at all times and women are gatekeepers), that frame and reify traditional gender norms and heterosexuality (Connell, 2002; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009). Consequently, gendered scripts are powerful tools that shape how people choose to sexually interact with one another, while maintaining traditional gender expectations (Laws and Schwartz 1977; Wiederman, 2005).

What is different when queer women sleep with other genders such as women over when they sleep with men? As discussed above, deconstructing traditional gendered sexual scripts is derived from more than simply paying more attention to the clitoris, as there seems to be an underlying anxiety attached to undivided sexual attention. Why? Brunskell-Evans (2016:62) argues that:

> Within patriarchal social, family and workplace environments, women are frequently expected to fulfil a 'social lubricant' function—facilitating men's activities and interactions, for example—in ways that are generally taken-for-granted and unreciprocated. This generally unspoken yet powerfully-exerted expectation indicates an assumption that a woman's time and right to determine her own actions and priorities are both violable: she is expected to participate in a process of self-abnegation in order that men's self-hood is supported and maintained.

Brunskell-Evans' (2016) argument is clear: the patriarchy cannot be separated from women's interactions with men, and women are understood as objects to facilitate cis men's comfort. It is not surprising, then, that many women may feel anxious navigating sexual pleasure that centers around their own desire, and may deviate from traditional gendered scripts. However, how do *queer* women resist or embody these gendered scripts in sexual behavior? The following interaction with Emory (25, white, queer, cis) encompasses a reflection on ways in which she began to learn and embody

gendered understandings of sexual pleasure. To conduct the interview, I went to her house as she was cooking breakfast before her shift later that afternoon.

[Spencier]: What was your first or few moments of understanding sexuality, and how was it transformed throughout your life based on that?

[Emory]: Yeah. Honestly, there was a little bit of early influence from Omegle. I don't know if you remember that terrifying website. So, it's like, a chat site where you just, a random person from somewhere else pops up when you log on. And at like, sleepovers with my friends, you would log onto Omegle. And there would just be a random dude like, jacking off at the opposite of you. And so, kind of, early on, there was a bit of thought that with any sexual interaction that was with a man was usually going to be basically like, this is his viewing pleasure. This is for him. Whereas when I saw things that were focused on female pleasure, I was much more interested and like, I believed that there would be some kind of payoff for me, I guess. Like, I kind of, have continued that thought process into adulthood where like, I don't go into sex with a guy and expect any kind of orgasm from that. Like, nine times out of ten I'm going to assume that nothing's going to happen. Might be fun. There's plenty of things that can be fun that do not necessarily include an orgasm. That's usually what my goal is though if you're having sex. That seems like a natural thing. But, kind of, where like – I mean, whatever year that scary movie came out, and there's that scene where she's, you know, having sex with her boyfriend. And he like, cums and Anna Faris is like, stuck on the ceiling in jiz. Like, which obviously is very unrealistic. But at that age, I was like, oh, the only thing that's going to happen from this is that the man will cum. That's like, that was, kind of, how I looked at it. And the basis of my mom's discussion with me was also, was our where do babies come from version. So…

[Spencier]: So, biological.

[Emory]: Yeah.

[Spencier]: And so, have you ever had an orgasm being with a guy?

[Emory]: I can't point to a specific one. So, I want to say no. But I feel like there are levels even when I'm like [pause] Like, I definitely just came like, with just myself. Like, there are certain things where—there's levels. I also feel like I don't have any, like, a huge significant emotional

connection to many of the guys that I've ever had sex with. A lot of it is like, this is to help my self-esteem, basically, because like, this regular dude thinks I'm cute enough to put his dick in.

[Spencier]: Is emotional aspects important for you in regards to pleasure?

[Emory]: Yes, definitely. I mean, I like, consistently have found it easier to have an orgasm with a woman. But I also wouldn't say that that certainly is like [pause] It's not like, every time it happens because it was with a woman, so. That's important there as well.

Emory is throwing some peppers into her scrambled eggs as she considers where she learned about sexuality. As she navigates her thought process, she brings up several times that even as a queer woman, she conceptualizes interactions with men to be about *his* pleasure. She goes into sexual interactions with men *expecting* to not climax. When she reflects on why this is, she refers to media clips and sex education of her childhood, conveying this sentiment of sex being for male pleasure. I enjoyed hearing Emory speak to the fluidity of pleasure, in that sexual interactions can be enjoyable and sought after, even if orgasms are not on the table. In other words, Emory actively queers the understanding of sex by deconstructing the notion that sexual interactions must produce orgasms. Sexual pleasure can be measured by a multitude of things other than orgasms.

However, Emory admits the complexity of her understanding of pleasure—she finds that her sexual interactions with men that yield no orgasms are imbedded within an underlying desire to be "wanted" by men, despite her preference for women. Emory's reflection on her sexual behavior shows how embodiment of identities and power can play out in the bedroom. Even when Emory queers her own understanding of sexual pleasure, she finds herself prioritizing men's pleasure because she has been taught that they are a priority. Does this lessen the powerful agency Emory exhibited in defining her sexual pleasure as more than production of orgasms? Does Emory do this to "explain

away" why she tolerates zero orgasms with men? I don't think so. I think queer women are embedded within a powerfully heteronormative system that subconsciously creeps into their bedrooms, personified within many of their interactions with men. Yet, they are finding ways to cope, to resist, to bend, to push back. Emory's male partners' failure to provide her orgasms doesn't nullify the sexual pleasure she experiences with them. If life stories tell us anything, it is that lives are not singular themes. We live life in multiplicity and in intersectional ways. Emory's reflection on her sexual experiences paints a picture of *both* resistance and tolerance.

Taylor (27, white, bisexual/queer, cis) on the other hand, explains an ease of communication when she has sex with women that isn't felt with men:

[Spencier]: And how would you compare and contrast your experiences with men versus women sexually? Would you say they're more or less the same, are they different and if so in what ways, in regards to the actual like sexual interaction.

[Taylor]: Um, I would say like if I'm just with a woman I would say it's probably a little more intimate feeling to me, um, sometimes I guess, not always. But um, I feel like with women it's just much more of this feminine touch to it. Almost in a way, more simple and easier to navigate those waters. I feel like sometimes, with a female, we just know what each other—I feel like we're pretty confident in like what the other person wants and we're very—like even for the very first time, like we were both talking about 'this feels good, this doesn't feel good,' like 'this is what I want, this is what I don't want.' And I feel like with women that's always come very natural to me, to just kind of say like 'I'm enjoying this' or 'I'm not enjoying this' or like 'can we do this instead?' And when I've been in those situations with a woman I feel like I've just been able to communicate with them better and kind of just express myself a little bit better, for my needs. So, I feel like that's probably the biggest difference from men to women, because I've definitely—I feel like it was easier for me to be vulnerable faster with women. Does that make sense?

[Spencier]: Yeah.

[Taylor]: It was much easier for me to like immediately tell women what I want and what I need, whereas with like men I'm like this is the first time I met you

> and I can't say shit to you. Like, we're just gonna have sex and then like if it's good, it's good, if it's bad, it's bad. And I'm not able to communicate that as easily.

Taylor stresses the importance of communication that results in an "ease" in navigating sexual interactions with women. She makes a point to say that this won't happen when she has a one-night stand with men, for example, and instead will just "deal" with whatever she's getting—good or bad. She mentions that she finds it easier to be "vulnerable" with women, and that she can get to this point of vulnerability with women faster. To feel entitled to sexual pleasure and feel comfortable expressing her desires.

What does it mean to be vulnerable? For Taylor, vulnerability seems to mean expressing preferences, desires, boundaries, and overall communication. For Taylor, the very thing that may seem like emotional labor when interacting with a man, seems "natural" when with a woman. Why? Perhaps, when sexually interacting with a woman, Taylor doesn't feel like she is performing traditional gender norms, and therefore doesn't feel the pressure of actively deviating from them when conveying sexual preferences. Another possibility is that Taylor may not feel the additional emotional labor and pressure of protecting a woman's feelings or ego when communicating her sexual preferences. Why doesn't Taylor, similar to other participants, feel like women's feelings or ego need to be protected in sexual interactions? Why does Taylor feel comfortable communicating her needs—in eliciting a prioritization of her pleasure—with women? Similar to Emory, Taylor seems to find an easing of patriarchal norms in the bedroom when having sex with women. A freedom from gender performance. From anxiety. A sense of safety. Perhaps this explains why in a study within the U.S, lesbian women had a

higher rate of orgasms than bisexual women—because lesbian women aren't sexually interacting with cis-men[26] (Frederick et al, 2018).

Pat touches on the queering of gender performance in one of her first sexual interactions with another woman. She conveys that it's "different" from her previous experiences with men:

[Spencier]: And how was that? Can you talk me through that like first-time experience with a woman?

[Pat]: Sure. It was nice because she was much shorter than I was and it was kind of like my first feeling of like, I mean, I already was tall so I had, you know, protective feelings. But like to be like this big bear protecting this small person was really interesting and it was like super cute. She was like adorable and like getting physical maybe like we would—pardon me, I'm going to cough again. Yeah, so, holding hands at the movie theater was like a big rush because instead of like the previous experiences where I was less in power, I guess, not exactly what I mean. But—yeah, I don't know. But I felt—it was just a very different experience from what I felt before and it was very comfortable and I enjoyed being with her. When things would progress further like sexually and we would make out or go further, like touching, it was pleasurable, it was just different. It was the same pleasure, I enjoyed it, it was just different from anything I experienced before. And I really knew then that like, "Okay, so, I do like both of these things."

[Spencier]: Hm-hmm [affirmative]. Could you compare and contrast your sexual experiences between men and women? And of course, I guess I'm asking this in a very binary sense. So, I am very aware that you might also include people who are gender fluid, nonbinary so, compare and contrast your experiences with cishet men and others, if you will.

[Pat]: *I think that through my good experiences just with communication, like expressing what I want or a partner knowing what I want and remembering what I want.* I've had more—like it's better with women,

[26] It is worth noting that one can identify as a lesbian, and have had, or have, sexual interactions with cis-men. Sexual attraction is fluid, ever changing, and is distinguishable from sexual behavior (in that one can have sexual interactions with someone without sexual or romantic attraction). This statement is merely noting that lesbian folk typically, or more commonly, do not sexually interact with cis-men, which may result in a higher rate of orgasms.

> maybe listen a little bit better. And then, not saying that with the men I've been with partner-wise, that they don't but I just think overall, I've had to—the communication was there but I didn't have to do as much communicating with women then I had to do with men. Like I feel like I had to really, really tell them like, "Okay, do this here at this time now and then we can do this." I just like, overall better partners women-wise. [emphasis added]

Pat retracts her use of the word "power" when referring to having less power in her interactions with men; however, one could suggest that in her formative sexual experience with a woman she felt powerful and at ease. As Pat works through her experiences with women, she touches on the ease of communication.

The data implies that for some of these queer-identified women, it may seem easier to orgasm and not fake it with women because they already feel safe and farther away from the heteronormative constructions of sex, and therefore more comfortable to vocalize their needs and wants without it feeling like "work" or "labor". Safety in this context means that women may not feel the gendered power differentiations they normally may feel when with cis men. Another possibility to consider is that women are simply raised in a very gendered way that allows a more fine-tuned skill set to enact healthy communication in the bedroom with one another that results in higher sexual satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

This chapter worked through a number of themes raised by the data that evoked forms of gendered sexual scripts and emotional labor, such as denying oral sex, faking orgasms, and performing particular forms of "appropriate" pleasure (not squirting). Throughout the participants' stories, anxiety is embedded within their sexual interactions.

This anxiety is driving women to deny or not feel comfortable enough to enjoy sexual attention. Whether this anxiety is a result, mediator, or precursor to gendered sexual scripts and emotional labor, is not certain. For example, does enactment or performance of gendered sexual scripts result in feeling of anxiety for women? Or perhaps, does feeling anxiety merely accompany the enactment of emotional labor? Does anxiety propel women to enact emotional labor? The data and analysis suggest a combination of all of these.

Women and AFAB folk seem to be bringing not just emotional labor, but an overarching cognitive labor, or mental load, into the bedroom. Anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, deciding among these options, and monitoring results. It is a managerial mindset that is labor in itself. Take for example, the picture Emma paints in "The mental load: A feminist comic" of a woman trying to feed the baby, make a drink for her guest, and cook dinner, while the husband sits in the living room with the guest, drinking a beer. And as the pot overflows, the baby throws food on the floor and the glass spills, the husband comes in and asks "What did you do?! Why didn't you just ask for help?" The issue, or course, is not the overflowing pot, or any other resulting mishap, but rather, that the husband expects the wife to be the manager and to delegate tasks. Being responsible for telling someone what to do, when to do it, and, most importantly, having to ask, rather than them knowing what needs to be done, or even asking, and then doing it is exhausting. It is a significant component to emotional labor and simply hard work. Therefore, often, women will simply not ask.

Now transfer that same idea into the bedroom during sexual interactions. To be the manager—to carry the brunt of the "mental load" or cogitative labor, means that by

the time many women or AFAB folk are expected to relax and "receive pleasure," they may not be, and rather than explicitly ask or tell their partner what to do, they give up and don't bother. In a collaborative, equitable space, they shouldn't have to ask or tell their sexual partner how to pleasure them. A sexual partner knows to ask, to check in, in order to discover what their partner wants, rather than assume. These "check ins" seem to be happening in my interviews when women sleep with women and when queer folk sleep with other queer folk. They ask. They share the labor of learning, navigating, and listening.

As the findings illustrate, the relationship between the participant's anxiety, emotional labor, and cognitive labor cannot be separated from power. It has also been shown that the underlying driving force of gender roles and scripts finds itself creeping into the bedroom in many ways. For Quinn, it is faking an orgasm and the expectation of teaching her partner how to appropriately stimulate her later in their relationship. For Emory, it is seeking the approval and attention of the male gaze even if she prefers sexual interactions with women. These participants' sexual experiences illuminate how, within queer AFAB folk's lives, the patriarchy and traditional gender norms are creating spaces of discomfort and lack of entitlement to pleasure within sexual interactions with cis men.

This chapter provides a unique examination to the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles, inclusive of queer women's sexual lives. In many of these narratives, heteronormativity is both perpetuated and critiqued by women and AFAB folks' sexual interactions, decision-making, and reflections. A seemingly easy answer to many of their sexual struggles is the need for communication. However, these narratives have made it clear that they:1) feel like no one wants to hear or care about their preferences, 2) they

feel anxious and uncomfortable to broach the topic, 3) they have broached the topic, and have experienced anger or violence 4) they have internalized their sexual experiences as a personal problem, and finally, 5) they don't want to place the burden or labor on their sexual partner.

The following chapter will turn to examine how this simultaneous "push and pull" of resistance and perpetuation of heteronormativity occurs in an intersectional, interactional manner. How do narrations of gender in the bedroom look different for women and AFAB individuals of different body sizes? For women and AFAB persons of difference races? The participants' stories of their sexual histories allow a unique perspective, in that it allows us to see the embodiment of larger social institutions play out in a seemingly private, interactional way. The impacts of gender, race, and body size can be examined through how these participants navigate and experience sexual interactions. How do they perpetuate gender roles when they don't prioritize their own orgasms, and how may they be simultaneously be deconstructing, or queering, forms of sexual pleasure when they love their bodies? What does all of this have to do with gender roles and power? The following chapter examines these questions.

CHAPTER 4: INTER(SEX)TIONS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES THAT INFLUENCE SEXUAL EXPERIENCE

As discussed in Chapter 2, sexual scripts are a point of interaction between gender structures and the individual, shaping beliefs, behaviors, and even desires (Tolman, 2002; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Gavey, 2005). Sexual scripts create a sexual double standard (men are encouraged to be sexually promiscuous while women are expected to be selective and sexually demure), as well as pose outright danger to women's safety (men have a 'right' or 'entitlement' to sex) (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty, 2010; Sanchez, Fetterold, and Rudman, 2012). In addition, upholding gender scripts of women being sexually submissive creates a lack of communication and inability to express themselves sexually (Sandchez, Fetterold, and Rudman, 2012), as well as internalize the demure, submissive role (Impett and Peplau, 2003; Kiefer, Sanchez, Kalinka, and Ybarra, 2006). Consequently, gendered scripts are powerful tools that shape how people choose to sexually interact with one another, while maintaining traditional gender expectations (Laws and Schwartz 1977; Wiederman, 2005). Therefore, sexual scripts perpetuate gender inequality.

This chapter looks at how sexual scripts are enacted and shaped by intersections of social structure, particularly gendered 1) body image, and 2) sexual assault. Gender proves to be the dominant structure, whether embodied or forced upon the participants, that influences how sexual scripts are executed and depicted. Throughout the chapter, the participants provide moments of both acceptance and resistance of gendered sexual scripts. However, the intersections in which they navigate gendered norms in the

bedroom, whether through the lens of body size, racialized genitals, or overcoming sexual assault, impacts how these participants reflect and internalize their entitlement to pleasure.

BODY IMAGE AND BARRIERS TO ENTITLEMENT TO PLEASURE

Body image has its own category within my guided interview questions, yet was a constant in participants narratives throughout all areas of the conversation. Previous research such as Sanchez and Kiefer (2006) find that there is a relationship between body shame, sexual pleasure, and sexual problems that are mediated by sexual self-consciousness during physical intimacy. Other research finds that women who are more satisfied with their body image report higher rates of sexual activity, orgasm, and trying new sexual behaviors (Murstein and Holden, 1979; Faith and Schare, 1993; Ackard, Kearney-Cooke, and Peterson, 2000). However, these studies look at heterosexual men and women.

Genital Panic: Body Hair, and Smell

In the select research on the topic of queer women and body image, there are contrasting views as to whether one's sexuality impacts the experience of body image. Some researchers have suggested that lesbians may be less likely to have poor body image, due to the tendency to occupy more inclusive spaces that promote gender fluidity and diverse body presentation, as well as a rejection of the male gaze (Rothblum, 1994; Hill and Fischer, 2008). Studies by Alvy (2013) and Polimeni et al. (2009) supports this

theory, suggesting that lesbian women may have lower rates of poor body image. However, Dworkin (1989) has argued that lesbian women are influenced by the same processes of heteronormativity and gender socialization as straight women are. Select studies support Dworkin's theory, with results showing no significant different between sexual orientations and its relation to body dissatisfaction (Peplau et al., 2009; Yean et al., 2013). All these studies, however, examine lesbian women, and forgo any analysis as to how this may impact bisexual, pansexual, and queer women. This is not surprising, as researchers often create monosexual, binary, static identities (gay/lesbian/heterosexual) that invalidates the bisexual and/or pansexual identity, and consequently perpetuates bisexual/pansexual erasure (Barker and Landridge, 2008; Gonzalez, 2017).

There is one study, however, conducted by Hayfield, et al (2013) which addresses this gap in the literature. This study explores a spectrum of sexual orientations and their relationship to their body hair, body image, and use of cosmetics. Hayfield, et al (2013) found no significant differences in body satisfaction, but found that lesbian and bisexual women maintained more positive attitudes toward body hair. In my own study, I believe there is anxiety found in queer women's perceptions of their bodies, akin to straight women, particularly when focalized around their vaginas[27], and that this anxiety impacted their fulfillment in sexual experiences. 27 participants brought up some form of displeasure, anxiety, or distaste in relation to their vagina, whether inclusive of genital hair, smell, taste, and image.

[27] When using vagina, I am using it in laymen's terms. This was discussed with each participant, in that it was inclusive of the vaginal canal, labia ("lips"), clitoris, and so forth.

Mack (28, Syrian, cis, bisexual), for example, refuses to receive oral from her partners if she feels that she isn't "ready", which to her means shaved and freshly showered:

[Spencier]: How often would you say you give oral in comparison to the amount of oral you receive?

[Mack]: Mm, that's a good question. Definitely a big difference, I'd say, but I think that's more on my part.

[Spencier]: Difference in what?

[Mack]: In me giving more than receiving, and I'm saying it's on me mostly because I'm not always comfortable with myself down there. And if I feel like I'm not prepared or I'm not ready, like I didn't shave or I didn't—I worked all day. *I usually don't let someone perform oral on me if I'm not feeling up to par on my standards for my vagina.* [emphasis added]

Keep in mind that earlier, Mack admitted that her primary way to experience an orgasm with a partner is through oral sex. Mack is quite literally denying herself an orgasm due to the anxiety of how her vagina will be perceived. Why? Select research argues that women's perception of their bodies, particularly their genitals, as "unfresh" or "unclean" is an internalized byproduct of the objectification of women (Roberts and Waters, 2004). As for why women may internalize and exhibit a self-surveillance of their bodies, Roberts and Waters (2004:10) remark that: "Habitual body monitoring is actually a survival strategy in a sexually objectifying culture." Mack seems to be prioritizing the presentation of self and her sexual partners interpretation of her body over her potential sexual gratification. However, Mack's prioritization of "the presentation of self," is embedded within a system of patriarchal power.

Mack continues to criticize her body:

[Spencier]: What are your feelings or thoughts about your body?

[Mack]: I'm very insecure. I'm still working on self-esteem. I have a lot of problems with that, mostly because of my childhood. I'm starting to like myself, but I've always been insecure about weird little things like my feet or my big veiny hands or my nose or my hairiness. It was a lot of little things like that, that collectively just made me really insecure, but it's a work in progress.

