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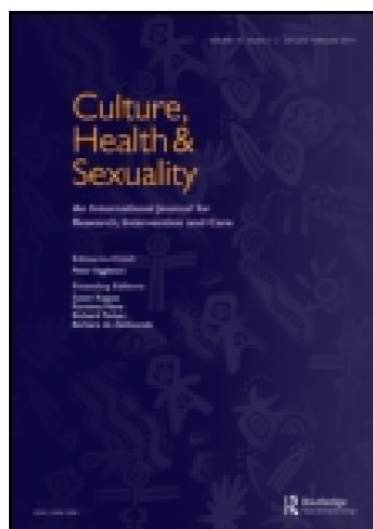
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Coming to power: women's fake orgasms and best orgasm experiences illuminate the failures of (hetero)sex and the pleasures of connection

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While some literature has explored women's sexual satisfaction and, to a lesser degree, women's faking orgasm experiences, little research has examined the context and conditions around women's best and most memorable orgasms. This paper utilised thematic analysis of qualitative data from a community sample of 20 women in the USA (mean age = 34 years, SD = 13.35 years) from a wide range of racial, socioeconomic, and sexual identity backgrounds to illuminate their experiences with fake or pretend orgasms, and with their best orgasms. While faking orgasm narratives reflected themes of wanting to reinforce a partner's sexual skills, strategically ending sexual interactions, and suppressing feelings of abnormality and shame, best orgasm experiences showcased the power of interpersonal connection, the joys of masturbation and other non-penile-vaginal intercourse behaviours, and the significance of 'transformative embodiment'. Implications for the relative failures of (hetero)sex, particularly in the context of gendered power imbalances, along with the importance of deconstructing the sexually 'functional' or 'dysfunctional' woman are explored.

Keywords: women; orgasm; sexual satisfaction; masturbation; interpersonal relationships

Although much of the research on sexual satisfaction has shown that people in North America and in most Western contexts often define their sexual satisfaction in terms of orgasm (Haavio-Mannila and Kontula 1997; Sprecher 2002; Waite and Joyner 2001; Young et al. 2000), how people interpret sexual satisfaction in interpersonal relationships remains intimately tied to norms of gender, power, and entitlement (McClelland 2011; Nicholson and Burr 2003). While sexual satisfaction researchers from North America and Europe have certainly included orgasm as a key measure of satisfaction, framing it as a centrepiece of sex (Lavie-Ajayi and Joffe 2009), a highly sought after and potentially problematic occurrence for women (Haavio-Mannila and Kontula 1997; Young et al. 2000), and a mutually agreed upon goal of sexual behaviour (Sprecher 2002; Waite and Joyner 2001), far less research has examined women's subjective feelings about orgasm (Fahs 2011). While research has found that women orgasm far less often than men (69% versus 95% for last encounter, see Richters et al. 2006), and that non-intercourse behaviours more reliably led to orgasm for women (Richters et al. 2006), little is known about how women create meaning around these discrepancies. Against this background, the present study examined qualitative narratives from 20 women with diverse backgrounds (race, age, current relationship status, parental status, class backgrounds, and sexual identities) in order to examine two key polarities of orgasm: women's experiences with fake or pretend orgasms, and women's descriptions of their best and most memorable

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orgasms. In doing so, this study illuminated several themes in each area while also showcasing the wide range of feelings about orgasm and its relationship to power and sexual satisfaction.

Literature review

The problem of measuring sexual pleasure haunts many studies about sexual satisfaction, particularly those that examine women's sexual satisfaction. Many gendered scripts of sexuality demand that women pay less attention to their own sexual needs and instead prioritise their partner's sexual interests. This results in a variety of problematic symptoms of sexual inequality, many of which are pervasive in cultural contexts that prioritise patriarchal dominance and the hegemony of penile-vaginal intercourse: faking orgasm (Fahs 2011; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010; Wiederman 1997), sexual dissatisfaction (McClelland 2010), sexual compliance (Impett and Peplau 2003; Kaestle 2009; O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998), sexual extortion and violence (DeMaris 1997), tolerating sexual pain (Elmerstig, Wijma, and Swahnberg 2013), and the prioritisation of their partner's pleasure over their own (McClelland 2011; Nicholson and Burr 2003). That said, as a more hopeful sign, when women asserted their sexual agency and sexual power whether by adopting feminist scripts, anticipating more personal satisfaction, or changing the types of sexual behaviour they engaged in, this ultimately led to better outcomes interpersonally, socially, sexually, and politically (Bay-Cheng and Zucker 2007; McClelland 2010; Murnen and Smolak 2009; Yoder, Perry, and Irwin Saal 2007).

Faking orgasm

Despite the frequency with which North American, European, Australian, and New Zealand women fake orgasms, and the implied and explicit importance orgasm often has in people's sexual lives, few studies have examined women's experiences with faking orgasm, particularly those that use qualitative data. The prevalence for women faking orgasm is remarkably high, with studies consistently showing that over half of women have faked orgasm (Fahs 2011; Darling and Davidson 1986; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010; Opperman et al. 2013; Wiederman 1997), with many women faking consistently (Bryan 2001; Fahs 2011). One study showed that women faked orgasm during 20% of their encounters, with many women faking it far more often than that (Bryan 2001), particularly with male partners while engaging in penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI) (Fahs 2011).

Clear gender differences exist in perceptions about faking orgasms, as most men reported that they do not know when women faked their orgasms (Knox, Zusman, and McNeely 2008). While men, too, sometimes fake their orgasms, men could not fake as easily because they produce semen during orgasm (Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010). For women, not all sexual behaviours are equally conducive to women faking their orgasms, as 67% of women college students faked orgasm during PVI, while they faked it less often during oral sex, manual stimulation, and telephone sex (Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010).

Some studies have analysed which interpersonal contexts elicit faking orgasm more often, with evidence suggesting that those who faked orgasm were typically in their mid to late 20s, had intercourse at a younger age, had more lifetime sexual partners, scored higher on measures of self-esteem (Wiederman 1997), and had more formal education (Mialon 2012), presenting a complicated and uneven picture of the women more likely to fake orgasm. More predictably, women who faked had a higher desire to please their partner and more difficulty communicating with their partner (Wiederman 1997).

Although little research has examined women's same-sex experiences with faking orgasm