[Spencier]: So, what are your feelings and thoughts about your vagina, vulva, clit, the entire area down there, like body hair near your vagina or things like that?

[Mack]: Hm-hmm. [Affirmative] I remember the first time I actually saw my vagina in a mirror. I was really young. I was a kid. This is so funny. I don't know why I didn't have underwear on, and I was in one of those kid nightgowns where they're—they have cartoons on them. And I was swinging on this door. It was a door like this. There was a mirror on it, and I was a little monkey, so I was swinging on it like this with my feet on the door, on the mirror, and me holding on to the handle. *And, boop! I took a peep, and there she was. That was the first time I saw it, and I was enamored.* I was like, oh my God, is that what it looks like? I never thought to look before.

But it took me a long time to even get comfortable with someone performing oral on me. I just feel like some of the guys that I've been with early on made it seem like vaginas aren't the best thing to look at, so I always felt insecure about that. And now that I'm 28, I'm realizing they all look the same. They're all beautiful. I don't know why guys were so scared of them besides sticking their penis in them. *When it comes to hair, I am really hairy, and that is one thing that I'm pretty insecure about because I usually, when I do have sex, hopefully, I shave my hair down there.* And it grows back really fast, and there's always that awkward, stubbly, prickly part of the growth that I hate so much. I have to shave it. I can't let it go loose. *It's way too much.* And I shave my butt, my butthole. [emphasis added]

Mack mentions that her concerns and anxiousness surrounding the perception of her vagina stem from formative sexual experiences with men. In her narrative, you can trace her first experience seeing her vagina and being "enamored", to being uncomfortable and "insecure" as guys convey it isn't the best thing to look at, to now re-learning her body (and perhaps, other women's bodies), to feel that all vaginas are

"beautiful". Despite Mack's work towards self-love of her vagina, she still admits to consistent maintenance of her body hair before sexual interactions. The insecurity Mack feels around her body hair aligns with what current research finds on attitudes towards women's body hair—that there is an expectation for women to be hairless (Tiggemann and Kenyon, 1998; Tiggemann and Lewis, 2004; Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008). In addition to her concern over her body hair, Mack's negative image of her body and vagina align with what research has found to be a "genital panic" among women. A qualitative study by Fahs (2013) found women evoking descriptions of anxiety, need for control, and internalized sexism when describing their relationship to their genitals.

Fin (30, white, questioning, queer/homoromantic[28]) describes a similar development of her body image throughout the years akin to Mack:

[Spencier]: So, I'm moving into a section about body image and the self. What are your feelings or thoughts about your vagina, like body hair near your vagina?

[Fin]: Mm-hmm. I feel like, now, I'm very confident. I feel good about my body. I feel good about my body hair, which is something that was a source of stress when I was younger. I remember the first time that it had ever struck me that I needed to do anything about it—I was so young. It's so weird to think about it. I was in sixth or seventh grade, and I remember walking into the bathroom at school, and my friend was talking to my other friend about this girl they know who had gotten fingered for the first time. And they were like, "I can't believe that she let that happen when she hadn't even cleaned up down there. It was like a jungle. Isn't that so gross?" And I was like, oh, no. This is something that I'm supposed to be aware of and making sure that that doesn't ever happen. So, then I was hyper-aware about shaving, and it was also weird because I got armpit hair very, very young. *I think I was probably in fourth or fifth grade, and my mom was adamant that I needed to do something to remove it. But I also had really sensitive skin there, so I would always have razor bumps,*

[28] Fin is "queer/pansexual" in terms of sexual interaction, but is homoromantic, in that she is only interested in relationships with other queer folk, primarily other femmes.

and it would be broken out. Growing up, it was so important to me that I was removing this body hair, and now, I just don't. Sometimes, I shave my legs, but that's about it. But I remember—remembering that and then hearing my friend make this comment about how *you cannot have your first sexual experience while you have hair or everyone in the school is going to know about it, and everyone's going to think it's gross, so I had this crazy feeling. But at the time, I had also never looked at my vagina. It was a thing that was supposed to be off limits, and nobody's supposed to touch that, and I, for some reason, thought that that extended to myself.* So, it was just this thing that was down there that I had never looked at, and I hoped it was normal, but I also felt like it would be weird to check it out. After I had kids, I definitely—I think it's probably due to the partner that I had kids with, but I definitely have a lot of nervousness about having sexual interactions after having children. So, it's like, does it look different? Is it weird compared to what women's bodies look like before they have kids? *Is it less able to be pleasurable for another person?* But since then, I've kind of gotten over all of that. And my last partner and I, we're still really good friends, and they're actually my roommate, but they were very helpful to me *in coming to terms with the fact that my body's still a good body and that it still performs the things that it's supposed to do. And it also gave me a lot of space to explore myself.* We were in an open relationship, so I just had a lot more space to do things about myself, and I think that I learned a lot about my body not only by being with them but by the space that I was given by being with them.

[Spencier]: Yeah. Did you ever take a mirror and investigate or look at it or—

[Fin]: Probably not until after I had kids. I don't think that it's something that I did before that. I don't know. I feel like even as I started to become a sexual being, I still was very worried about doing things that were weird or not normal, and it wasn't until— I mean, once I had kids, it was like most of the shame was gone. Thirty people have been in a doctor's office staring at my vagina while I gave birth, so it was just like, oh, now I guess I can look at it. The weirdness has already happened.

[Spencier]: What about having people go down on you in your first formative experiences?

[Fin]: *I was definitely nervous about smell, and I also had this weird thing when I was like 17 and I was just starting to experience sexuality. Something that I was very nervous about was vaginal discharge and just any kind of moisture down there. I felt like it was not normal, and it wasn't supposed to be there, and I thought that people would think it was weird.* I

> remember being—before I had had a sexual experience but once I had started to recognize myself as a sexual being, not only would I be really intentional about shaving and everything, but I would use baby powder and stuff to make sure that I wasn't moist down there. Now, I look back at it, and that's so weird. Vaginas are supposed to be moist. I thought that's what they do. So I remember that being a huge source of stress was that I had too much discharge or that it wasn't normal to be wet. [emphasis added]

Fin speaks to experiencing shame, anxiety, and being nervous around her body hair and vagina. The management of body hair and vaginal discharge, which includes constant pain (razor bumps, burns) and vaginal discomfort (baby powder) were mechanisms for Fin to manage a source of stress about herself. Therefore, traditional gendered constructions of beauty are impacting many of these women's sexual behaviors; particularly the presentation of self for others approval and comfort, even at the expense of one's own comfort or sexual pleasure.

Where do women learn and embody these negative perceptions about their body hair and perception of their vagina? For Fin, she addresses gleaning information from her school peers in the bathroom, and her friend remarking on the importance of shaving before her first sexual interaction with a boy. Fin lacked educational information to use from either her family or her school system to make informed judgements about her body—to the point of worrying over the moistness of her vagina, and consequently throwing baby powder on it. Throughout Fin's struggles and anxiety over her vagina and body over the years, her most recent partner serves as a point of resistance in her narrative.

Fin's last relationship illustrates a way in which a social relationship assisted Fin in forming a healthier relationship to her body, particularly as she works through her anxieties of having a vagina that has birthed two children and its ability to pleasure others. Interestingly, this healthy past relationship Fin refers to is with a queer, nonbinary person.

As addressed in the last chapter, it seems folk in my study feel more comfortable communicating their needs and desires with other queer folk or other women, which can be seen even as they navigate their complexity of feelings towards their own bodies.

Nevertheless, research shows that women consistently perceive their vagina in a negative light (Braun and Wilkinson, 2001; Berman and Windecker, 2008), and as Fin and Mack show, it is a source of great anxiety that leads to body modification and denial of oral sex.

Genital Panic and Race

This anxiety or "genital panic", however, extends beyond sexist distaste for the vagina or body hair: it also encompasses embodied racism and distaste in one's own skin color. Sam (27, Palestinian, cis, straight) sits crossed-legged on my couch in her work clothes, sipping a water and, in a low, quiet voice, quickly narrates me through her self-image of her body and genitals, as if it comes spewing out of her without a second thought:

[Spencier]: What are your feelings or thought about your body?

[Sam]: I don't – my body from a distance like, in a mirror or whatever, like, I like my body. I don't like my skin. I have bacne. And like whenever I shave, like, I get really bad bumps like, no matter what. But I'm also too lazy to go get it waxed or whatever. *And then like, my perineum like, vaginal/anal area because I'm Middle Eastern is dark. And I find that, like… I know that that is like that because I'm Middle Eastern or whatever. But I just don't find it attractive. I get nervous when like, Scott wanted to like, go down on me. Because I didn't want him to like, look at that area. Like, I just… I Googled like, if there was like, bleaching I could do, or like, laser or something. Because, like, I'm uncomfortable with it. But I know that's just, you know. But then you watch porn, the misconception of bodies. Like, their bodies all look clear. And their little areas are pink, and like—you know what I mean?*

[Spencier]: Hm-hmm. [affirmative] When did you first like, look and investigate and explore your vagina?

[Sam]: A long time ago. When I was like, 14, I took a mirror and looked down there. Because that's when I was starting to talk to dudes on the internet and they would ask for fucked up pictures. And I'm like, no, I'm not doing that. *Like, it doesn't look good. I'm like, I don't know what you think you're going to see, but it doesn't look good down there. [Laughs] And I have, I guess, bigger labia that like, stick out and stuff. It, like, that makes me uncomfortable.*

[Spencier]: And then, what about your thoughts about how your vagina smells or tastes?

[Sam]: *I used to be afraid that I smelled.* But I started taking this thing called like, lactobacillus acidophilus which is like, a probiotic. And it's because I used to take a lot of antibiotics. So, that would like, throw off my pH and give me a lot of yeast infections. So, I started taking that. And I feel like that's helped. And then like, sexually, Scott and I would like, talk dirty and stuff like that. He'd be like, yeah, touch yourself. Yeah. Taste yourself. I don't think I taste bad, I guess. And that turned me on when he would do that shit. [Laughs] So, I get, like, I'm getting more comfortable. Still don't want to see it. But, like, you can look. [emphasis added]

Sam compares her vagina to what she sees online in porn, reflecting that her genitals are too dark, her labia too large, and therefore, considers it unattractive. Sam's point of vaginal comparison, porn, idealizes hairlessness and labias that are tucked away, essentially prepubescent (Cokal, 2007; Schick, Rima, and Calabrese, 2011; Rodrigues, 2012). What is not addressed in this research, however, is that these representations of cis women's vaginas are not only objectifying, but almost exclusively representing white bodies. Sam has internalized the racism displayed in porn that an attractive vagina looks a very particular way: hairless, tucked in, and white.

Like Fin, Sam discusses extreme measures to "manage" her body to appease others, inclusive of investigating bleaching. Research by Rowen et. al, (2018) shows that

in a nationally representative survey of non-incarcerated folk within the U.S, women were less likely to report genital dissatisfaction if they were older, identified as Black and lived within the Northeastern or Midwestern United States. Interestingly, there was no association between genital dissatisfaction and gender of sexual partner.

My participants such as Sam are from the Midwest of the U.S (primarily northeast Ohio), and for many women, they tell me a story of working towards "overcoming" majority of their anxiety surrounding their genitals. What fails to be considered in these representative surveys, however, is that women such as Mack and Sam are Middle Eastern, and indeed live an existence as a person of color, yet, in many representative surveys, they are considered white. Sam and Mack both tell stories of struggling with their body hair and self-image about their genitals in a way that may be unique to their experiences as brown women navigating a society that privileges white women's bodies. Consequently, it is important to consider the ways that bodily anxieties extend inequality beyond traditional gendered scripts, into systems of racism and white privilege as well.

Body Size

As the narratives show, genital panic included smell, taste, color, body hair, and shape. However, another factor that is brought up consistently in women's stories, is body size. Parker (35, Latinx, questioning, pansexual) is a former professional dominatrix, single mother, who is currently unemployed due to medical health reasons and the Covid pandemic. Throughout her sexual history, Parker weaves body image as a central theme that impacts her sexual experiences. When I asked her about the first time

she had penetrative sex, Parker volunteers that she refuses oral sex due to her body image:

[Spencier]: What about the first time then?

[Parker]: He was huge. It was incredibly painful. It was missionary style.

[Spencier]: Was there any foreplay?

[Parker]: Not really. All the lights were on. It was not what I would hope for**.** *I never ever, ever wanted anybody to go down on me. I had huge fears of that. Huge. Even when I was in the best shape of my life, maybe a buck ten, solid muscle, I was terrified of somebody seeing me from that angle. Absolutely terrified. I was a very chubby kid. I still have huge body dysmorphia issues.* I was called pig, whale. Every fat shaming name in the book from the time I was very little. My mom had me go on diets and exercise plans from the time I was ten on. Oh yeah. There was a lot. Oral sex was never something I was interested in.

[Spencier]: So oral at that point, you weren't interested because…

[Parker]: *My belly. I was afraid of someone having to look up at me past my belly. Or my fupa being the biggest part of that experience. I told myself I didn't like it even though I didn't know if I liked it or not. And I would just tell people, oh I don't like that. So, I would be in control of it instead of me just being deathly afraid they would think I was fat.* [emphasis added]

Parker denies oral sex from many of her formative sexual partners, and admits to telling them she "didn't like it", despite admitting later in our interview that it is the primary way for her to achieve an orgasm with another partner. Research shows that body image is known to be related to sexual satisfaction, in that healthy body image correlates to both higher rates of, and more satisfying sex (Sanchez and Kiefer, 2007; Woertman and van den Brink, 2012; Traen, Markovic, and Kvalem, 2016; van den Brink et al, 2018). This finding makes sense, as many sexual acts typically entails an intimate moment where people are commonly unclothed and very close, touching bodies. One could guess that the more confident and satisfied one feels about their body image, the

higher likelihood they feel comfortable allowing another person to explore and experience their body without added anxieties about the perception of their body.

This relationship between sexual satisfaction and body image is experienced throughout the spectrum of genders studied[29], however, appears most prevalent within women (Satinsky et al, 2012; Traen et al, 2016). Why? A theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) coined "objectification theory", suggests that society treating women as sexual objects results in women treating themselves as an object to be scrutinized and evaluated by others (self-objectification). For example, Parker's consistent monitoring of her body and how it is perceived by others, even if it meant literally denying herself sexual pleasure or satisfaction.

The body objectification Parker experiences trickles into her current sex life, despite her work towards self-love and care. She has just finished showing me her professional dominatrix toy collection she uses on clients, and her face lights lit up as she described the sincere love she has for teaching BDSM courses. She goes into a poetic, passionate trance when describing the uses of sexual play for working through trauma, and the ways safe BDSM play has transformed her life in a way clinical therapy never could. Yet, as we re-center her story on her own sexual experiences, she sighs and physically deflates—her shoulders sag back down, and her brow furrows—and she begins to tell me a recent sexual interaction she had with a casual partner when smoking weed:

[Parker]: So, when I finally got the dress off… I'm never embarrassed of my body when I'm a submissive. That's a lie**.** *I never admit that I'm embarrassed of my body as a submissive. When I was high, oh my God. The*

[29] These studies only look at cis men and women, and therefore leaves out the trans community. If this study was gender inclusive, I suspect the results may look different.

dysmorphia came out of my mouth like an unending sewer stream. I refused to come out from behind the door of his closet, behind which I took the dress off. He's like, what are you doing?

[Spencier]: And this is when you two have had multiple sexual interactions already?

[Parker]: This was at like the five-month mark. He's clearly seen me naked. But because I was high as balls I refused to come out from behind the door and he had to come over and be like, "okay, come on." And I was like, "ugh, fine." [Laughs] So I went over and laid on the bed and he's trying to be sexy with me**.** *I just looked at him and I was like, "no, you need to stop." He's trying to play with my clit and I'm like, no. I fully looked up and I said "when you and I are together, I get off on our interaction, on the dynamic. But I get to show you what will actually make me cum and how I make myself cum because you aren't doing it right." He was like "uh, okay." [Laughs] Full shock. Of course, in his mind I made him feel like a sex god because I faked every orgasm. I'm totally into him. The fantasy and everything is fantastic and I find him incredibly physically attractive. But man, that whole fakery was gone. All faking of anything was gone. Also I had not shaved. With him, I make sure I'm always super trimmed, it was full on 70s porn star bush. Glorious. It was curly. I had conditioned it.* I'm just like spread on his bed and I'm playing with myself and he's looking down at me and he's shocked. He's in full shock. He doesn't know what to do with himself. He's touching while I'm playing with myself, he's like, "oh my God, you are soaked." I'm like, "welcome to what it's supposed to feel like." He's like, "have you been faking?" I was like, maybe. Anyway. [Laughs] When I'm in character, he like throat fucks me. It's a violent, it's all about the gag, it's all about the drool. Down girl. But when I was super high I was like, "look, you need to not go past my hard palate." I showed him, right here. This is where you need to be. And he's like, "oh, okay, so don't thrust?" He was shocked at how good it felt when I was just having him in my mouth. *He was like, that feels really good. Yep, for me too. It doesn't hurt. He's like, "have I been hurting you?"* What sends him over the edge is when I do both hands with a lot of spit and it's very tantric and he can't control himself. So, whenever I have to take control of the situation with him I just start doing that. *But yeah, you have to understand, when I let you do what you want to do it hurts. And that's part of what I want. That's part of what I'm into with you. But right now, I don't want to gag. I just want to suck on your dick like a lollipop.* So that's what we're going to do**.** *But at one point, the dysmorphia really came flying out of my mouth.* I was naked and he was naked. He wanted me to suck his dick but then to be on all fours and his face was back here and I was like, mm mm, no. *There's no way you'll enjoy the view from back there.* And he's like, what the fuck

> are you talking about? I was like, I don't think I want to do this. And he's like, "we've literally done this twenty times, what is wrong?" And he wasn't angry about it. He was just like, what the fuck is going on? Finally, after we had sex I'm like, pulling the covers up over me and he's like, what are you doing*? I'm like, dude, do you have a fat fetish? Are you a chubby chaser? I was still super high and it just came out. Is that your thing?* He's just staring at me. He's just had the most amazing orgasm of his life. He's like, no. Not at all. Usually I like very thin women, very athletic physiques. And I was like, then what the fuck are you doing? [Laughs] *It did not compute in my head, in my state of not having a filter, without having this guise of sexual power and weaponized sexuality. It did not compute and all the insecurity came flying out. Look at this pendulous fucking fat, how can you like this? What the fuck? I was angry.* He looked at me and he was like, "it's your personality*." It's the fat girl with the great personality? He went, "number one, that's awful. Number two, yeah I like your personality." Okay.* [emphasis added]

Parker's story reminds me of Emory's, from chapter 3, in that they are both very reflective and critical of their own simultaneous resistance and tolerance that ebb and flow throughout their sexual encounters. Parker leads me through an interaction where she is in a constant state of body dysmorphia and anxiety—one that leads her to admit that she perhaps is always feeling this way, but never will communicate that to her partner. However, within this same scene, she describes moments of agency and communicating her needs; Parker tells her sexual partner what she does or doesn't like, and how to properly satisfy her sexually. Consequently, although Parker em(bodies) shame and anxiety over her weight, she chooses to weaponize her feelings to establish a conversation that results in her sexual gratification.

As Parker ends her sexual "scene" on a negative note (telling me that she covers her body in a blanket and asks her partner if he has a fat fetish), I consider how Parker may not notice her own acts of resistance and agency. By refusing to shave her genital hair, and describing her hair as glorious and conditioned. Masturbating to show her

partner what she prefers. In talking out what method and style she would like to perform oral sex.

Smoking weed broke down many boundaries of communication for Parker that were otherwise closed off in previous sexual interactions with their partner, but it broke down so many boundaries that her poor body image came spewing out with it. Parker admits that her low self-image of her body is always present, so one may argue that breathing life into her feelings through communication may be the first step in working through them. This process may be understood as "naming" emotion, which allows one to interpret and legitimize their emotions and feelings (Stets, 2005). If we can label it, it helps us to understand, interpret and categorize it. However, social locations such as gender, race, social class, and other forms of power stratification define how emotions are interpreted (e.g. women being too emotional and thus inferior or not taken seriously).

Embodiment is another key player in emotions, and it is important to be reminded that the physiological and cognitive have elements in this ability to label. We may externalize and internalize an emotion by which roles we play, and which emotions are appropriate for that role. For Parker, she may feel gendered obligations to embody and perform sexual pleasure since their male partner "deserves" and is "entitled" to give them an orgasm to properly perform their masculinity. However, during this scene, Parker resists this traditional gendered embodiment, poor body image withstanding, to communicate and establish boundaries with her pleasure in mind.

Jorden (51, white, cis, straight) on the other hand, seems to be cognizant of her resistance to body shame and her entitlement to pleasure. Jorden explains how being a woman over six feet tall and "large" is unable to "be invisible," in that she is always

noticed and taking up space. After working through her formative feelings about her body, she depicts her transformation in body image, telling me how if she was going to take up space, she might as well embrace it.

One of the ways Jorden resists traditional gender norms surrounding women's bodies is by wearing heels, "Because I'm going to be taller than most men anyways, so why not allow myself to wear the shoes I want?" It seems ironic that by wearing heels, Jorden is resisting gender norms—but Jorden formerly stifled her wardrobe choices because she was frequently taller than men. Jorden enacts agency and resistance in her entitlement to pleasure as well when I inquire about a form of oral sex. Jorden comments that she often feels "passive" in receiving oral sex, so I ask if she has ever experienced a more "active", participatory form of oral sex:

[Spencier]: Have you ever sat on your partner's face?

[Jorden]: Yes, and I liked that too. But that was a—that was probably the latest thing, experience that I had that I liked. I mean, that was like after my divorce, so within the last five years.

[Spencier]: I feel like that that's more of an engaging way to receive oral. You're also still kind of in control, in a way.

[Jorden]: Yeah, which definitely is a thing for me. But, see, prior to that, you know, *I'm six feet tall and I'm not thin, I have never been thin. So, I think there was always a discomfort with sitting on someone's face, that like it would be awful for them, you know? And that I could hurt them or that they would be like—I don't know, well, you know, I have no idea specifically.* Like, you know, when I think about it from a physiological standpoint, I'm like, "That doesn't make any sense." But, you know, that was where my emotional, you know, where my emotions went around that act. *And so, I would not even try it for like most of my life. You know? And I think that there were—like when people would bring it up, that was like a hard stop for me, like no.* But yeah, after my divorce I dated someone who was 16 years younger and he was—and we were a terrible match outside of bed but

> we were a great match in bed. And with him that came, like I just—*you know, he really loved that, convinced me that he really loved it. And then, I was like, "All right, well let's try this." And yeah, then I was sort of hooked. So, now, yeah, you know, so sad if you get smothered, oh well.* [emphasis added]

Jorden reflects on how she denied herself a more participatory, engaged form of oral sex due to her body-image, and how this has changed in more recent years. It seems that a partner who encouraged and expressed loving the activity is what impacted her change of heart. With this in mind, did a male partner's approval or desires still determine whether or not Jordan permitted herself a sexual activity that she enjoys? Perhaps this is what started her venture into more participatory forms of oral sex, but she ends her thought on a particularly emboldened note "So sad if you get smothered, oh well."

In this section, I examined how the patriarchy is enacted through gendered sexual scripts, and how these scripts are shaped by perceptions of body image, body hair, genital appearance, and body size. The self-objectification of the body is a concept used to understand this phenomenon, which argues that viewing women as objects results in women treating themselves as an object to be scrutinized and evaluated by others (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). These narratives touched on ways that women and AFAB folk navigate traditional gender structures as they permeate other identities that intersect with their body, and their sexual behavior. The following section of this chapter will analyze how participants narrate their experiences of sexual violence, trauma, and assault, and how this provides a close look at the body as a space in which power operates.

SEXUAL TRAUMA, POWER, AND SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

***TRIGGER WARNING:** This section will include descriptions of sexual assault, rape, and trauma. To move past this section, please skip to page 145.

The majority of participants in my interviews delve into their personal experiences of sexual assault, rape or sexual violence. 22 out of the 30 participants brought up sexual violence and trauma. Current research suggests that roughly one in five women have experienced sexual abuse or assault, and 14-25% of women have been raped (although considered to be much higher, as the rate of reporting one's sexual assault or rape is dismally low) (Koss, 1993). It is important to note that I do not have a section within my interview prompts that discuss sexual assault or violence. I did this intentionally, to ensure participants did not become triggered in reflecting on a potentially traumatic experience(s)[30]. Despite this lack, many women brought up their experiences of sexual assault and violence due to the impact on how they interpret their current and future sexual experiences and outlooks on their sexual pleasure. In order to understand these participant's sexual lives, it is necessary to examine how gender relations established by a patriarchal state characterize violence and trauma as a universal thread that runs through many sexual histories. As it proved to be an important topic for many

[30] Sexual assault may result in psychological outcomes such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Campbell et al. 2009; Elliott et al 2004), Depression (Eadie et al. 2008; Sarkar and Sarkar, 2005), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), eating disorders (Capitaine et al 2011), sleep disorders (Burnam e al, 1988; Chen et al. 2010), and substance use (Hedtke et al., 2008; Simpson and Miller, 2002). These psychological outcomes in mind, I chose to prioritize my participants wellbeing by not specifically prompting them about potential sexual abuse or assault. This study is not focused on sexual violence, and there was no indication of the topic in my overview for participants to look over and determine if they were willing to broach.

women in my sample, it is important to touch on within this chapter on intersections of social structures. This is particularly the case within the queer community, for whom sexual violence and assault are strikingly high.

Research suggests that lifetime sexual assaults for bisexual and lesbian women range from 15.6-85% (Rothman et al, 2011; Walters et al., 2013; Langenderfer-Magruder et al. 2016). In a study by Waldner-Haugrud and Gratch (1997), 52% of their sample of gay and lesbian folk reported experiencing sexual coercion. Research also shows that bisexual women report having experienced more accounts of sexual coercion and abuse than straight women[31] (Corliss et al. 2002; Balsam et al. 2005; de Visser et al., 2007; Austin et al. 2008; Kuyper and Vanwesenbeeck, 2011; Menning and Holtzman, 2014; Johnson et al., 2017). This high rate may not necessarily suggest that queer women are targeted more frequently (although that is a possibility), but rather, queer women may be prone to deviate from gender roles and heteronormative beliefs, and consequently be less likely to interpret sexual coercion, violence and aggression as appropriate behavior. In other words, queer women may be more likely to discern, define, and name their experiences of sexual assault and abuse.

The research supports this possibility, as women within a sexual minority are more likely to report adult sexual assault than straight women (Balsam et al., 2005; Stoddard et al., 2009). A study conducted by Rothman et al. (2011) reviewed 75 studies that examine sexual assault within sexual minorities, and found that within the United States, the highest estimates reported (85%) were for lifetime sexual assault among lesbian and bisexual women. With this finding in mind, it is critical to incorporate more

[31] It is important to note that these rates of sexual assault and violence against LGBTQIA+ women are from male perpetrators.

queer femme's narratives into the discussion surrounding sexual trauma, abuse, and assault, and examine how this has impacted their sexual pleasure and sexual experiences.

Higher Rates of Sexual Behavior:

"I was getting something I wanted out of it, which was to feel that control"

When looking at my participants reflection on their sexual abuse, for some women, they found themselves taking back power and a sense of control through *more* sexual behavior. For example, Quinn (26, white, questioning, demi-bisexual) tells me about a childhood of long-term abuse and rape, which leads to her seeking sexual interactions she can control outside of her home. She explains how she was molested by her caregiver's friends from a young age.

[Quinn]: As we got older, we were encouraged to fight. We were kind of left in the back shed. We weren't allowed in the home unless we were invited by him, which was pretty rare. And then when I was about six-ish, I was younger, he would have meetings with other people that he was affiliated with and they would all come to the house and he used to have me strip in front of them. Nobody would touch me for a long time. It was just a big group of men staring at me, taking all my clothes off. And I don't know. It just kind of escalated at some point. Where a couple of the guys had extra interest. If I remember correctly I think that some of the men were not wanting to be in that room but the guy that was raising me[32] kind of forced them to stay there. So, the couple of guys that did get really interested in it, I unfortunately was molested by them many times. This went on, I think I was like seven or eight when it started. And it went on until I was about twelve or thirteen, early pre-teens.

[Spencier]: Could you conceptualize what was happening?

[32] Quinn was raised by her biological parents' friends from high school. Quinn tells me that her biological parents did not want to be parents, yet did not want to give her up for adoption. This scene refers to the man who raised her.

[Quinn]: So, when it first started happening, like when I would take all my clothes off and would just stand in front of them, I knew that something wasn't right. And I felt really uncomfortable. But I didn't exactly know what was wrong that was happening**.** *What I thought, I thought that it was something that I was supposed to be comfortable with and that the fault laid with me because I was the only one that seemed to be uncomfortable. And then the guys that were uncomfortable being in that room, now that I'm older and have had time to reflect on it, I also thought that I was responsible for making them uncomfortable. But when they first started touching me, I think that I knew that it was wrong but I didn't know wrong in what way. Nobody had ever told me that it was my body and that people had to ask for my permission. And I didn't understand that.* Especially because I had already been fighting since I was four. So, people were constantly touching my body without my consent in physical ways, not sexual ways**.** *But it wasn't an idea that I was used to, that my body was mine.* So, I didn't fully understand what was going on until I was a little bit older. I probably realized it probably by like six months to a year after it started happening, I'd have to say. But even then when I realized it, I obviously didn't know what to do with it. I knew that I didn't have anywhere to go or anyone to turn to. I had nobody that would be my advocate. *So, I just kind of swallowed it and completely shut myself off to it emotionally. So basically, when it was happening it was just like, I wasn't there.*

….

[Spencier]: So, you said it was around sixteen you become very sexually active. Can you speak to that a little bit?

[Quinn]: Sure. So, the first time that I had sex again was with a guy that I had only been dating maybe like two weeks, something like that. *But I didn't, at that point, view sex as being something that was like anything more than an exchange between people. So, it didn't really mean that much to me. If I wanted something, I just wanted it and I didn't really feel any shame about it.* I was known around my school for being a pretty promiscuous girl because I just didn't really care. It wasn't shameful to me. Sometimes men or boys at that point would actually contact me, seemingly just so they could have sex. *But it was actually what I wanted because I wanted to feel that control and power. And in my life the only time that I felt in control in those days was when I was having sex.* As far as with my sexual partners I was usually the dominant one. But I'll be honest, most of my teenage years, as far as sex goes, it's kind of a blur. *I feel like I used it as a really weird sense of therapy. But at that point I was still really used to disconnecting. So even though I was in control and I was getting something I wanted out of it, which was to feel that control, I also kind of was still really detached from it and wasn't really cognizant of anything that was going on.* It was just happening at that moment and I would feel

> better afterwards. The best way I could describe it is an addict isn't thinking about what they're doing while they're doing it. But they feel better when they're done. Like they get what they need out of it. I don't know. [emphasis added]

[Spencier]: And so, are you achieving an orgasm with any of these people?

[Quinn]: No.

[Spencier]: Are you achieving any orgasms when you masturbate during this time?

[Quinn]: Yes.

Quinn makes a point to reflect on how her younger self understood autonomy and her body; that she felt guilt for feeling uncomfortable, and if anyone appeared to be uncomfortable as well, she felt responsible for their discomfort. She speaks about how she was forced to fight as a child, and relates this to her molestation in that she never felt like she could make decisions regarding her body and who got to touch it. Following this reflection, Quinn goes on to discuss her out of body experiences to cope with the molestation, where she says "I completely shut myself off to it emotionally. So basically, when it was happening it was just like, I wasn't there." Quinn is describing an out-of-body/depersonalization experience, which is a common form of coping (particularly for child sexual abuse and assault) that allows an individual to detach and dissociate themselves from the trauma (Sar, 2014; American Psychiatric Association, 2018; Farina, Liotti, and Imperatori, 2019).

As Quinn transitions from this scene, however, she begins to point out that she became very sexually active, or as she says, promiscuous, during her high school years. When asked why, she describes her sexual dominance and promiscuity as a way to regain "control" and "power". She relates her sex drive in high school to someone who is a drug addiction that she barely remembers the act itself, she just knew she craved it, and

momentarily felt better afterwards. This behavior is not unusual in survivors, as sexual abuse has been linked to hypersexuality, particularly among survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Aaron, 2012; Castro et al., 2019; Slavin et al., 2020).

For most of her childhood, Quinn had no decision in who had access to her body. She was at her caregiver's whim. Based on her own narrative about herself and her choices, Quinn found solace in sexual interactions where she could, for the first time, have "control" and "power"; to learn boundaries, to regain a feeling of safety in sexual interactions by leading them[33]. Notably, Quinn doesn't orgasm during any of these interactions where she's searching for control and power, but is able to reach an orgasm when masturbating. Consequently, Quinn is expressing that her "promiscuity" in high school was not about, or for, her sexual pleasure. She was not seeking sex for the sake of orgasms, but rather for control in a seemingly uncontrollable life. Her sexual interactions with men during this period are the one space where she can make decisions about her body. Quinn points out later in the interview that during high school, she actually defined herself as a lesbian, and that she didn't orgasm with men because she simply wasn't attracted to them:

[Quinn]: I had sex with a lot of men, or boys, when I was a teenager. But I didn't actually think that I was straight or even bisexual. I thought that I was a lesbian. I wasn't sexually attracted to any of the men, or boys. I wasn't sexually attracted to any of them. *To me, what the purpose of the sex was,*

[33] This sense of "regaining control" reminds me of the surfer, Bethany Hamilton. Bethany had her arm bitten off by a shark. The moment she was approved by her doctor, she reentered the water and began surfing again—reteaching herself how to surf without an arm. She mentioned that she had to get back in the water as soon as possible, otherwise she knew she would never surf again, out of fear. Perhaps this is a piece of the same process Quinn experiences in her trauma and healing—healing through reentering the very same space that took away something from her. Reworking one's association to the space through controlling her newly formed experiences in said situation. However, this high increase in sexual activity can also be dangerous depending on use of protection from sexually transmitted diseases, use of protection from pregnancy, and potential future sexual violence from partners.

> *was an emotional and mental release for me. Which I think is another reason why I never had an orgasm until I was in my twenties from sex because I didn't need it. That's not what I wanted. I wasn't there for anything physical.* [emphasis added]

This reifies Quinn's purpose of an increase in sex drive and sexual activity after her sexual trauma and molestation, as she uses sexual interactions with men she's not attracted to in order to garner a sense of authority. This increase of sexual activity after sexual trauma is also seen in Gail's (23, white, nonbinary, bisexual) narrative:

[Spencier]: Normally what does it take for you to reach an orgasm with a partner?

[Gail]: Um, because of, I have a fairly extensive sexual trauma history, prior to it, it was very easy to get me off. I would just have to use hands or my partner would use hands. Um, now I do, I require like a vibrator, just because it took me*, it's very difficult for me to orgasm using my hands because it sometimes can trigger a traumatic reaction. And that's still very consistent now.* With my current partner, we've definitely taken a lot of, we've managed to make a lot of progress in that, because I still want, I want to kind of return to that, so we've been very patient, like experimenting on what works and that sort of thing, and he's very, he's very understanding and always checks in with me whenever he's doing stuff like that. I was ah, date raped at a party.

[Spencier]: And would you like that we just leave it at that and move on? Are you comfortable talking about it?

[Gail]: Oh no, I'm actually, I'm happy to talk about it. I don't really have a trauma reaction when I'm talking about it. It's not really a … It's very much like an intellectualization thing, like I can talk about it without a problem. Um, so I was sexually assaulted by a stranger, um, this is someone I had really never had any previous contact with. It was also the first time I'd ever drank socially. Um, so, there was like a lot of baggage during the actual event. Um, one of my friends who coincidentally was in the fan fiction group in middle school, um, she invited me to a house party, and so, I told, I lied to my parents and said I was just going there for a sleepover. So I went to her house party and um, I got very, very drunk, and I, um, at the time I called it hooking up with a guy, but it was pretty much I had no capacity to consent, and um, it was very difficult for me looking back, because I rationalized it after the fact in that you know, like oh well he was also really drunk, so you know, maybe he couldn't consent either, and maybe I'm the rapist now, and um, oh well I said yes at one point, but then I said no, so was it really rape, because if so *[pause] There*

was like a lot of [pause] I didn't really sit down and admit to myself that it was rape until I was having, about six months after the fact I started having serious nightmares related to it. I wasn't able to orgasm at all. It was very significant to me because um, at the time my mother, she had untreated bipolar one disorder, so she was very much like, if you got her on a good day, you got her on a good day. But if you got her on a bad day, it was a bad day. So, I caught her on a bad day one morning when I was on my way to um, god, what was I doing that morning, I think I was, I was, I was work, right, I was in scrubs. Um, and I sat down and I was having coffee with my mother, this was like six o'clock in the morning, and um, I just, just completely without prompting, I just said oh yeah, you remember that party I went to six months ago and she's like yeah, I said I was, I was raped there. *And she did not believe me, and she did not, she refused to acknowledge that I was raped until about two years ago. So, it took her a solid five years to say, okay, yeah you were raped. Um, my father denied it only for about a week. I think he was just trying to come to terms with it, and then he ended up apologizing and saying okay, I believe you, and I'm very sorry for the way I reacted.* So, that was very, it took me a very, very long time to be able to sit down and talk about it. Ah, I threw myself into rape crisis work when I was in college, which kind of ended up steering me towards the social work path, because I was trying to come to terms with it, and I used it as like a way of like personal therapy for myself. Was just, I'm just gonna throw myself into this, I'm gonna make sure this never happens to anyone else ever again. Very unrealistic, but my heart was in the right place I guess. Um, so that was the first major sexual trauma, um. There was another one that occurred in college.[34]

[Spencier]: So, when you break up with your first boyfriend, the one prior to going to this party, would you say you masturbate regularly or—

[Gail]: *Oh yeah. Yeah, I would say I masturbated about once a week, and then, yeah. Yeah actually I masturbated more after the incident. My sex drive went way up, like it was already pretty high to begin with, but it like spiked after I was raped. Um, which to me was, it was difficult because I think that the reason that it spiked at the time was that I was trying to regain control over my sexuality. Um, so like I was practically insatiable, like any minute I could be having sex with my boyfriend, um, I could be having sex, it was actually him that pointed out um, you know, are you trying to pull some control back from this, and it was really hard to hear him say that at the time, but now I'm like he was 100% right, that's exactly what it was.* [emphasis added]

[34] Gail makes a point to inform me earlier in the interview that they are not comfortable to talk about the second time they were sexually assaulted, noting that they are still working through it and trying to process their trauma. Due to Gail's boundaries, I move on to my next question once they bring it up.

Gail provides their own reflection to their increased sex drive after their sexual trauma, remarking that this increase was, in fact, to regain control. Where Gail seems to deviate from Quinn, however, is the struggle to validate their sexual trauma as real and valid. Gail laments over their parent's denial and refusal to acknowledge their sexual trauma, and takes months themselves to work through and acknowledge their own trauma. Research shows that disclosure is a pivotal part of survivor's recovery; however, shame and victim blaming such as in Gail's experience stops many survivors from disclosing (Koss, 2000; Ahren, Stansell and Jennings, 2010; Carretta, Burgess, and DeMarco, 2015; Alaggia and Wang, 2020).

Gail see's their sexual experiences being impacted by this sexual trauma to this day, in that they are triggered by fingering, which is a primary form of pleasure for them (penetration). Imagine having a primary source of sexual pleasure for you being tied to one of the most traumatic experiences of your life. A mode of pleasure that is supposed to create immense pleasure and release, now tainted and triggered by a memory where your body was stolen from you. It is important to be mindful of the complexity of sexual pleasure, particularly within the queer, femme community, as sexual assault rates remain dramatically high. Gail exemplifies the hurdles many queer folks have to jump as they work through pleasure that is forever changed by an invasion of a space that is supposed to tout vulnerability, safety, and pleasure.

Gail is working through understanding their sexual pleasure as it entails forms of both PTSD and pleasure. The uncomfortable reality for survivors is that pleasure and trauma can take place simultaneously in sexual interactions that are embedded within the history of sexual trauma. This juxtaposition once again reminds us that sexual

interactions and sexual pleasure are entangled within social identities and social institutions, and are influenced by our experiences of such. We cannot examine sexuality and pleasure in a void, as it is these very identifiers and experiences that encapsulate and make our sexual experience what it is. Sexual preferences, distastes, kinks, turn-offs—these all are established through the intersection of our identities, our bodies, and social institutions. For Gail, rape culture, a scaffold of the patriarchy, has impacted their sexual pleasures and experience of their body, even within the boundaries of a safe space with their partner.

Where, how, or when does the patriarchy, rape culture, and traditional gendered sexual scripts become cemented into our understanding of sexual behavior? Some researchers argue that sex education within the United States is a pivotal point in youths' transition into young adults, where the education system affirms heteronormative, sexist notions of sex, sexual pleasure, and reproduction (Hobaica and Kwon, 2017; Colla, O'Sullivan and Enright, 2018; Hobaica, Schofield, and Kwon, 2019; Hall et al., 2019; Kramer, 2019; Rabbitte, 2020; Guttmacher Institute, 2021). Felix (24, white and Asian, nonbinary, bisexual) points to this deficiency in appropriate education, as they work through their experiences of sexual assault and abuse:

[Felix]: The guy that I did lose my virginity to, he just like, crossed a lot of boundaries. But that was like, halfway through our relationship. So, I didn't even know that was going to happen. It was like, a very beautiful thing in the beginning and then it turned into, like, something, like, it just didn't seem right. But I thought it was supposed to be okay, sort of deal. *But at the same time, like, is it because of like, the sex education that we didn't get?* Because he was going to the same school I did, you know? And like, I was very confused about that. *Like, is it really like, his fault for like, crossing the boundaries with me and like, hurting me and everything. But at the same time, the education wasn't there either. Like,*

did he know that I didn't want something even if like, I wasn't exclaiming no? Like, even though, you could see in my face that I was very uncomfortable, or like, I was like, I felt like I was persuaded into something because I'm in a relationship, you know? Like, I just wish it was like, a little different with education and I was taught better. You know?

[Spencier]: Hm-hmm. [affirmative] Do you feel like these sexual experiences have impacted or altered your future experiences of sexuality at all?

[Felix]: Yes. I do believe that. I have been going to see a therapist a little bit about it too because I think it's like, very important for me to like, come to terms with it, you know. I did, like, I've noticed, like, *when you asked me how my sex drive is. I used to be always like, at high, like, no matter what. And I was wondering why it was. And I think it was because I was looking for that validation with like, that, an abusive partner that I had.* So, I was like, okay, I'll just keep doing this. Like, and I was always like, at a high sex drive because I was trying to like, really make sure that he was still into me, sort of deal. And it sucked, but. I don't even know like, what a high, like, a normal high sex drive is. Maybe I do have a high sex drive. I do have it often, you know? But like, it's not going to be like, that, oh, I have to be doing this so he feels better, sort of, deal. It's toxic. But I've gotten a lot better about it. And I'm really happy about it. *I'm not afraid to say no to something***.** I'm not afraid to say like, hey, not today. I have a headache. Or like, I can't do this right now because, I'm busy. Like, I think it's like, a very okay thing to be just communicative with your partner. [emphasis added]

Felix address the complexity and cultural impact of sexism in their sexual interactions. They acknowledge that, yes, their partner was responsible for transgressing their boundaries and coercing their sexual interactions. However, Felix mulls over how their education system did not provide them a toolset to navigate consent, health sexual behavior, and other vital skills to apply to a sexual relationship. Simply put, Felix acknowledges the powerful control a culture (and what is does or doesn't provide in knowledge and systems of support) has on creating an individual and their patterns of behavior. This is not to absolve perpetrators of their actions, but rather to crystalize ways in creating changed behavior on a larger scale. For Felix, the lack of appropriate,

inclusive sex education was an important factor. Consequently, as current research and Felix's experience indicates, sex education has an impact on safe and pleasurable sexual interactions.

Despite this awareness, Felix also seems to still be working through self-blame. They seem to be making themselves accountable for experiences of sexual assault and abuse. Felix further reflects on how they felt the need to maintain a high sex drive to appease their partner, and they seem to be asking themselves "what DOES my sex drive look like when I don't have to provide or centralize someone else's feelings and pleasures? They aren't sure. Therefore, even as a nonbinary, bisexual individual, Felix finds themselves navigating gender roles that prioritize men's comfort, pleasure, and perception of AFAB bodies.

Absence of Sexual Behavior: "I wanted nothing to do with any of it at all"

In contrast to the previous narratives, some participants described an absence of sexual behavior after experiencing sexual trauma. For example, Charlie describes a formative sexual experience with her girlfriend, who brings a boyfriend into their sexual interaction that results in rape:

[Spencier]: So, when do you have oral or any of these next steps of sexual pleasure with another person? Like when does that happen?

[Charlie]: I don't really remember having oral. Like the first time, I cannot for the life of me picture that. I feel like it was with a girl. I remember there was a girl when I was in eighth grade that I ended up really liking, and she was like the first girl that I really like liked and was like interested in pursuing. There was a girl before her, but—and she would always be like, "Oh, you're my girlfriend." And I was like, "Okay, that's great." But like I

didn't know what that meant, really, at the time. This girl was like the first person that I started sexually exploring with. So I think, it would probably be me with her. And then sexual experience—that kind of sucks, which, you know, like triggers or whatever, but thank god for years of therapy—was with her, and I found out she had a boyfriend who was like way older. I can't even remember how much older he was**.** *I want to say like in his 20s, and then I was 14 and she was like I think 15 or 16. And there was like a whole threesome situation with them. But I remember like being halfway through it and not wanting to do it anymore. And I just didn't know what to do. So, it took me like a long time too to realize that that was definitely rape, you know. But I'd say that was my first experience, and I think that kind of skewed a lot of my entire sexual experience for my entire life, until I finally worked through that.*

[Spencier]: Hm-hmm. How do you think it has impacted your future sexual interactions you had?

[Charlie]: I mean, it definitely scared me the hell off of them for a long time**.** *Like I remember that happening, and then I don't think I actually had sex of my own voluntary will until I was probably like maybe 16, 17. I want to say like 17, I think.* But before then, it was just like a lot of like, you know, cuddling and make-out sessions and whatever**.** *I didn't even want to do oral. I didn't—I wanted nothing to do with any of it at all.* And then I feel like that kind of made me like a late bloomer, *and it made me like uncomfortable with my own sexuality, you know. Like it kind of like—it limited my masturbation* and wanting to continue that, and then like in relationships in my early 20s, it really limited like my sex drive, because anytime I felt like I was like, "Ooh, let's do this," or, "I'm in the mood," or whatever, *I felt like embarrassed and ashamed for feeling that way,* even though like my whole life I had been brought up to like, you know, not feel that way and that it was okay to be like a sexual being, I was still just like—I think that one experience like threw off my whole fucking outlook for a long time. [emphasis added]

Charlie's decrease in sexual behavior is not uncommon, as research on sexual assault survivorship shows that survivors may increase or decrease their sexual behavior (van Berlo and Ensink, 2000; Deliramich and Gray, 2008; Weaver, 2009; O'Callaghan et al., 2019). Alongside the decrease in sexual behavior, Charlie discusses feeling guilt and shame when she *did* engage in sexual behavior. A study by van Berlo and Ensink (2000)

found that sexual assault survivors may experience emotions such as shame, guilt, and possible anger towards oneself that may lead to sexual problems.

Charlie makes a point to explain that she didn't have the language or knowledge to stop the unwanted sexual interaction; specifically, that she couldn't communicate to her girlfriend and her girlfriend's older boyfriend that she wanted to stop. As discussed in chapter 3, women are placed with the emotional and cognitive burden of caring for cis men, the result of which can be sexual interactions that involve putting their own pleasures to the wayside. However, the traumatic experience that Charlie reflects on shows the pressure and power embedded within sexual interactions. As Fahs and Swank (2020: 2) touch on within their study:

> Women's ability to say no to sex—and to have a receptive audience that listens to women's 'no' statements—is compromised by living in a context in which women's social roles dictate they should or *must* say 'yes' to sex. Women's access to sexual power is compromised by stories—communicated in mainstream media, family, religious institutions and by gender relations—that strip women of sexual agency. …

Therefore, women's ability to determine, negotiate, and evaluate their sexual pleasure and desires is intertwined with cultural expectations and norms of men's sexual access to women's bodies.

Research shows that dominant cultural gender norms that convey female sexuality as passive and secondary to male desires creates a hurdle for cis gendered, hetero leaning women to establish a line of communication for safe and enjoyable sex (Fine, 1988; Thomson and Holland, 1994). This is not to imply that same sex or genderfluid/genderqueer sexual violence does not occur, but rather, suggests that the prevalence of sexual violence against women is embedded within gendered norms and

scripts are enacted within the bedroom. For example, Riley explains their first time having sex as a traumatic experience that was embedded in heteronormative conceptions of penetrative sex that resulted in pain:

[Spencier]: So, tell me a little bit about your first time having a sexual interaction with another person. You said it was around thirteen.

[Riley]: Yeah. It was awful. Um, I, people would always talk about how your first time you'll bleed because they're breaking the hymen or whatever, um, when you lose your virginity it hurts the first time, and you know, it happened and I cried afterwards because I was bleeding profusely, um, and then I didn't want to do it at all again. *I didn't masturbate for like weeks after that.* And eventually I started to um, reach out more again once I, you know, learned more about it and everything like that, so [pause] *My first time was THE worst.* Um, and then afterwards I actually, once I started to get more comfortable with trying it again, I started using more like phallic objects, like vegetables and stuff like that, to masturbate. *Um, and then I would tell people like no, I took my own virginity, [CHUCKLE], because for me that was my real first time, because I actually fucking enjoyed myself, you know.* [emphasis added]

Riley's describes feeling extreme pain, bleeding profusely, and crying during their first sexual experience. Their description of having sex is compiled of traditional gendered sexual scripts; they even preface their experience by stating that the first time someone who has a vagina has sex, it will hurt and then explains a loss of their virginity as penetrative sex.[35] Due to this traumatic and painful experience, Riley doesn't masturbate for weeks, until they begin to take back their sexuality through self-discovery via masturbation. They remark that they lost their virginity to *themselves,* because for the first time, through masturbation, they actually enjoyed sex. Research shows that masturbation improves women's body image, sexual pleasure, and self-awareness (Coleman, 2003; Herbenick et al., 2009; Rowland et al., 2020).

[35] Stating the belief that this will be the result, due to assumptions of women and AFAB folk's pain

Riley makes a point to remark that their masturbation techniques included reintroduction of phallic-shaped objects. Scholars have suggested that queer folk may use phallic-shaped objects and sex toys to subvert the patriarchal power of the penis (Reich 1999; Hamming, 2001; Minge and Zimmerman, 2009; Fahs and Swank, 2013). Importantly, Riley's reflection on taking their own virginity through masturbation exemplifies masturbation and use of sex toys as therapy. Research shows that sex objects and toys may promote diversity in pleasure, provide orgasm positive interventions, ease performance anxiety, produce new ways to achieve an orgasm, and create a sense of autonomy or control in one's sexual experience (Striar and Bartlik, 1999; Billups et al., 2001; Fahs and Frank, 2014).

Overall, Riley's experience of traumatic, painful, penetrative sex represents the strong tether that binds traditional gender roles, heteronormativity, and sexual scripts, which consequently permeates to many participants experiences of sexual trauma.

CONCLUSION

Within this chapter, body size, body hair, perceptions of genitals, and sexual assault were closely examined, to see how these intersections of social structures – specifically internalized sexism and racism, misogyny, and rape culture - influence the participants' experience of gendered sexual scripts. Both resistance and embodiment of traditional gender norms, even as queer women, were examined in these narratives. Once again, the majority of the moments where traditional gender norms are examined describe situations when the participants were sexually interacting with cis men.

This research serves as an analysis into the pervasiveness of patriarchy as manifested through traditional gendered scripts that are prevalent in many queer women's lives. Many of the participants' self-worth, entitlement to pleasure, and enactment of sexual behavior were influenced by the heteronormative standard of female beauty and behavior. Within the section of sexual violence, many individuals found themselves narrating how their experience of sexual violence effected their perception and navigation of sexual behavior.

Consequently, one cannot discuss women's sexual pleasures and histories without also talking about power. The following section will consider themes found throughout the prior findings: queer resistance. The final chapter on queer resistance will conduct a closer examination of how power is relegated, resisted, and embodied in women's sexual interactions, inclusive of: use of sex toys and masturbation, queer porn, period sex, and telling one's narrative. In addition, there is resistance work in the process of telling their sexual story. It is the intent of this next chapter to exemplify the personal is political through the political power of queer pleasure, and the resistance work embedded within one's entitlement to pleasure.

CHAPTER 5: SEXUAL LIBERATION & THE POLITICAL POWER OF PLEASURE

"Whilst it is important to continue to interrogate and draw attention to patriarchal domination of women's sexuality, we need to also provide their obverse, the counter-narratives to this hegemonic discourse of sexual terrorism. Such counter-narratives must include stories of women's quest for erotic fulfilment, agency, pleasure and desire that transcend discourse of sexual danger." (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013: 29)

Pleasure is a pathway for accessing sexual liberation, and pleasure activism is a means to resist the heteronormative, traditionally gendered narrative (brown, 2019). Sexual pleasure, eroticism, and intimacy with ourselves and others can be both healing and powerful (brown, 2019). Embodying sexual empowerment can look like many things, but the underlying tenet remains the same: to resist capitalistic notions of production of orgasms, and to find the erotic, the pleasure, the satisfaction—the power—that is within ourselves. As Audre Lorde (1978: 89-90) tells us in *The Uses of the Erotic*: "For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of." Lorde reminds us that women have historically been taught to devalue their sexual worth—to dismiss the creative energy and joy that comes out of allowing ourselves to deeply feel all aspects of our lives. To sacrifice our entitlement to pleasure. The radical act of self-love, the sharing of joy, are erotic sources of information and knowledge that may be used to dismantle oppression.

There is liberation in the exploration of one's joy, and telling stories of joy. In fact, Bakare-Yusuf (2013: 29) argues that "women's sexual and embodied agency is potentially more threatening and disruptive to a hetero-patriarchal controlling logic than a focus on danger and violation, hence its repression and suppression." By this, she means

that although addressing issues of sexual violence and power are undoubtedly important, not including the desire, sexual pleasure, and eroticism in women's lives perpetuates the narrative that women are passive victims who need protection from their sexuality. Conversely, Bakare-Yusuf (2013) argues that negative representations of women's sexuality is purposeful, in that this violence-centered research coincides with patriarchal underpinnings that perpetuate the policing of women. Therefore, inserting sexual pleasure and joy into sexual research is doing transformative, activist, work. Framing sexual pleasure as a feminist choice reclaims women's agency, empowerment, and enjoyment within sexual behavior. Toward this end, sexual liberation and pleasure activism are centered within this chapter. There is resistance work in finding one's sexual power, and embodying it. Pointing to forms of sexual liberation in the bedroom allows room for sexual liberation outside of it. In essence, the personal is political.

There is necessary and useful work in studying disparities and marginalization in women's sexual lives. Understandably, for a group to be pushed to the margins, inequity and disparities are common consequences, and they are important to address. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of examining systems of power and their influence on marginalized folk's experiences. Critically looking at how systematic oppression impacts specific groups of people allows us to have conversations as to how we can implement social change. However, as with a sole focus on sexual trauma, when we only examine these disparities, we are not fully centering the voices and experiences of a marginalized group; rather, we are only telling one piece of a multifaceted story and experience. In fact, incorporating sexual pleasure, agency, and resistance work shown in women's

sexual narratives allows us to better understand the weaving of these stories alongside their stories of violence, trauma, and violation.

This chapter examines how sexual liberation and agency are enacted within the participant's sexual history and pleasure narratives. More specifically, this chapter examines sexual liberation within these participants lives in three ways: 1) queering sexual pleasure, 2) entitlement to sexual pleasure, and 3) sexual pleasure representation. Within the section on queering pleasure, I examine how participants deconstruct or queer understandings of sexual pleasure beyond producing orgasms. The second section of this chapter touches on entitlement to pleasure, in particular participants' experiences of period sex, masturbation, and sex toys. This section examines how participants establish entitlement to sexual pleasure with both themselves and their partners, and how this demonstrates a form of resistance to stigma and taboo surrounding women's sexual pleasure.

The final section focuses on representations of pleasure: queer/lesbian porn, and the sexual liberation found in telling one's own story (in narrating the self). This last section explores the value of representation in these participant's lives, whether in the pornography they consume, or in centering their voice and story that, in many ways, has been historically denied or silenced. Again, this chapter serves to push sexual research beyond the scope of violence and trauma in relation to women's sexual lives. We must critically analyze women's sources of pleasure and joy, to more fully represent narratives about their bodies, as well as ensure what rises out of these narratives does not contribute to the creation of a new standard of appropriate sexual pleasure[36].

[36] By this, I mean we must maintain an ambiguity, diversity, or fluidness in measuring pleasure. Sexuality researchers must be cognizant that establishing new boundaries around ways to experience pleasure, are

QUEERING SEXUAL PLEASURE: PLEASURE BEYOND ORGASMS

Admittingly, I went into my research focused on the orgasm gap[37] as it is something I personally care about. As I got deeper into my interviews, I realized that for many women and AFAB folk I spoke with achieving orgasm is not the best measure of sexual satisfaction. It is most certainly important, but people construct and experience pleasure in many diverse and unique ways that we fail to measure when we only measure sexual pleasure and gratification as an orgasm.

Queering pleasure is more than just broadening our studies to who people sleep with. It is more than same sex or gender fluid interactions. Queering pleasure is broadening our scope and our understanding of what sex *looks* like. It is queering the norm, and in this specific case of sexual pleasure, the norm is a hetero-patriarchal norm. Queering pleasure is to include sexual behavior and sexual satisfaction that extends beyond orgasm frequency; queering pleasure actively critiques the able bodied, cis gendered, heterosexual male. Queering is a verb not a noun. My definition represents a challenge to hegemonic practices and discourses. So, when I talk about queering pleasure

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still boundaries nonetheless. For example, the work of Masters and Johnson deconstructed notions around women's orgasms by integrating the importance of the clitoris into sexuality research. Their work is considered to be a breakthrough in conducting research on women's sexual behavior, as it normalized their sexuality and desires in ways that extended the scope beyond penetrative, procreative sexual interactions. Media has since transformed, normalizing women's sexual pleasure in many ways (for example, Cosmopolitan having an entire section of their magazine dedicated to it). However, an expectation to *always* be sexual and produce orgasms in particular ways, fails to examine the stigma and newly constructed boundaries that, once again, provide scripts to women as to how they may experience and navigate sexual pleasure. The intent isn't to provide an opposite, newfound script of sexual behavior to women (from sexual conservative to sexual deviant). The intent is to abolish the static boundaries of the script altogether.

[37] A representative U.S sample of orgasm frequency, conducted by Frederick, St. John, Garcia, and Lloyd (2018), shows that an orgasm gap persists between heterosexual men and women, with heterosexual men as most likely to say they usually-always have orgasms when sexually intimate (95%), followed by gay men (89%), bisexual men (88%), lesbian women (86%), bisexual women (66%), and finally, heterosexual women (65%).

that means I am asking: What do desire and pleasure look like through a queered lens? What is sexual satisfaction and how can we see this on a spectrum rather than seeing it against the normative expectations (that is, the orgasm)? Solely examining orgasm rates put sexual pleasure in a dichotomous "all or nothing" box of production. This expectation of performance and production influences women's experiences of sexual anxiety in the bedroom, as discussed in chapter 3. Instead of solely examining the orgasm gap, my participants' narratives suggest that we must examine how our understanding of sexual satisfaction is structured by patriarchal heteronormativity. They tell us orgasms are certainly important, but they aren't the only important thing.

For example, one of my participants, Parker (35, Latinx, questioning, pansexual) speaks to the fluidity in their experience of sexual pleasure:

[Parker]: Orgasms for me were never the litmus for a good interpersonal sexual experience. I love giving myself orgasms. It's great. I'm very good at it. And it took me a long time to be able to do it manually. I just learned how to do it manually not this past winter, but the winter before. So, placing this bad boy, a body wand for clitoral stimulation, on my clit at full power was the only way that I could orgasm and I would squirt.

[Spencier]: So there seems to be a distinction for you between an orgasm and still being sexually satiated or satisfied.

[Parker]: Oh yeah. If I'm in a fantasy situation or something that's really, really thoroughly orchestrated, like a really intense scene. That's why I love BDSM so much. In BDSM orgasms aren't necessarily the point. Getting into subspace is the point. Being rigged in a new position. Being able to take a really heavy amount of impact play, that's the point. Experiencing different sensations. Submitting in new ways that are challenging. That's the point. Making art. If you're doing wax play and you can take all this wax and they get to take pictures and it's a full artistic experience. That's the point. Penetrative sex isn't the point. Orgasm isn't necessarily the point. Pleasure is so much more than orgasms. And in those scenarios, when my dom has used a toy like this on me, yes, I've cum. But there was no pressure. It wasn't about feeding their ego.

Parker illuminates how my analysis was centered around heteronormative, patriarchal understandings of sexual pleasure. It is a capitalistic understanding of producing sexual pleasure that misses the nuanced ways women and AFAB folk experience pleasure, sensuality, and sexual play. To center queer, femme, and genderqueer voices demands that we reorient, or queer, what we are even including as sexual pleasure.

Parker articulates how their interest in the artistry and power within BDSM provides them sexual pleasure that doesn't necessarily revolve around orgasms. Around 45 to 60 percent of people report having fantasies that include dominance or submission, and around 30 percent of people have fantasies that include whipping or spanking (Joyal et al, 2015; Jozifkova, 2018). In a qualitative study of queer folk who practice BDSM, Baur (2014) found that there was not only a celebration of sexuality and pleasure, but a skill in communicating one's desires, fantasies, preferences, and abilities. Baur (2014) goes on to explain that many participants were able to separate and distinguish their sexual behaviors, emotional connections, and desires, to create a safe space that explored boundaries and identities. Baur's research included participants, like Parker, who explained that "sex" or "orgasm" was not necessarily the point of BDSM, and that many "scenes" could not even include genitals. Similar studies centered on BDSM have found that participants drew distinctions between BDSM and sex, in that BDSM is not just about sexuality, but rather about respecting power, security, consent, and discipline (Sprott et al, 2020; Karlstrom, 2018). Again, these studies align with Parker's emphasis on enjoying things other than orgasm in their sexual experience.

Notably, Parker points out that she loves giving herself orgasms, and even goes on to discuss her favorite vibrator she uses when masturbating. However, Parker separates her reasons for autonomous masturbation and interpersonal sexual relations. For Parker, sexual relations with another person is a holistic experience featuring a full range of sensations, power, emotions, intellect, and artistry. Masturbation is for creating orgasms, for herself. However, as she mentions, orgasms aren't necessarily or always the point.

This explanation Parker provides about their sexual experiences crystalizes the concept of queering sexual pleasure in that they actively deconstruct notions around sexual pleasure as penetrative, heteronormative, orgasm-mandating, male-centered experience. As queer scholar Cathy Cohen (1997) argues, queerness interrogates heteronormativity, which can look like many different things inclusive of single motherhood, sex work, use of sex toys, and more. Cohen reminds readers that heteronormativity works to reinforce institutional racism, patriarchy, and class exploitation, all of which intersect with the lives of those labeled "heterosexual," and that inclusive, intersectional queerness is required to destabilize those in power. Indeed, queer scholarship has provided a space within social research to break apart preconceived notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, to disconnect these concepts from one another and re-align them in unexpected and new ways. Consequently, Parker's queering of sexual pleasure is not just sexual liberation for oneself, but an act of resistance and activism that challenges heteronormativity.

Another way participants' queer sexual pleasure is in sexual "play," such as foreplay and stimulation of the entire body. For example, when I ask Morgan (33, white,

cis, sexually ambiguous) about what she likes or prefers in her sexual interactions, she gives me a small smirk and begins to tell me her interests in foreplay:

> [Morgan]: I have really sensitive skin. The lightest touch on me will send shivers down my spine. Sometimes ticklish, sometimes not. I feel like if some kind of foreplay is starting once we've been sitting on the couch watching a movie or something like that, if you have been touching the inside of my wrist or rubbing down my hip or something like that, that is already a pretty big start for me. The rest of it goes from there. So, I think that is part of it. But especially when I'm doing any kind of sexual play. It's very mental as well, the power dynamics behind it. If I was texting them dirty pictures while they were working and they come home, 'you're in so much trouble right now…' Just that one sentence can really get me ready to go. I feel like it's such a combination of what I do and what is done to me physically with the mental capacity and the mind games behind it.

Morgan, like Parker, remarks on how power play can be sexually stimulating. Beyond BDSM, however, Morgan remarks that she enjoys light touches along her skin, sexual "playfulness" and texting sexual pictures to one another. Morgan ends her statement referring to how she enjoys a combination of both mental and physical stimulation.[38]

There is power and agency in women and genderqueer folk exploring sexual pleasure for the sake of pleasure itself. The act of "play" allows them to explore their bodies, fantasies, pleasures, and kinks instead of reducing sexual interactions to identity categories, trauma, and power. It pushes back at reductive notions of sex as merely a vehicle for procreation. It is queer, as these participants rework the boundaries of sexual norms and sexual pleasures. It is experiencing sensuality and pleasure outside of orgasms, or working through their mental pleasures that stimulate and connect to their bodily ones. It is seeing pleasure as an end, and not as a means to an end. Lastly, such play pushes

[38] Sexual play and BDSM may heavily overlap, dependent on the individual.

against the sexual hierarchies of "good" sex; i.e., heterosexual, procreative, interactional[39] sex.

Sexual play, as Paasonen (2017) argues, is a space to explore and utilize fantasy to actively disrupt power relations, to actively resist social sanctions, gender roles, and sexual scripts, and to experiment with resistance. Play may assist in queering binary categories of sex and sexuality. Play may be a process of becoming or unbecoming, of both learning and unlearning, of both performance and unmasking. We make these connections in the bedroom by playing out what is expected while allowing space to play, to explore, to fantasize. It allows us to pursue desire, sensations, and pleasures that shed normative notions of our identities—to experiment with ourselves in a way that opens up both ourselves and the potentialities of others (Paasonen, 2017).

Sawyer (30, white, cis, bisexual) also touches on the importance of sexual playfulness and the full range of sexual sensations one can experience. However, as Sawyer chats with me over Zoom in her office, she informs me of learning this knowledge through her experience as a store manager of a sex toy shop:

[Spencier]: You mentioned working at a sex store. Can you speak to that a little bit?

[Sawyer]: I definitely learned a lot in regards to–that there are so many things other than actual penetration that can be used sexually: just little tickles, touches, flavor, scents. There're so many things. All five senses can be used and the education portion and talking to customers and teaching them about things, in the most professional manner. People that genuinely came in and wanted our help and had no idea what they wanted or what they were looking for. You know, we would ask a couple of probing questions, pun intended, and we found what they want. Selling the fantasy was our thing. That was the company's motto. They would ask: "What does selling the fantasy mean to you?" And it's basically letting a customer -- showing the

[39] Not all forms of sex are with another person. Sex may also be understood as sexual behavior with oneself (i.e., masturbation)

> customer what they want even if they don't even know they want it. And there's just so many aspects that go into any kind of sexual pleasure from beginning to end. I mean, there's, again, not even penetration. Like massage candles, that's touch and that is sight and that is smell. You have three right there that are just super important other than just getting fucked.

Sawyer speaks to many aspects of Paasonen's (2018) definition of sexual playfulness, such as sensory openness, curiosity, and exploration. She also touches on sexual playfulness toward the end of her statement as she adds "there's just so many aspects that go into any kind of sexual pleasure from beginning to end." What I found particularly interesting in this explanation of her experience as a sex shop worker was the use of selling sex toys as a form of sex education. Sawyer begins as a student, and then becomes an educator to her clients about varying forms of sexual pleasure beyond the coital imperative. This sex toy shop, then, is an outlet of activism and sexual liberation as it creates a safe space of education, sexual exploration, and a queering of sexual boundaries surrounding sexual pleasure.

However, it bears repeating that one of the few forms of queering sexual pleasure and sex education is in the form of capitalistic consumption. By this, I mean that one of the few avenues people may receive a 'queering' of sex education, is in the mandate and format of being a consumer of goods. Future research is necessary to problematize the intersections of capitalistic consumption and sexual empowerment.

In this section, I examined how queering allows for not just plural sexualities, but also encompasses non-normative sexual acts, experiences, and consciousnesses (Rubin 1984). Cohen (1997: 439) speaks to this understanding of queer, stating: "In queer politics, sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change, movement, redefinition, and subversive performance—from year to year, from partner to

partner, from day to day." For folk such as Parker or Sawyer then, the point isn't to "normalize" fluid sexual behavior and identity, but rather, to destigmatize it. To queer sexuality doesn't mean to center particular forms of sexual behavior, but rather, to condone the fluidness of sexuality that directly interrogates that there *is* a "normal" or "center" in sexual pleasure.

Taking a "normalization" approach could simply reconfigure sexual behavior into new static, essentializing categories. For example, consider the complications in a sexual binary of straight and gay. Creating the additional, static box of "gay" leaves no room for folk who move within and beyond these essentializing categories. It is necessary to understand sexual identity and behavior as a space for continual re-adjustments in multiple ways in relation to time, bodies, experiences, and environment. Queerness is not a petition for normalizing queer identity, but rather, an interrogation and destabilization of taken-for-granted truths surrounding identity itself. Consequently, the narratives throughout this section make the case for queerness within sexuality, and how it is a demand for fluidity, destabilization, and destigmatization of sexual behavior and pleasures. Queerness problematizes the assumed inner workings and connections made between sex, gender and sexuality (Esterberg, 1996).

ENTITLEMENT TO SEXUAL PLEASURE: PUSHING BACK AGAINST STIGMA

In this section, I turn to sexual liberation and play in the use of masturbation, use of sex toys, and period sex. This analysis adds to means of queering pleasure and sexual liberation, while paying close attention to participant's narratives of sexual behavior that

have routinely been stigmatized or taboo for women, and their acts of agency that suggests an entitlement to sexual pleasure.

Masturbation & Sex Toys

> "American cultural discomfort regarding masturbation is rooted in the rich socio-historical context of sexual policing, particularly with regard to alienating women and children from their own sexuality under the pretense of discipline and well-being." (Adams, 2016: 230)

Whether to quell desires of, to sexually gatekeep their bodies from, or to accommodate their advances, women bodies have been molded into objects for men. Simply put, women's sexuality has been defined as inherently entwined and in service to, men's sexual desires and urges. As stated previously, women have been understood to be passive throughout sex—they "take in," or "receive"—many actions and narratives of sex describe women as passive creatures that have little to no agency in the interactions of men. The invisibility surrounding women's sexual desires and pleasures especially influences how one talks about, thinks about, or engages in masturbation. There is a missing discourse of desire surrounding women's autonomous pleasure, irrespective of men's involvement (Fine, 1988). Thus, such invisibility surrounding women's pleasure is purposeful in that it tells a story of gender and power that interprets women's sexual bodies and pleasures as unimportant, or even stigmatized (Fahs and Frank, 2014).

Despite the absence of education surrounding women's masturbation, studies have found associations between women's masturbation linked to improvements of women's body image, sexual pleasure, and self-awareness (Coleman, 2003; Phillippsohn and Hartman, 2009; Burri, Cherkas, and Spector, 2009; Herbenick et al., 2011; Rowland et al., 2020). Women often use sex toys for masturbation. Research shows that sex

objects and toys may promote diversity in pleasure, provide orgasm positive interventions, ease performance anxiety, produce new ways to achieve an orgasm, and create a sense of autonomy or control in one's sexual experience (Striar and Bartlik, 1999; Billups et al., 2001; Fahs and Frank, 2014). Overall, women have used masturbation for a variety of reasons ranging from tension release, self-care, resistance to male dominance, and as a source of joy and pleasure (Fahs and Frank, 2014). Within my study, all 30 participants masturbate. With this in mind, I find that my participant narratives exhibit forms of sexual liberation through masturbation and use of sex toys, as it exemplifies an entitlement to pleasure that is attached to nothing other than their own sexual satisfaction.

Brianna (27, white, cis, bisexual) is a behavior therapist/technician, a graduate student, and a self-described BBW (big beautiful woman). She sits crisscrossed on my couch and throws her hair up into a ponytail as she reflects on her formative experiences with sex toys:

[Brianna]: Yeah, I guess I was maybe sixteen or so when I used my first actual vibrator that didn't come out of a pillow.[40] I do remember a few years later my mom finding one of mine and being like, "you don't need that." Us having a little bit of a conversation about it. She threw it away and I was really angry because I bought that with my own money from my job that I worked hard at. But she was just very against the concept of it. I don't remember exactly how she phrased it but something along the lines of how if I can do that to myself then it takes away the specialness of having a soulmate or a husband and sharing that with him. Something along those lines. I remember feeling very much like, No. And also feeling kind of sorry for her. That was kind of a first for me. The concept of recognizing something in a parent or authority figure that you feel like you pity them a little bit was kind of a bizarre concept. But I feel like that was the first time I felt it. I knew that it was something I was having fun

[40] Brianna mentions earlier in the interview that her first way to masturbate was using a vibrating device that she pulled out of a neck massage pillow

> with and enjoyed. I felt like throughout my recent years I had been taking my sexuality into my own hands and enjoying what I was doing. And the way she told me about why I shouldn't be doing it kind of made me sad for her. It made me realize that she didn't have those kinds of experiences.

When asking Brianna about her use of sex toys, she reflects on an interaction she had with her mother. Brianna's mother finds her vibrator and throws it out, telling her she doesn't need it since she will eventually have a husband who will satisfy her needs and, significantly, that masturbation will spoil her future sexual intimacy. Her mom seems to be attempting to confine Brianna within a heteronormative concept of sexuality that involves a very particular kind of sexuality: one that doesn't involve female agency and autonomy that is separate from male partnership. Brianna's reaction is a blunt rejection of her mom's attempt to establish traditional, heteronormative gender norms. She feels *sad* for her mom, and reflects that this was the first time that she associated sadness and pity towards a parent—an authority figure who is supposed to offer her guidance and answers. She felt sad, realizing in that moment that her mom must not also experience the joys and pleasures in discovering one's own body through masturbation with a vibrator.

Brianna's story offers an insight into how women navigate traditional gender roles and sexual scripts from an early age. This scene also shows how sexual entitlement to pleasure and sexual liberation is not a space one enters and is then a part of forevermore. Sexual liberation and entitlement to pleasure is an ongoing process. By this, I mean that women's entitlement to sexual pleasure, separate from its association to men's pleasure, is constantly contested. Therefore, women are consistently negotiating, resisting, demanding, and navigating ways to establish their sexual liberation. In this example, Brianna reflects on her lack of guilt or stigma when her mother found her sex

toy, and remarks "I knew that it was something I was having fun with and enjoyed. I felt like throughout my recent years I had been taking my sexuality into my own hands and enjoying what I was doing." Sex toys and masturbation allow women such as Brianna to create their own sexual pleasure and joy, providing them opportunity to be agents of their own sexual satisfaction.

Masturbation and sex toys, even if done and used privately within the bedroom, have historically been a source of stigma and shame in public discourse.[41] Jorden (51, white, cis, straight) addresses the transformation of her own conversations to her friends and family surrounding sexual pleasure and masturbation throughout the years:

[Jorden]: I mean it was probably just a couple of weeks ago, a friend of mine who lives in another part of the country, posted that a website called *Good Vibrations* was having this amazing sale on this particular clitoral vibrator. And she had posted about it, I don't know, maybe six months ago, they do this periodically. But I missed the sale, I didn't go to the website in time so this time when she posted it, it was like, "Oh, my gosh, I'm getting it." You know, it was like 75% off or some crazy thing so, I ordered it and not only did I order it but I did a whole post on my Facebook page saying, "Listen, we're in a pandemic, ladies, like, you know, we need to get through this and sex toys might be the key." And I said, "Heck, you can get three of these, they'll let you buy three. So, pick one up for yourself and a couple of friends." And that post got so much response and it's funny because, I mean, there would have been a time in my life where, I mean, you could have paid me $100,000 and I wouldn't have posted something like that. Like I would have been so uncomfortable with the idea of acknowledging that I use such toys let alone encouraging other people to. And now, that didn't even phase me. So, definitely an evolution of comfort and, you know, just acknowledgement.

Jorden's reflection of her internalized stigma surrounding sex toys speaks to the

[41] Despite the leaps made in the transparency and destigmatization of active sex lives of women such as Jorden, sex toys remain a social pariah in many ways. The sex toy market includes toys filled with chemicals (such as phthalates, polyvinyl chloride, and polystyrene, which are known to cause cancer, birth defects, and interfere with hormones) since there are no FDA regulations or industry standards for them (Comella, 2017). This is because sex toys are oftentimes marketed as novelties, or gag gifts, rather than functional items people regularly use, leaving little expectation for health standards (Comella, 2017).

overarching patriarchal climate surrounding women's sexual pleasure. Her entitlement to pleasure and her transparency about that pleasure is something she grows into—something she learns despite a culture that tells her otherwise. In contrast, men's masturbation is normalized, condoned, and deemed an integral part of men's lives from the time they are adolescents (Halpern, Udry, Suchindran and Campell, 2000; Laqueur, 2003).

The internalized stigma surrounding masturbating women was what Betsy Dodson was committed to deconstructing. Dodson (1974:13) argued that empowerment in women's sexual lives would translate into empowerment and entitlement in other areas of their lives. She wrote:

> Masturbation is the way we discover our eroticism, the way we learn to respond sexually, the way we learn to love ourselves and build self-esteem. Sexual skill and the ability to respond are not 'natural' in our society. Doing what 'comes naturally' for us is to be sexually inhibited. Sex is like any other skill—it has to be learned and practiced. When a woman masturbates, she learns to like her own genitals, to enjoy sex and orgasm, and furthermore, to become proficient and independent about it.

Dodson's (1974) encouraged women to become their own experts, of their own bodies—to create their own knowledge, boundaries, and control surrounding their own pleasure. Masturbation, Dodson argued, continues to be a source of sexual liberation, as it creates an independent source of sexual pleasure and joy that allows women to both learn their bodies, and become comfortable with them. Jorden touches on her own "evolution of comfort" as she calls it, where she finds an easing of embarrassment, stigma, and shame as she grows comfortable in her body and pleasures. Despite Jorden's reclamation of newfound joy and love for her masturbation and sex toy use, what remains tethered to her transformation, is that she ever felt a source of shame associated to her sexual

behavior to begin with.

Interactional Masturbation and Sex Toy Use

Masturbation and sex toy use can also be liberating in interactional settings with sexual partners. Liz (32, white, cis, bisexual) is on the patio of a local coffee shop, sipping her coffee when she begins to tell me about her use of sex toys on another partner:

> [Liz]: My current boyfriend likes pegging[42] actually. So, we had discovered that probably like two years ago, um, we were just like being in a really degrading sexual mood[43] and he was talking about being humiliated and I was like, I do have a huge pink dick in the other room. [CHUCKLE] And it kind of escalated. And um it went from like using external toys to now I have a strap on that's only been used on a man. And it seems like men like the reversal of gender roles [chuckle]. Or like not having to be like so tough or like being the one in charge all the time.

Liz discusses how she uses a strap on to peg her cis male partner. She reflects on her sexual behavior with her partner and suggests that perhaps men enjoy the reversal of traditional gender roles. Liz is reflecting on her and her partner's transgression of gender norms pertaining to sexual pleasure, and that her use of a strap on as way to "be in charge." In line with current research, scholars have suggested that queer folk may use phallic-shaped objects and sex toys to subvert the patriarchal power of the penis (Reich 1999; Hamming, 2001; Minge and Zimmerman, 2009; Fahs and Swank, 2013). Therefore, it can be said that Liz is producing new ways to experience sexual pleasure

[42] Pegging is a sexual practice in which a woman performs anal sex on a man by penetrating his anus with a strap-on dildo. This practice may also involve stimulating the male genitalia.
[43] Erotic humiliation is consensual psychological humiliation performed in order to produce erotic excitement or sexual arousal. This can be for either the person(s) being humiliated and demeaned or the person(s) humiliating, or both.

and orgasm with a partner that both deconstructs notions around heteronormative sex, while promoting diversity in pleasure. Liz illustrates how entitlement to pleasure may be in both receiving, and providing sexual pleasure in queer, diverse, sex toy-inclusive ways. Sexual liberation and entitlement to (giving) pleasure through sex toys.

In other inter-relational sex toy use, sex toys and mutual masturbation may be used as a source of dedication to one's orgasm and sexual pleasure. For example, Gail (white, agender, bisexual/queer/homoflexible) remarks on the use of sex toys with their partner:

> [Gail]: Yeah, so actually ah, Theo was the first partner in which I've had regular um, like contact with the sole purpose of getting me off, whereas in the past I would often have sex, just to have sex, you know. If I orgasm, great. If I don't, I don't. But the ultimate goal was I always wanted to get the other person off. But with Theo we will often have like sexual contact in a way that like it's dedicated for me to get off. Um, so in those situations I will like use my vibrator on myself, but then they might use the dildo, their fingers, um, they might use dirty talk, but they'll kind of like help me along. Or we might like do mutual masturbation. So, with that yeah, they will often use toys on me.

Gail smiles a big grin, ear to ear, as they remark that their current partner uses sex toys with the intent of getting them off, essentially of focusing the sexual attention and pleasure on them. This desire is new to Gail, as they reflect on past sexual interactions with other partners being goal-oriented towards getting *others* off, noting "If I orgasm, great. If I don't, I don't." Gail touches on both the "queering" of sexual pleasure in that their uses of sexual interactions aren't necessarily tied to the intention of orgasm, while also touching on chapter 3's discussion of sexual "givers," in that there is an expectation of women and AFAB folk to give sexual pleasure. However, Gail moves beyond these scopes. As they reflect on their current sex life entailing use of sex toys with the sole intention of "getting them off;" they have grown into a sex life that centers their pleasure,

which is something they are both unfamiliar with and enjoy. Therefore, use of sex toys as a form of sexual liberation can be found in both solitary and partnered sexual pleasure.

Period Sex

Period sex has been associated with shame and stigma for many people who menstruate (Fahs, 2011, 2013; Jackson and Falmagne, 2013; Chrisler, 2014; Matthew, 2018; Rubinsky, 2018). For many folks who have periods, this shame and stigma is directly associated with their concern over their partner's perception of their bleeding bodies (Fahs 2011, 2013, 2014). With this in mind, a study by Gunning et al. (2019) found that partner communication influences perceptions of period sex and one's feelings of their own bleeding body. More broadly, conversations around sex with one's partner predict sexual satisfaction (Byers, 2011). Despite its importance, many sexual partners struggle to talk candidly and transparently about their sexual activity (Byers, 2011; Cupach and Metts, 1994; Noland, 2010). Cis-gendered men and women who do engage in period sex associated their feelings around period sex to their positive communication and conversations with their partner (Allen and Goldberg, 2009). Thus, communication with one's sexual partner regarding a desire for period sex is an important piece of engaging in period sex. However, period sex is a challenging topic to bring up, which may require people to work through feelings of stigma and shame in order to navigate an uncomfortable discussion (Anderson et al, 2011; Noland, 2010).

Despite the topic of period sex being entrenched with stigma and shame, studies show that a majority of women have engaged in menstrual sex, particularly women in committed relationships (Allen and Goldberg, 2009). Although period sex appears to be a

common occurrence, research indicates that there are mixed perceptions and opinions on period sex, ranging from finding the behavior dirty and gross to finding it affirming (Fahs, 2014). More broadly, women who are more comfortable with their bodies and sexuality are more likely to be comfortable with their period and period sex (Rempel and Baumgartner, 2003). Consequently, there appears to be an association between perceptions of period sex and their navigation of gender roles, embodiment, and sexuality. Overall, these studies examine heterosexual cis women, consequently leaving out queer women and gender nonconforming participants from conversations surrounding period sex. It is also important to note that these studies approach period sex through a heteronormative lens, in that they measure sex as penetrative. What many of these studies fail to encompass is the frequency of oral sex throughout period sex encounters.

A more recent study by Rubinsky et al (2021), however, looks at 136 diverse gender and sexual identities, and investigates attitudes towards menstrual sex. Their findings show that their participants felt generally positive or neutral toward menstrual sexual activity, and are comfortable and content with their interpersonal conversations pertaining to the topic (Rubinsky, et al, 2021). My findings within queer folk's narratives surrounding their bodies and period sex likewise suggests a trend of more comfortable navigation of period sex. This ease speaks to the entitlement to pleasure many of my participants exhibit, and their comfort in both their bleeding bodies and communicating their needs to their sexual partners.

Anne[44] (28, Filipino-American, straight, cis) provides an example of this entitlement to pleasure even during her menstruating cycles:

[44] As discussed in chapter 3, Anne has had both relationships and sexual interactions with women and queer folk, however, defines herself as straight due to her current long-term relationship with a cis male.

[Spencier]: Have you ever experienced any type of sexual interaction on your period?

[Anne]: Yeah, that doesn't stop me. And I don't like when partners, I mean I've never had partners like that—that's something that I ask, like I set that foundation when I start dating somebody, or at least I have with the last couple partners, I'm like if that's something that bothers you—and honestly it shouldn't bother you because it's a very natural thing and like if you don't have sex on your period, you're literally eliminating so many days. My periods last six to seven days, so you're literally taking out like half the year, all because you don't want to have sex with me on my period? Grow up.

Anne declares that not only does she have conversations with her sexual partners pertaining to her periods, but that she establishes boundaries and expectations in her entitlement to pleasure throughout her menstruation. Furthermore, Anne resists the notion that period sex is deviant, shameful, or stigmatized. The past study by Rubinsky et al (2021) that is inclusive of the queer community suggests that queer folk may be more likely to perceive their and others bleeding bodies as normal and natural. Anne makes a point to call her period "natural" and refuses to cut out her menstruating days for the comfort of a partner's perception of menstruation[45].

However, for many participants, this comfort in period sex is not a feeling they have always had. Folk discuss their transformation throughout the years from associating periods with stigma and shame to feeling a sense of confidence and positive associations with period sex. Westley (30, Black, cis, bisexual) tells me about her struggles with period sex in her younger years, and as to how she's grown into a sense of entitlement to pleasure throughout her menstruation cycle:

[45] It is also worth noting that since my participants are predominantly queer, they may also find an easing of anxiety and shame when interacting with *other* bleeding bodies during sexual interaction, as they may feel less anxiety or need to negotiate with a partner who has similar bodily experiences. Future research is necessary to examine how women and AFAB folk explicitly feel about sexual interactions on their period with other people who menstruate.

[Spencier]: Have you ever had any type of sexual interactions on your period?

[Westley]: Yeah. Um, when I was younger I would avoid it. But as I got older I got less self-conscious about it and like more just accepting of normal female occurrences. I also used to kind of just not talk about having a period with guys, because I just assumed they were grossed out by it, and then I've kind of just not given a fuck. I now use a menstrual cup and like soft discs, so last night I had sex and didn't tell him that I was on my period. [CHUCKLE] Because *I'm not going to limit my experience just because there's some blood going on.* [emphasis added]

Westley reflects on her discomfort in telling male sexual partners about her period, and admits she found her sexual partner's perception of her period so important that she would avoid period sexual interactions altogether. However, she points to her growth in her bodily confidence and comfort, and stresses that she's not going to "limit" her sexual experiences just because "there's some blood going on." Westley's reflection on her former perception of period sex is a common thread that runs through my participants stories; participants used to feel uncomfortable and shameful about period sex in their younger years, and have grown into a newfound perception of entitlement to sexual pleasure that is inclusive of their menstruation cycles. This change in perspective suggests that future research needs to examine what forms of period-positive sex education may be implemented into youth resources to encourage a destigmatization of period-inclusive sexual behavior.

Also included in Westley's reflection on her perceptions of period sex is her lack of disclosure to her sexual partner that she is on her period. This purposeful omission suggests that there is still some stigma attached to her menstruation, and that a partner's perception of bleeding bodies is an underlying concern. Gail (23, white, agender,

bisexual/queer/homoflexible) also touches on the importance of a partner's perception of periods, as they remark:

> [Gail]: Um, I currently have an IUD, so I don't really get periods anymore. But back when I did, I've yet to have a sexual partner that was not okay with me being on my period, so I'm kind of blessed in that regard, because I can just have sex during my period and they just didn't care. Um, I would always just like say like hey, I'm on my period, let me grab a towel. Then you lay down a towel, you have sex on the towel and everything is fine.

Gail exhibits forms of entitlement to pleasure and resistance to stigma surrounding periods, as they navigate period sex with the nonchalance of "throwing down a towel" with their sexual partners. However, slipped within this reflection on period sex, Gail makes a point to remark that they are "blessed" to have partners who never minded their menstruation. This concern for partner's perception of bleeding bodies is seen in Westley's narrative as well, and in past research pertaining to period sex (Gunning et al., 2019). Nevertheless, narratives such as Gail, Westley, and Anne speak to the ways that navigating period sex may be understood as resistance work and entitlement to pleasure. Normalizing bleeding bodies and deconstructing the shame, guilt, and stigma attached to periods is hard work that pushes against the notion that folk who bleed are dirty or are less worthy of sexual pleasure.

This section centered participant's narratives that spoke to the agency and resistance work needed to exhibit an entitlement to pleasure in traditionally stigmatized or taboo forms of sexual behavior (for folk with vaginas, at least)—in this case, masturbation, use of sex toys, and period sex. Participants spoke to "deserving" sexual pleasure in diverse and fluid ways, while also continually having to *work* towards creating space and boundaries for their pleasure, as well as counteracting heteronormative

scripts. For example, Brianna had to argue with her mother pertaining to her right and entitlement to use a vibrator, and Jorden had to work against internalized stigma and shame before her transparency on social media on her use of sex toys. The participants allude to a continual "process" of establishing agency and resistance in their entitlement to pleasure.[46]

SEXUAL PLEASURE REPRESENTATION

This section looks at how representation of self in sexual pleasure is a form of sexual liberation. This analysis includes sexual liberation through watching representational porn, a passive process, as well as actively narrating their own pleasure stories during this research study.

Queer and Lesbian Porn

Queer porn encompasses varying gender identities and sexual orientations exploring sexual pleasures and desire in multiple ways. Ingrid Ryberg (2012:27) has asserted that queer porn includes two objectives, which are "interrogating and troubling gender and sexual categories and aiming at sexual arousal." However, studies have also found that there is an entire genre of "lesbian porn" that is created and consumed by heterosexual men at the expense of queer women; this particular "lesbian porn" perpetuates stereotypes surrounding queer women, and leads to the sexualization and violence against queer women by cishet men (DeGenevieve, 2007; Russo, 2007).

[46] This continual "process" for participants is seen at all levels of social analysis: micro (self), meso (inter-relational interactions such as family and relationships), and macro (societal norms and social institutions, such as school).

Consequently, not all queer porn is inherently queer, and may in fact perpetuate heteronormative understandings of sexual behavior.

Much queer porn, however, creates a "democratization of desire" where feminist, queer, LGBTQIA+ visibility contributes to a shift in the boundaries surrounding and regulating sexuality (McNair, 2002). In fact, McNair (2002) argues that this blurring of boundaries of public and private discourse assists in the breakdown of sexual hierarchies. This shift in boundaries surrounding sexual behavior and gender representation is a big part of why Taylor (27, white, cis, bisexual/queer) prefers queer porn. She describes this preference for lesbian pornography as a point of representation, as it breaks down sexist boundaries surrounding women's entitlement to pleasure:

[Spencier]: Why do think you prefer to watch lesbian pornography?

[Taylor]: I think it's that vulnerability of like—I feel like men and women porn is just fucking gross half the time. Porn I feel like is typically targeted towards men and I think that it's always just like the terrible, extremely rough, guy shoving his dick down some girl's throat and I don't want to watch that. To me that's not what my sex looks like, so for me I feel like the more intimate porn is just not so vulgar and intense. I feel I find that easier in like lesbian porn than I do if I'm looking for a guy and a girl porn. I have to go through like five hundred videos before I find something that doesn't like honestly disgust me. So, I think it's just the ease of it in a sense, like okay it's here, and this is a little bit easier for me to find, I only have to go through ten videos whereas on this end I have to go through like five hundred videos. [CHUCKLE] So, I think that's definitely got something to do with it. I think too when I was younger, I liked watching women too because I feel like it helped me understand my body better. I feel like it was easier for me to be like oh, they're doing this and this woman got off from doing this and that, so I feel like it helped me understand my body a little bit better, whereas like men/women porn, I'm just like, this has nothing to do with her, like this is all about him getting off basically. So, I didn't really relate to it in that sense. I think that was like a big, especially when I was younger, a bigger factor into like why I watched lesbian porn, because it was easier for me to just relate to that I think at a younger age.

Taylor stresses that the reason she gravitates toward lesbian porn is because straight porn is violent, rough, and doesn't represent her sexual experiences and desires. Although Taylor is bisexual, her reasoning behind predominantly viewing lesbian porn is not simply due to a preference of viewing queer sex, but rather, due to not seeing herself or her sexual interests represented in straight porn. She goes on to reflect that when she was younger, she used lesbian porn to learn about her own body, almost as a form of informal sex education, and quips that "men/women porn, I'm just like, this has nothing to do with her, like this is all about him getting off basically. So, I didn't really relate to it in that sense."

Research shows that much pornography centers on violence and aggression towards women, and is targeted towards a (presumed) male audience (Bridges et al 2010). The violence and aggression in pornography, as Brunskell-Evans (2016) states, is quite literally selling and marketing the violation of women's bodies and boundaries. This is not to stigmatize forms of pain and humiliation fantasies or desires, but rather, to address the lack of diverse representation within pornography that speaks to a system that is deeply entrenched in the objectification of women's bodies. The appeal of violent porn, Jensen (2007:98) argues, may in fact be due to society's conception of masculinity as "rooted in a dominant concept of masculinity: sex as control, conquest, domination, and the acquisition of pleasure by the taking of women." Taylor points to this violence and absence of sexual behavior centered around women's pleasure as a reason she prefers to watch lesbian porn.

Taylor's emphasis on seeing herself represented within queer porn points to an argument made by Cherie (2010), in that queer porn may be understood as working

towards representation of authenticity: authenticity in gender, sexual orientations, desires, bodies, interpersonal interactions, and desires. Queer porn, then, is not just about representation, but also critiques the boundaries around what "typical sex" looks like. For example, Olivia (25, Black, pansexual, cis) asserts that she doesn't enjoy hearing men in porn, and therefore finds her sexual interests represented in queer porn:

[Spencier]: And you mentioned you watch porn. What kind of porn do you enjoy watching?

[Olivia]: I don't like hearing guys in porn. I prefer lesbian or solo girl porn. Or trans women that haven't had their bottom surgery. It is still watching somebody be penetrated but without having to hear or see a guy. I noticed I look for women's body types that are similar to mine. I definitely get turned on by like, me being turned on in a way. Like, I would masturbate in the mirror. Like, I touch my own body because that turned me on. I would watch a lot of girl-on-girl stuff because watching a woman get pleasure, like, brings me pleasure. You know what I mean? I like women on women. I've even been watching some shit like, with women with strap ons fucking other women. I love watching women 69 or threesomes. I've been a little bit into like, some dom and sub stuff. Like…my partner and I talked about – like, we watched a video. And we talked about trying some things— fantasy wise.

Olivia enjoys a myriad of porn, ranging from women masturbating, to lesbian sex with a strap-on, and threesomes. Within all of Olivia's porn preferences, she is finding herself represented in queer porn. Whether with women sleeping with one another, or deconstructing boundaries as to what "appropriate" sexual scripts and gender presentation look like in the bedroom, Olivia creates her own form of sexual liberation and active resistance to heteronormativity by exploring her sexual desires through porn in fluid ways. Olivia is, as Ryberg (2012) argues, troubling gender and sexuality categories by consuming porn that defies heteronormativity.

Olivia addresses the joy in seeing herself represented in porn, and the joy in her own body's pleasure. She also suggests that these porn clips are something she uses to engage in conversations with her partner, allowing them the language and space to explore new sexual desires. These two moments are of particular importance because they represent Olivia's sexual liberation as something beyond consuming queer porn, but as also embedded in how she interprets this knowledge into her own sexual life, perceptions, and behavior.

Porn is an important part of many women and AFAB folk's sexual lives, as 29 out of 30 participants in my study remarked using it. Participants such as Olivia and Taylor point to the importance of finding porn that represents their interests and sexual desires. Therefore, it is important to examine how porn represents (or doesn't represent) women and queer folks' sexual lives, and as to how we can use this information to create diverse, representative porn.

One could go so far to note that, despite its commodification, pornography are stories, or narratives. They set a scene, and play out characters that are representative of what they think the consumer's want. Extending this analysis of representation and narrative, the following section of this chapter speaks to the importance of centering narratives of oneself, and its connection to sexual liberation.

Narrating the Self

Narration has been understood as a mode of representation, where we learn and make sense of both the social world, and our social identities connected to it (Somers, 1994; Ochs and Capps, 1996). Somers (1994) argues that identity is embedded within overlapping, intersecting networks of relations that change over time and space, and that

ourselves and our participants identities are not fixed categories, as fixed categories leaves no room to considering power relations that change and reconstruct themselves throughout time. With this in mind, Somers (1994: 614) argues that it is important to incorporate a re-framed narrative, as it is not merely a "representation" of lived experiences, but rather, we must examine how:

> social life is itself storied and that narrative is an ontological condition of social life….that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives.

This framework, then, leaves room for both agency and structure within participants' social knowledge. It marries narrative with both identity and action research by examining narratives as connected relationships that are embedded within time and space. However, meaning making and narrative are not solely to conceptualize past or current events, but also future-oriented meaning making (Märtsin, 2019). By this, Märtsin (2019) means that narratives serve as a vehicle to imagine future selves and relations to others, or to develop goals and sense making that influences future possibilities. This understanding of narrative frames my inclusion of my participants self-reflection of their own sexual narrative "themes." At the end of the interviews, I asked participants if they had to come up with a central theme that runs through their sexual history and pleasure narrative, what would it be? Incorporating an open-ended question on reflection of their sexual identities and lives, allows participants to not just represent themselves, but also

allows myself as a researcher to place their reflection within a larger social and cultural network or configuration of relationships.

Therefore, incorporating my participants' closing self-reflections is invaluable, as they reflect past, present and future intentions, identities, and meaning making surrounding women and genderqueer folks' sexual lives. And ultimately, the act of telling of one's own story can in and of itself have liberating power.

Estelle (23, Black, cis, fluid sexuality/heteroromantic) is petting her dog in her apartment, and drinking a protein shake since she is on her way to the gym after this interview. As I ask her about determining a central theme for her story, she sits back and reflects for moment before saying:

[Estelle]: To like find the love in yourself, in your body, before you give it to someone else. You not being in love with yourself—you're never gonna get that full pleasure, because I'll tell you when I started loving and feeling myself and all that stuff, my sex got better. Teenage years I feel like that's probably why you know, sex wasn't that enjoyable, because you have, you're hearing things from this person, you're hearing things from that person, you have to worry about him going to school and telling people, like what you guys have done, all those things. Like you're going through that hard part in your life or like those younger years where you're not sure if you really should even be having sex before marriage and like all this stuff, and then once I started loving myself, and enjoying what I like and not being afraid to verbalize it, I started enjoying sex. I started feeling myself more. I started being able to venture out. And like experience with women, and experience with men, and when I walked in like to a situation, like feeling more comfortable about myself, they feed off of it and we just have a great time. So, self-love. Try masturbating and loving yourself, because that's how I really found myself, pleasing myself, knowing that if somebody else can't, I know I can. That is like the biggest confidence booster.

Estelle finds a theme of self-discovery and self-love in her sexual narrative. She describes having to break away from the stigma, anxieties, and shame associated with sex

as a young woman, and finding ways to love and discover her body that have led to a healthy and fulfilling sex life. Estelle describes agency as a way she loves herself, in that she verbalizes what she does or doesn't like to partners, she explores herself and others, and states that she can always get herself off if others can't, and finds confidence and love in that notion. Estelle is describing her theme as self-love through agentic sex (whether with herself or others), where she is an active participant in her sexual pleasure. The fact that Estelle reflects on her struggles and growth to get to this point in her sex life speaks to the necessity in reforming and creating informative sex education that frames sexual desires, pleasure, and consent as primary matters in sexual interactions.

This value of agentic sex through sexual growth is something that comes up in Jamie's (27, white, cis, bisexual) reflection on a sexual narrative theme, as well:

[Jamie]: Um, I think a major theme for me is um growth, and um I think that could be with any person um with anything ever, but especially sexually and with my body period, it's always important for me to be able to recognize when I don't want something or what I do enjoy and to know that it is completely okay to voice when something is not okay and to voice when something is uncomfortable instead of just kind of staying quiet and just dealing with it, like pushing it down. So, I have, over time I've just gotten way more open and honest with myself and with my partners about what I like, what I don't like and what I will do and won't do. Um, so I'd say growth is the biggest theme for me, probably.

Jamie is similar to Estelle in her reflection, in that they find communicating their desires, boundaries, and preferences to be an important piece to their sexual narrative. Importantly, they both note that this was something they have had to learn; hence Jamie attributing her agentic sexual life to "growth." Jamie reflects on being uncomfortable with certain sexual interactions and in the past staying silent or "pushing it down,"

whereas she now prioritizes communicating with herself and her partners as to what she does or doesn't like.

Similar to these narratives on agentic sex, Valerie (36, white, cis, bisexual) reflects on her underlying reasons and intentions with sexual interactions:

> [Valerie]: Major theme in my sexual life story. I guess like about tuning into my body and like what does it for me, like where I, what sensations I like and what sensations I don't like and if I'm doing things for the pleasure of someone else, and like is it, is that the reason why, am I getting anything out of that. Like what am I doing for myself and like what am I getting back, like things like that. Just learning how to tune into what I like.

Valerie seems to be taking her sexual narrative "theme" into a mode of self-reflection, and as to how she centers her sexual behavior on providing others pleasure, to the point of forgetting about prioritizing her own pleasure. She acknowledges her need to tune into her body and desires, as well as the importance of prioritizing her own pleasure. As discussed in chapter 3, many participants frame their sexual interactions as preferentially "giving" sexual pleasure. Although the act of "giving" pleasure is powerful in its ability to deconstruct selfish notions surrounding body and desires (that sex with another is interactional, and that consideration and care of the other may be seen as a radical and queer act), it also may be embedded within traditional gender norms of one's entitlement or prioritization of their own pleasure in the bedroom. Valerie seems to point at this dismissal of her own pleasures in her self-reflection.

Alongside Valerie, Parker (35, Latinx, questioning, pansexual) discusses their theme of their sexual narrative as not simply a giver, but sex as a "performance":

> [Parker]: Sex for me is a performance. It's a performative act. And it's something I do for others. Orgasms are something I do for myself by myself. But my

> sexuality is largely performative. I still do not fully understand my own sexuality. I say I identify as pansexual because it's the closest thing that I think is accurate. But yeah, the thing that jumps out to me, *especially in recounting all this… No one has ever just sat me down and asked these questions before* [pause]. Most of what I do has been reactive and performative. My sexuality is a direct reaction to what I was raised to think it should be, and it's typically a reaction to what I think my partners want. Or in terms of a professional setting,[47] it is what I know they want. So, I become their ideal. But for me, pleasure is not part of that performance. [emphasis added]

Parker calls their sexual interactions performative. They are a chameleon who shifts colors (sexual performance) to best fit their environment (sexual partner). Parker is able to point to their upbringing as a pivotal foundation in how they navigate sex, and that they were raised to be a particular person.[48] This expectation has flowed over into their approval seeking behaviors in sexual partners: "I become their ideal." For Parker, sex is about seeking approval and creation of pleasure in others. It is, literally, a performance.

This chapter is about sexual liberation, and this particular section discusses how representation through self-narration may be understood as sexually liberating. So, one may wonder why I would choose to include a quote by Parker that speaks to their inability to reflect on agentic, liberating, self-prioritizing sexual interactions. However, it is this ability to reflect on their sexual narrative in such a clarifying, blunt way, that may pave the way for Parker to be more agentic in their future sexual interactions. One may even argue that Parker's sexual interactions as a "performance" may be a form of sexual play (Paasonen, 2017). However, in Parker's reflection they remark on their performance

[47] Parker is a professional dominatrix
[48] Prior to this conversation, Parker touches on their people pleasing desires they developed through seeking acceptance and love from their parents

as inherently tied to embodying what their sexual partner desires, rather than in conjunction with their own desires.

Regardless, I believe Parker's ability to point to their sexual habits and how they are formed, is in it of itself, sexually liberating. Narrative itself, saying these things to another person, can be liberating. From "say her name" to "talk therapy," the verbalization, speaking one's truth aloud so that there is a listener, is liberating. As discussed earlier in this chapter, narratives are temporal, spatial, and relational. Parker's ability to tie their past formative relations to how they conceptualize and value particular sexual behaviors in their present, may lead to constructing newfound behaviors in their future. As Parker notes, "No one has ever just sat me down and asked these questions before." Which leads me to ask: What ways have we denied women and queer folk opportunities to reflect on their sexual lives, and how does this neglect their sexual futures?

Narratives of sexual pleasure, whether performed for consumer consumption (porn) or in the interactive setting of a research study, are powerful ways to exhibit sexual representation of self, and therein, exhibit a form of sexual liberation. These narratives suggest that it is important to see oneself represented in sexual pleasure knowledge.

CONCLUSION

This chapter pushes sexual research beyond the scope of violence and trauma in relation to women and AFAB folk's sexual lives to analyze sources of pleasure and joy, liberation, and resistance all the while being careful to not contribute to a new standard of appropriate sexual pleasure. Furthermore, I examined sexual liberation by looking at how

these narratives queered sexual pleasure, how participants extended their entitlement to sexual pleasure, and how they consumed and produced sexual pleasure narratives.

Within the section on queering pleasure, I examined how participants queer the understanding of sexual pleasure that is beyond producing orgasms. Narratives such as Parker's allowed us to see the uses of BDSM and sexual pleasure beyond an orgasm as a good sexual experience. Morgan emphasized the importance of foreplay and sexual play, and Sawyer explained the importance of using all five senses based on her education as a sex shop worker. Overall, these participant's narratives illuminated ways we may "queer" our notions of sexual pleasure to experiences beyond production of an orgasm.

The second section of this chapter touched on entitlement to pleasure, which addressed participant's experiences of masturbation, sex toys, and period sex. This section examined how participants once again queer the boundaries surrounding sexual pleasure with both themselves and their partners, and how their entitlement to their sexual pleasure exhibits a form of agency and resistance. The distinction from the first section on queering sexual pleasure, however, is that participants are actively working against stigmas, stereotypes, and taboos associated with use of sex toys, sexual interactions during periods, and masturbation. Therefore, beyond queering notions of sex, there is an active choice in one's entitlement to sexual pleasure. Narratives such as Jorden's navigate the stigma around talking about masturbation and sex toys with her friends, and growing into a newfound sense of confidence and comfort. Other narratives such as Westley's shows resistance work as they push against any notion that a partner might be uncomfortable with their bleeding body. In her telling, Westley refuses to accommodate

others and stifle her sexuality for the sake of others' discomfort surrounding menstruation.

Finally, the last section pertains to pleasure representation: queer/lesbian porn, and the sexual liberation found in telling one's own story. This last section explored the value of representation in the participant's lives, in both the pornography they consume as well as centering their voice and story that, in many ways, has been historically denied or silenced. Narratives such as Olivia and Taylor's speak to the importance of both representation of queer folk in porn, and access to a variety of sex behaviors in porn. Porn has consistently been created with the intent of a cis heterosexual male consumer in mind, and consequently creates depictions of sexual interactions that don't center, let alone include, female pleasure and perspectives. This objectification and commodification of pleasure for the benefit of men speaks to the importance of representation of women's sexual desires and pleasures in varying areas outside of one's own bedroom.

Alongside these stories on queer porn consumption, other participants gave me narratives of self-reflection. Asking participants to weave together their own sexual story "theme" allowed space for them to construct their own self-analysis. These narratives overall tell a story of the importance of agentic decision making, and agentic sex. Making active decisions in sex whether through establishing boundaries, communicating with partners, exploring their own bodies and those of others in deterministic ways, and allowing themselves to prioritize their emotions and bodies is an importance aspect of many participant's reflections.

How do these reflections of agentic sex inform us for future sexuality research? These narratives make a clear case that women and AFAB folk are more concerned with their ability to agentically navigate their sexual experiences more than whether or not they are having "equitable orgasms." In fact, I would argue that creating an environment where women and AFAB folk felt comfortable in prioritizing their communication, desires, fantasies, boundaries, preferences, and pleasures, would result in a shrinking orgasm gap. Regardless, the sentiment remains the same: women and AFAB folk are concerned about their ability to make decisions in sexual interactions, and find themselves developing their sense of agency despite heteronormative, patriarchal messages surrounding what constitutes appropriate, gendered sexual behavior.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY & IMPLICATIONS

"If freeing ourselves from sexual imprisonment is not a political issue, I don't know what is." (Dell Williams, at the NOW Women's Sexuality Conference in New York City, 1973)

This chapter will conclude my research by summarizing what themes and results were found within the research, reflect on how this study may influence sexuality scholarship, problematize and address the limitations of this study, and make suggestions as to how future policy and sexuality research may extend the scope of this study.

In this study, I interviewed 30 participants (identified as women (23) or genderqueer folk with vaginas, i.e., AFAB) using purposive snowball sampling to collect sexual history and pleasure narratives. This research sought to better understand the meaning making processes involved in their sexual experiences, and how these processes related to their gender and sexuality identity. Additionality, I aimed to better understand

how intersecting hierarchies of power influence participants' narration and experience of their sexual history and pleasure. This research was important given that queer women's narratives surrounding their sexual experiences have historically been absent from academic research, as previous research on women's sexual behavior often focused on cis, straight women, and heteronormative concepts of sexual pleasure (i.e., orgasm rates).

I used life story interviews to examine how traditional gender roles and heteronormative sexual scripts influence their sexual experiences and pleasure. Life story interviews are broad and less structured than semi-structured interviews, allowing for the participant to tell the researcher what is important to them (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Geiger (1986) contends that using life story methods, particularly when studying women, allows subjects to (re)present themselves, and consequently, subjects co-construct the knowledge with the researcher. This method is especially useful in gender and sexual health research, as the voices of women experiencing sexual pleasure are often absent from research, health policy and academic discussions. Too often, when the voices of women are heard, sex is equated with violence, assault, and negative consequences.[49]

Although sharing one's sexual experiences could potentially induce stigma, shame, or a struggle to disclose a topic that has historically been packaged as a "private" piece of one's narrative, most participants readily engaged in their story-telling process.[50] After the interview concluded, often the participants would thank me for doing this work. They expressed gratitude that I was creating a space for their words to be heard, in both

[49] As addressed in chapter 5, this is not to say women's discussions pertaining to violence, stigma, and negative experiences surrounding sex are not necessary or important. Rather, it is important to address the full range of women's multifaceted sexual experiences, and therefore, must include pleasure.
[50] Even as participants worked through topics that seemed to make them feel shame, guilt, or embarrassment, they seemed engaged in the story-telling process. It is worth noting that this may be due to selection-bias. It is very likely that the participants who volunteered to be interviewed, were individuals who were comfortable and ready to tell a stranger their sexual life story and experiences.

that moment (i.e., the act of telling one's story for the sake of telling one's story) and for future readers (i.e., for other individuals to read their story). Many reflected on how their words and experiences could help another person, and that this may be a step in the right direction in normalizing women and AFAB folk's sexual desires and pleasures. It seemed important to many participants that someone even took the time to ask them about (and listen) to their narrative, and allow them to reflect on their own story.

Utilizing life stories was also particularly useful and enlightening for my own analysis. These participants' stories allowed me to reorient my understanding of sexuality research in new ways and their stories pushed me to reorganize how I understand sexual pleasure. In particular, their stories queered my understanding of sexual pleasure to encompass more than an orgasm imperative. Additionally, participants restructured and queered my focus on gender. I went into this analysis prioritizing cis women's experiences of sexual pleasure. However, after our interviews, some of their gender identities changed, and consequently, their ability to change and new gender identities queered the boundaries surrounding gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual behavior.[51] I believe that it was the life story methodology that reoriented both my concepts and scope through promoting respondents' ability to direct their own sexual narratives. They taught me to listen, and I heard things I did not expect.

Overall, these stories speak to the importance of deconstructing traditional gender roles and the expectations of these roles that breed heteronormative sexual scripts. These stories provide a unique perspective on how *queer* participants' sexual experiences are influenced by traditional gender roles and heteronormative sexual scripts.

[51] Some participants now identify as nonbinary, agender, or are currently questioning their gender identity.

In this study, I started with two research questions: 1) How do women create meanings that are important to their sexual experience and how are these meaning-making processes related to their gender and sexual identity? 2) How do intersecting hierarchies of power influence women's narration and experience of their sexual history and pleasure? The findings in this dissertation highlight some of my interpretations of the life story data. These interpretations are summarized below. I follow with a discussion of study limitations, future inquiry, and potential public policy solutions.

Emotional Labor & Anxiety

Participants' narratives evoked forms of gendered sexual scripts and emotional labor, such as denying oral sex, faking orgasms, and performing "appropriate" pleasure (e.g., not squirting). I extend the analysis of emotional labor enacted within sexual interactions to include additional factors. I examined what emotional labor looks like when women *receive* sexual pleasure, such as oral. I examined why some women prefer to give pleasure over receiving it. Additionally, I examined what emotional labor within sexual interactions looks like for queer women. These are a few of the ways in which my data extends (and queers) the conversation on gender, emotional labor and sexual pleasure.

Looking at these additional factors I found four things: 1) That the gendered power dynamic women and AFAB folk experience with cis men in sexual interactions is necessitating emotional labor not only through penetrative sex, but with oral sex as well; 2) that this gendered power dynamic is so salient that women and AFAB folk often feel a persistent anxiety that influences their sexual behaviors and preferences with cis men;

and 3) that women and AFAB folk conduct forms of emotional labor such as faking orgasms for varying reasons, but consistently find difficulty in communicating their own emotional, sexual, sensual needs.

My fourth finding was that while queer women and AFAB participants embody many of these gendered scripts and forms of emotional labor (around cis men), they simultaneously exhibit forms of resistance by queering preconceived notions as to what sexual pleasure and sex actually entail. In other words, my participants accommodate gendered power dynamics in sexual interactions with cis men in many ways, while also deconstructing notions of sex equating to the production of orgasms, and advocating for "giving" in bed as an inherently powerful and equitable process. Fundamentally, patriarchy is hard to ignore, as cis men play a role in inhibiting women and AFAB individual's entitlement and access to sexual pleasure, queer or not.

The participants' stories show how anxiety is often embedded with their sexual interactions. This anxiety is driving these women and AFAB individuals to deny, or not feel comfortable enough, to enjoy sexual attention. Women and AFAB folk seem to be bringing not just emotional labor, but cognitive labor, or a mental load, into the bedroom. This "mental load" can be seen in how women anticipate needs, identify options for filling needs, decide among these options, and monitor results. In other words, accepting a managerial mindset that is labor in and of itself.

The relationship between the participants' anxiety, emotional labor, and mental labor cannot be separated from power, as evidenced in gender roles and scripts. For some, it is the faking of an orgasm and the expectation of teaching partners how to appropriately stimulate them. For others, it is seeking the approval and attention of the

male gaze even if they prefer sexual interactions with women. These sexual experiences illuminate how, even within queer women and AFAB individuals' lives, patriarchal gender norms create spaces of discomfort in their sexual interactions with cis men. As a consequent, this discomfort makes them reluctant to ask for pleasure, not express what their needs are, and lie about their experiences of sexual pleasure.

I heard these pervading traditional gender roles even in queer women's sexual lives. In many narratives, women as well as AFAB folk both perpetuated and critiqued heteronormativity in their sexual interactions, decision-making, and reflections. Their narratives suggest that many women and AFAB individuals: 1) feel like no one wants to hear or care about their pleasure preferences; 2) are themselves anxious and uncomfortable to broach the topic; 3) have experienced anger or violence when expressing pleasure preferences or sexual needs; 4) have internalized their sexual experiences as a personal problem; and finally; 5) do not want to place the burden or labor on their sexual partner.

My findings support other studies that found that women engage in emotional labor in the bedroom (Braun et al., 2003; Elliott and Umberson, 2008; Fahs, 2011; Fahs and Swank, 2016), and that traditional gender roles pervade sexual behavior (Laws and Schwartz 1977; Byers, 1995; Tolman, 2002; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003; Gavey, 2005; Wiederman, 2005; Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009). My research adds to this discussion an analysis of anxiety, the mental load, queer identity, "giving" sexual pleasure, and resistance embedded within sexual performance and pleasure.

In their stories, my participants repeatedly mention their anxiety and bemoan the mental load they have to carry in relation to sexual behavior. Anxiety seems to address a

piece of *why* participants enact mental labor in the bedroom. That is, anxiety seems to be a factor that propels mental labor, as they reflect on the anxiousness surrounding performing sexual pleasure and accommodating their partner's emotions. It would be important to examine this role of anxiety and the mental load further, to unearth how this may work in conjunction with emotional labor.

Social Structures Influence on Sexual Experiences

In chapter 4, I suggest that the perceptions about body size, body hair, genitals, as well as sexual assault (that is, internalized sexism, racism, misogyny, and rape culture) influenced how they enacted gendered sexual scripts. I examined how, at times, they resisted gender norms and at other times they reproduced them. Sometimes the same person both resisted and reproduced traditional gender roles. The moments where traditional gender norms are most commonly embodied and enacted is within sexual interactions with cis men. For example, most of the moments of genital panic and body dysmorphia in relation to their sexual behavior were with cis men (and cis men's perception of their bodies). In sum, I argue that many of the participants' self-worth, feelings of entitlement to pleasure, and enactment of sexual behavior were influenced by the heteronormative standard of female beauty and behavior.

Previous research has studied the consequences of cis women's body image and sexual trauma on sexual behavior. This research extends these studies by centering the analysis on queer women and AFAB folk, and by examining how sexual identity may influence sexual behavior.

Many participants brought up how their experiences of sexual assault and violence influenced their experiences of sexual pleasure. Some victims of sexual abuse said they increased their sexual behavior. Participants described this as a means to take back control and power in a situation where it was once stripped away from them. However, some respondents described an *absence* of sexual behavior after experiencing sexual trauma. This reaction to sexual trauma is not uncommon (van Berlo and Ensink, 2000; Deliramich and Gray, 2008; Weaver, 2009; O'Callaghan et al., 2019). Participants said that this reaction was due to feeling they did not have the language or knowledge to stop unwanted sexual interactions.

Finally, this chapter looked at how social structures influence sexual behaviors and experiences for **queer** women and AFAB. Both accommodation and resistance work were found in their experiences of body image and reflections of sexual trauma. Their experiences speak to how imbedded traditional gender roles and sexual scripts are within the day-to-day lives of queer women and AFAB individuals, and how they create barriers to accessing equitable sexual pleasure, and importantly, self-love and safety.

The Significance of Sexual Liberation

The final chapter examined sexual liberation within participants' lives in three ways: 1) queering sexual pleasure; 2) entitlement to sexual pleasure; and 3) sexual pleasure representation. I find that many of them deconstruct, or queer, measurements of sexual pleasure – that is, sexual pleasure is much more than an orgasm. For example, they found pleasure in BDSM and sexual play, candles and oils, and touch and smell. All parts of the body were sources of pleasure, not just the clitoris.

This queering of sexual pleasure exemplifies the power and use of life story narratives. As previously noted, I delved into this research with the assumption that the most important piece of this work would be examining the orgasm gap. By centering my participants' narratives, my research and analysis re-oriented and shifted. By actively listening to their stories, I found myself considering how sexuality research fails to represent queer women and AFAB individuals' sexual experiences and sexual priorities. Their narratives have allowed myself, as a researcher, to reflect on and critically examine how I perpetuated heteronormative understandings of sexual pleasure in my research.

The second section of this chapter touched on entitlement to pleasure, which addressed respondents' experiences of masturbation, sex toys, and period sex. I examined how participants once again queer the boundaries surrounding sexual pleasure with both themselves and their partners. They are actively working against stigma, stereotypes, and taboos associated with the use of sex toys, sexual interactions during periods, and masturbation. Therefore, in addition to queering notions of what sexual pleasure looks like, participants are illuminating ways that sexual liberation may be achieved through establishing their entitlement to sexual pleasure (i.e., establishing boundaries, exploring preferences, and communicating with sexual partners in commonly stigmatized areas of sexual behavior).

Finally, the last section demonstrated the importance of representation in sexual pleasure. Specifically, I discovered that participants found it important to see themselves represented whether in the pornography they consume, or in centering their voice and story (narrating the self) in this research project. Porn has consistently been created with the intent of a cis heterosexual male viewer (and consumer) in mind, and consequently

creates depictions of sexual interactions that do not center, let alone include, female or queer pleasure. Consequently, participants preferred to watch queer and lesbian porn. Interestingly, this was a trend found among all participants, even the few who identified as straight. Queer and lesbian porn was described as centering on women and queer people's pleasure, and encompassed sexual interactions that were not inherently violent or sexually objectifying to women. This speaks to the importance of representation of women and AFAB individual's sexual desires and pleasures in varying areas outside of one's own bedroom.

Representation of sexual pleasure was also evident in their own narratives. I asked participants to analyze their own sexual narratives and discern what was an important "take-away" about their sexual experiences. Asking respondents to weave together their own sexual story "theme" allowed space for them to construct their own self-analysis. Some of these narratives spoke to the importance of agentic decision making and agentic sex. By this, I mean they talked about making their own decisions in sex, whether through establishing boundaries, communicating with partners, exploring their own and other's bodies in deterministic ways, and prioritizing their emotions and body.

In sum, this last section provides a particularly important finding: the liberating power of narratives and agentic sex. Participants found liberation in seeing their experiences (representation in porn), telling their story (the act of the life story interview), and having their story heard (me active listening and creating space for reflection). Consequently, women and AFAB folk in my study made it clear that agentic sex is important (making more agentic decisions pertaining to their sexual interactions,

whether in exploration, communication, or boundaries) and liberation comes through telling their story.

Underlying this research is the importance of "queering" the way we understand sex, sexual pleasure, and sexual orientation (and consequently, how we study and conduct research on the topic). This is important work within gender and sexuality research as it supports past research on gendered scripts and norms that translate into a "third shift" of labor in the bedroom, and the phenomenon of faking an orgasm. Additionally, this research treads new territory by examining the ways that women may resist heteronormative sexual scripts through queering sexual pleasure and expressing desires of agentic sex. Most importantly, this research establishes a need and model for considering fluidity within what constitutes sexual pleasure and sexual identity, as many women navigate queer sexual existences.

LIMITATIONS

Due to a sample size of 30, the participants I interviewed in this study are not representative of other women and AFAB folk in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in me interviewing 10 of my respondents through online platforms (Zoom, Skype, Discord). An online platform may have limited my ability to establish a genuine relationship or solidarity with these 10 participants.[52] There was also potential selection bias by collecting participants from social media spaces such as

[52] It is worth noting that online platforms (skype, discord, and zoom) may also be a strength, since it opened up who I had access to interviewing. For example, online interviews provided me the opportunity to interview participants who otherwise were bound by time constraints (such as a single mother who worked two jobs, but could interview online and at home, during her lunch break). Additionally, I was able to interview participants in varying geographical regions outside of northeast Ohio.

women support groups, since many of these online spaces already discuss sexuality, body positivity, and feminism. Further, there was potential selection bias since I interviewed respondents who are comfortable talking about their sexuality and sexual behavior.

Finally, I do not have racial diversity in my sample. Consequently, my research scope is limited to a predominantly white experience of the queer identity. The select participants in my sample that identified as Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) or Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) individuals may have not disclosed much of their racialized experiences of sexual pleasure due to my whiteness.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE ANALYSIS

A challenge of this data is that it centers the gaze on cis queer women's experiences. In my future analyses, I intend to purposefully extend my scope to the trans community. It was admittingly happenstance to have a study containing a small number of folk within the trans community (i.e., nonbinary, agender, questioning). Given the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles and sexual scripts, I find it important to further examine how gender non-conforming individuals may navigate these barriers. Consequently, I seek to conduct future research that centers the experiences of the trans community, to examine the unique barriers nonbinary and genderqueer individuals may face as they navigate their sexual pleasure experiences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

The social justice work needs to be directed towards assuring women and AFAB individuals do not have to work through denial of sexual pleasure or healing of sexual

trauma in order to get to a space of sexual liberation. I posit that sexual liberation through consent and education needs to be a process that begins in early life. Children are already exploring their bodies with joy, curiosity, and love as can be seen in participants' masturbation stories often beginning around age 6-12 (27 out of 30 participants began to explore their bodies, genitalia, or actively masturbate within this age range). It is not until they begin to explore their bodies with others, typically cis men, do I hear acts of violence, assault, or simply selfish actions that leave women and AFAB participants thinking they are broken or difficult to please. Consequently, it is important to queer our understanding of sexual pleasure to mean something beyond simply measuring the number of orgasms a person has in order to encapsulate the full range of sexual pleasure that can be enjoyed within a sexual interaction.[53]

However, the change in establishing equitable pleasure does not come from expecting women and AFAB individuals to simply 'communicate in bed' with their sexual partners. Nor does change arise from asking 'why women and individuals with vaginas don't just speak up.' I believe the change begins when we listen to women and AFAB individuals, and realize their stories tell us that it is not their responsibility to accommodate cis men's construction of sexuality and sexual pleasure. It is not women and AFAB individuals' responsibility to speak up and produce more labor in teaching others, particularly cis men, how to pleasure them. We must reorient how we understand sexual pleasure. We must queer pleasure.

So, what do we do now? Simply put, future policy and research that seeks to establish equitable, queer, destigmatizing education surrounding sexual behavior and

[53] Once again, studying orgasms and analyzing the orgasm gap is necessary and important. However, we must refrain from using this as the only tool in measuring individual's sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

pleasure, should consider the role of strong ties. In other words, establishing rapport, close relationships, and education or conversations from within one's social networks and community, rather than outside of it, may be an important factor in creating social change around previously stigmatized sexual behavior.

Additionally, the activism and resistance begin outside of the bedroom: in reworking our sex education, our health classes, our adult-accessible courses, our sex shops, our narratives we tell in films, shows, and books, our doctors and researchers and how they measure sexual pleasure. We must rework how we define, and measure sex. Finally, we must be cognizant of how we critique and talk about sexual pleasure and disparities: being a woman or AFAB individual is not a barrier to orgasms and sexual satisfaction. Patriarchy is the barrier. We must name the systems of power, as these are the barriers. We must respect gender identities, while simultaneously deconstructing, queering, and breaking down gender roles.

APPENDIX A: GUIDED INTERVIEW OUTLINE

Background information

Name
Preferred pronouns
Age
Race
Sexual orientation
Occupation
Education
Hobbies
Religiosity
Location
Relationship status
Dynamics and structure of said relationship status

Themes:

History:

General feelings towards pleasure and sex for themselves
When and how did they first learn about sex. About anatomy. About women cumming. About touching themselves. About sexual interaction with another person. About reproduction. About LGBTQIA pleasure.

When was the first time you knew about being a sexual being?

When was the first time you felt sexually aroused?

What was your first sexual interaction?

What was your first (or first few moments) of understanding sexuality, and how it has transformed throughout their life?

Did you receive sex education?
If so, explain

Did anyone in your family have a discussion with you pertaining to sex? Sexual pleasure? Safety and Contraception? Masturbation?

What was, and are, the general feelings of sexuality in your familial household?
What are the general feelings of sexuality in your current household?

What were the general feelings of sexuality at school?
In the media?

How has your sexuality experience changed over the years?
How has your preferences in sexual pleasure changed or not changed?

First time you have had sex (with another individual, whether man, women, intersex)
How do you define sex?
Explain the experience

Pleasure Description:

Have you ever had an orgasm?
If so, can you describe your first orgasm?
What do orgasms feel like for you?

What gets you off?

Do you feel a preference towards clitoral stimulation, vaginal stimulation, anal stimulation, or some other form of stimulation?

Can you experience more than one kind of orgasm?
If so, describe.
Differences, preferences in particular orgasms?
If so, when did you first experience each orgasm

How do you relate or compare your orgasm experience to friends?
To media depictions? Explain.

What makes you feel satisfied? Satiated? What turns you on?
Do you have any preferences?

Do you masturbate?
If so, how?

What is your typical sexual interaction with either your partner or an individual?

Do you consider yourself hard to get off?

Do you consider yourself as someone with a high/moderate/low sex drive?

Is there something you would like to experience you have yet to attempt?
If so, what?

How do you compare your orgasm experience to how other women experience an orgasm?

Have you ever had unsatisfactory or “bad” sex?
Explain?
What is “bad sex” for you?

Have you ever faked an orgasm?
Why?
What does faking an orgasm entail?
Have you done it more than once?

Do you feel like you have any kinks?
If so, what?

Kinks & Sexual Play

Penetration? Oral? Foreplay—and what is foreplay to you?
Length of duration, frequency?

Thoughts on threesomes?

Thoughts on pornography?
Have you used pornography to stimulate or cum?
Do you enjoy or dislike porn? Why?
If you enjoy, do you have a preference of porn you prefer?
If you enjoy, how often do you watch?
Do your friends use porn or discuss porn with you?

Thoughts on toys?
Have you ever used an anal plug, vibrator, dildo, lube, whip, restraints on yourself? Something else?
Have you ever used an anal plug, vibrator, dildo, lube, whip, restraints on another individual? Something else?
If so, how was the experience? How often?

Thoughts on BDSM?
What is BDSM to you? Where did you first hear about BDSM?
Do you enjoy role play? Explain

Have you ever experienced anal penetration?
If so, what was or currently is your experience of anal?
Are you able to achieve orgasm through anal?

Have you ever received oral?
When was the first time someone went down on you?
Do you enjoy oral often?

How often would you say you receive oral in comparison to the amount of sexual interaction you have?
Do you require oral to achieve orgasm?

Have you ever given oral?
What are your thoughts on giving oral?
If so, when was the first time you gave oral? Was it on a man, women, intersex?
Do you enjoy giving oral?
How often do you give oral in comparison to the amount of sexual interaction you have?

Have you ever experienced having sexual interactions on your period?
If so, explain?
What are your thoughts or feelings on period sexual interactions?

What do you consider as "bad" sex(ual interactions)?
What do you consider good sex(ual interactions)?
How do you compare your good and bad sex(ual interactions) to those of media, or your friends?

Body Image & the Self

What are your feelings or thoughts about your body?

What are your feelings or thoughts about your vagina?
Body hair near your vagina?
When did you first look at your vagina? What did you think?

When did you first know about your vaginas existence and what it does?
How did you learn?
Has this changed over the years?

When did you first touch your vagina?

Have you ever douched?

Do you think your vagina looks like the representations you see in porn?

Do you count or know the number of partners you have sexually been with?
What counts or doesn't count to you?

APPENDIX B: DESCRIPTION: RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS*

Parker: [she/they] 35, white passing, questioning, Latinx, Pansexual, Polyamorous, professional dominatrix, single mom. Speech language pathologist. Master's degree. Enjoys writing poetry. On unemployment due to chronic seizures. Questioning (questioning gender identity).

Estelle: [she/her] 23, Black, cis-gendered, fluid sexuality/heteroromantic preference. Bartender & administrative assistant at law firm. Single. Agnostic. Enjoys working out, time with family and friends. Going to college, future goal is law school.

Judith: [she/her] 32, Straight, white, cis-gendered, speech language pathologist, Masters' degree, agnostic/questioning, resides in Cincinnati area. Married

Anne: [she/her] 28, Filipino-American, straight, cis-gendered, currently in grad school for her Master's in clinical health, plays volleyball, enjoys traveling, reading, getting her nails done. Reside in Cleveland area. In a relationship with cis male.

Olivia: [she/her] 25, Black, Pansexual, cis-gendered, Nanny, partial bachelors, enjoys cooking, is an atheist/agnostic, resides in Cleveland area. In a relationship with cis male.

Morgan: [she/her] 33, white, cis-gendered, defines herself as ambiguous (sexual orientation), bartender, has an education in culinary school, enjoys reading, hiking, cooking, atheist/agnostic, grew up in Columbus area, reside now in Cleveland area. In relationship with cis male.

Gail: [they/she] 23, white, agender, bisexual/queer/homoflexible umbrella. Hospice social worker. Master's in social work. Enjoys exercise, video games, reading. Daoist. Born in Kansas, now in Cleveland. In a relationship with cis male.

Phoebe: [she/her] 49, white, cis-gendered, defines herself as "bi-light". Customer service for specialty beverages, has a Bachelors in marketing, enjoys playing with her dog, golfing, biking, partakes in a "swing lifestyle", is "faith based"—as in, she believes in a god but goes to varying denominational churches. Grew up in rural town near Buffalo, resides there now. Single, but "regular friends with benefits"

Emily: [she/her] 32, white, cis-gendered, homoromantic/bisexual (romantically she only likes women, sexually she likes men and women). Has a bachelor's degree in accounting. Occupation is an administrative assistant. Non-religious. Live in surrounding Cleveland area. Single.

Valerie: [she/her] 36, white, cis-gendered, bisexual. Works in software, bachelor's degree in English lit, works with rescue cats, cooks, learning Latin, knits. Atheist/agnostic.

Raised and currently lives in surrounding Cleveland area. Married for the second time, to a cis male.

Cam: [she/hers] 41, white, cis-gendered, bisexual. Account partner health/life coach, has a master's (never says in what), enjoys fitness, holistic health/healing, yoga, "universal faith or source/agnostic" not faith based (spiritual based). Raised and currently lives in surrounding Cleveland area. In a relationship with cis male.

Riley: [they/them] 25, pansexual, nonbinary, Vietnamese, bartender, two years of college, enjoys art (and has a side business of doing commissioned art), video games, candle making, Buddhist (in practice more than faith), grew up in Vietnam, Sweden, and now in Cleveland area. In a polyamorous relationship with one person.

Liz: [she/her] 32, white, cis-gendered, bisexual, bartender, some college, enjoys painting, singing, light spirituality (meditative practices), at time of interview was in relationship with cis male, and is now single.

Brianna: [she/her] 27, white, cis-gendered, bisexual, behavioral therapist/technician, has a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, currently in early stages of master's program. Enjoys cooking, baking, learning/studying languages, atheist, grew up in Mentor, now resides in a city nearby. Participates on "kink sites" and considers herself a "brat" (type of submissive). Single (complicated, she adds).

Taylor: [she/her] 27, white, cis-gendered, bisexual (she personally identifies as 'queer' but uses bisexual when someone asks her). Social worker. Finishing up master's degree. Enjoys the outdoors, time with her dog, yoga, workout. Agnostic/atheist. Grew up in Elyria, now in Cleveland area. In a relationship with cis male.

Quinn: [she/her] 26, white, questioning, demi-sexual and bisexual. Real estate agent, some college, enjoys writing music, hiking, board games, Buddhist, grew up in Cleveland area, now in Avon area. In a relationship with a cis male.

Sawyer: [she/her] 30, white, cis-gendered, bisexual. Homemaker/online streamer (considers herself unemployed due to pandemic), some college, enjoys hanging with friends, singing, video games, board games, Cleveland area, non-practicing catholic, married to cis male.

Emory: [she/her] 25, white, cis-gendered, queer/bisexual/gay, service industry worker, culinary certificate, grew up and now resides in surrounding Cleveland area, single. Enjoys reading, movies, plays violin, baking, and singing. Raised Methodist, looking to explore Judaism which also runs in her family. Not particularly religious. Single.

Fin: [she/her, they/them] 30, white, questioning, queer/homoromantic. Service industry worker and community outreach worker. Grew up in Cincinnati, now resides in New Orleans. Master's degree. Two children. Enjoys dancing and parenting. Non-religious. Single.

Pat: [she/her, they/them] 30, pansexual, white, questioning. Currently unemployed due to pandemic, normally works management in entertainment/recreation industry, resides in Cleveland area. Bachelors in psychology. Single. Enjoys physical activities such as axe throwing, video games, roller skating—a lot of their social activities and events have been put on hold due to COVID. Agnostic. Currently working on renovating their home.

Mack: [she/her] 28, Syrian, cis-gendered, bisexual. Service industry worker, some college, Muslim (although not practicing lately "tethering a bit to those beliefs but also leaning towards agnostic"), grew up in Syria, now resides in surrounding Cleveland area. Single, participating in polyamorous sexual interactions with a couple, although not exclusive. Enjoys dancing, painting. Enjoys travel, cartoons, time with their pets, and spending time with friends.

Westley: [she/her] 30, African American/Black, cis-gendered, bisexual, artist, masters in sculpture and extended media, enjoys art (drawing), video games, reading, "anything my kids are into, so legos, trains, adventures", no religiosity/atheist, Texas, newly single.

Gina: [she/her] 30, white, cis-gendered, bisexual, user interface designer, some college in illustration. Enjoys smoking weed, going on walks, yoga, work out, draw, 3-D printing, reading. Raised Catholic but defines themselves as spiritual. Engaged with cis male.

Jamie: [she/her] 27, white, cis-gendered, bisexual, service industry worker, some college, painting, kayaking, reading, spiritual, in a relationship with cis male

Sam: [she/her] 27, Palestinian, cis-gendered, straight. Health care worker, Associates in applied science. Enjoys rollerblading, spending time with her cats, playing with makeup. Grew up Muslim, practices some things, but considers herself more spiritual. Divorced, newly single.

Felix: [they/them] 24, white and Asian, nonbinary, bisexual. Works at a tech company, no college. Enjoys painting, drawing, writing, and yoga. Considers themselves orienting towards Paganism and practices craft, doesn't put a label on it. In a relationship with cis male.

Kai: [she/her] 33, white, bisexual/pansexual, cis-gendered. Freelance photographer (was let go from full time, 11-year job due to Covid). Some college. Enjoys photography, read, larping (live action role play). No religious affiliation. Divorced, single.

Jorden: [she/her] 51, white, straight, cis-gendered. Self-employed (educational consultant), two masters: MBA and MSW (Masters of social work). Enjoys volunteering, running, read, spending time with her daughter. Thrifting and antiquing. Raised Roman Catholic, converted to Episcopalian in her late 20s. Currently no religious affiliation. Divorced. Single.

Aiden: [she/her] 33, white, bisexual, cis-gendered. Unemployed due to COVID (was an HR recruiter), Bachelors in operations management. Enjoys hiking, being a mom, kayaking, reading. Grew up Unitarian Universalist, states it has shaped her life and beliefs, but she doesn't feel like she would label herself as any religion. Married to cis male.

Charlie: [she/her] 32, white, cis-gendered, bisexual. Payroll coordinator. Some college. Enjoys baking, reading, hiking, camping. Considers herself spiritual. Married to cis male.

*Names have been changed to maintain anonymity

APPENDIX C: TABLE: RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS*

Name	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender Orientation	Sexual Orientation	Education	Occupation	Family Status
Parker	35	Latinx	Questioning	Pansexual/ Polyamorous	Master's degree	Unemployed	Single, one child
Estelle	23	Black	Cisgendered	Fluid sexuality/ Heteroromantic	Some college	Bartender	Single, no children
Judith	32	white	Cisgendered	Straight	Master's degree	Speech Language Pathologist	Married, no children
Anne	28	Filipino-American	Cisgendered	Straight	Some graduate school	Student	Relationship, no children
Olivia	25	Black	Cisgendered	Pansexual	Some college	Nanny	Relationship, no children
Morgan	33	white	Cisgendered	Ambiguous	Some college	Service Industry	Relationship, no children
Gail	23	white	Agender	Bisexual/Queer/ Homoflexible	Master's degree	Hospice Social Worker	Relationship, no children
Phoebe	49	white	Cisgendered	Bi-light	Bachelor's degree	Customer Service	Single, no children
Emily	32	white	Cisgendered	Homoromantic/ bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Administrative Assistant	Single, no children
Valerie	36	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Software Technician	Married, one child
Cam	41	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Master's degree	Health/Life Coach	Relationship, one child
Riley	25	Vietnamese	Nonbinary	Pansexual/ Polyamorous	Some college	Bartender	Relationship, no children
Liz	32	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Some college	Bartender	Relationship, no children

Brianna	27	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Behavioral Therapist/ Technician	Single
Taylor	27	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual/ Queer	Some graduate school	Social Worker	Relationship, no children
Quinn	26	white	Questioning	Bisexual/ Demi sexual	Some college	Real Estate Agent	Relationship, one child
Sawyer	30	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Some college	Unemployed	Married, no children
Emory	25	white	Cisgendered	Queer/Bisexual/ Gay	Culinary certificate, no college	Service Industry	Single, no children
Fin	30	white	Questioning	Queer/ Homoromantic	Master's degree	Service Industry and Community Outreach	Single, two children
Pat	30	white	Questioning	Pansexual	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	Single, no children
Mack	28	Syrian	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Some college	Service Industry	Single, no children
Westley	30	African American/Black	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Master's degree	Artist	Single, two children
Gina	30	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Some college	User interface designer	Engaged, no children
Jamie	27	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Some college	Service Industry	Relationship, no children
Sam	27	Palestinian	Cisgendered	Straight	Associates	Health Care Worker	Divorced, no children
Felix	24	Chinese/ Taiwanese	Nonbinary	Bisexual	No college	Tech Company Worker	Relationship, no children
Kai	33	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual/ Pansexual	Some college	Freelance Photographer	Divorced, no children
Jorden	51	white	Cisgendered	Straight	Master's degree	Self-Employed (Educational Consultant)	Divorced, one child
Aiden	33	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	Married, two children
Charlie	32	white	Cisgendered	Bisexual	Some college	Payroll Coordinator	Married,

*TABLE TERMINOLOGY

All terminology used within the table of narrator demographics is based on the respondent's answers and self-identifiers. This is to maintain the narrator's voice and actively queer (or deconstruct) the rigid boundaries around identifiers such as sexual orientation and gender status. The variation in these identifiers exemplifies the fluidity in experience of gender and sexuality.

RACE & ETHNICITY

Black, Latinx, Syrian, and other minority racial identifiers are capitalized but white is not. This is because "Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other 'minorities', constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun. By the same token, "white" is not a proper noun since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group" (Crenshaw, K. 1990, p. 1241, citing Mackinnon 1982, p. 516).

GENDER TERMINOLOGY

Nonbinary may be used differently dependent on the individual. Generally, nonbinary is understood as a term to describe a person who may experience a gender identity that is neither exclusively woman or man or is in between or beyond both genders. Often used for identities that fall outside the man/woman dichotomy.

Cisgendered may be used as a term for those whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.

Agender may be used differently dependent on the individual. Generally, agender is understood as 'non-gendered' or 'genderless'. A person who does not have a specific gender identity, or identify as having a gender at all.

Questioning may be understood as questioning their gender identity; unsure.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION TERMINOLOGY

Bisexual means attracted to two or more genders; attracted to multiple genders

Pansexual means attracted to all genders

Many folks use these terms interchangeably, and typically use whichever one is most comfortable for them. For some, there is a clear differentiation in the use of bisexual vs. pansexual—it is important to ask! The participants in my study associated bisexual and pansexual as similar identifiers, in that they were attracted to all genders.

Heteroromantic/Homoromantic: For some, romanticism is distinguishable from their sexual attraction. This is why some folk may say they are bisexual, but homoromantic (or heteroromantic). Heteroromantic means romantic attraction towards person(s) o the opposite gender, whereas homoromantic entails romantic attraction towards persons of the same gender (although this does not always entail the same gender, but may also entail folk who are queer-identified). Again, this may look or be understood differently dependent on the person—asking a person's preferences and identifiers is important.

Queer has oftentimes been understood as an umbrella term for the LGBTQIA+ community of sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual or are not cisgendered. However, many are now defining their sexual orientation as queer, which typically situates itself as a broad "non-normative" sexual identity. Queer sexual identity leaves itself open for interpretation, variability, and use, which, oftentimes, is the exact purpose of this identifier. It deconstructs the boundaries surrounding sexual orientation—it pushes boundaries and enacts fluidity in our previously rigid structures of sex, gender, and sexual behavior.

Homoflexible is used to describe a person who is generally gay/lesbian, but it sometimes attracted to the opposite sex. Some participants also define themselves as Bisexual/Gay, to denote this.

Demisexual refers to people who only feel sexually attracted to someone when they have formed an emotional bond with the person. Again, this experience sits on a spectrum, and may be experienced differently dependent on the person. For example, what counts as a close connection may vary between people. They may still engage in sexual activity with the assumption that attraction will develop—and this does not necessitate that forming an emotional bond will lead to sexual attraction.

Straight is understood as heterosexuality, or, romantic and/or sexual attraction for a person of the opposite sex or gender.

Polyamorous is not a sexual orientation, however, it was included in the table if the participant brought this up when asked about their sexual orientation. Polyamory is the practice of multiple, consensual, intimate relationships. This looks different from person to person, and may understood as "consensual, ethical, and responsible non-monogamy" (for more on polyamory, see *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love*)

Ambiguous and Bi Light were terms two participants chose to define their sexual orientation. When inquired as to what these terms meant to them, both participants eluded to the definitions of bisexuality and/or pansexuality, however, felt they were unsure about the boundaries surrounding their sexual orientation, and therefore felt their self-made terminology/identifiers felt more suitable.

For Phoebe, for example, Bi Light seemed to mean she was bisexual and heteroromantic, but felt ingenuine or an imposter to take up space within the bisexual community (which speaks to the biphobia deeply rooted in our understanding of sexual orientation)

RELIGION TERMINOLOGY

Nondenominational means open or accepting of any denomination within their faith; unrestrictive in their association of faith and particular religious groups or organizations. Some folk expressed this by defining themselves as **religious, but no affiliation.**

Non-practicing often suggests that the individual associates their faith and beliefs with the tenets of the religion, but does not actively practice the faith through event attendance (for example, attending a Sunday mass for Catholics, or daily prayers (salah) for Muslims)

Agnostic may be understood as someone who neither believes or disbelieves in a higher being/power (such as god or a deity of some sort). That the existence of such is unknowable.

Spiritual is often used in my participants description of their faith/religion association as a way to acknowledge that they believe in a higher power, but don't associate their faith in any man-made religion.

Atheist is understood as an active absence of belief. A person who disbelieves or lacks belief in an existence of a god or gods. Many participants would identify as both atheist and agnostic in the same sentence when making sense of their religiosity, seemingly trying to still grasp their stance on the matter. In other words, many participants seem unsure whether they situate themselves as thinking a religion/a higher power cannot be proven and therefore is simply unknowable, or whether they actively reject their association to religion/faith.

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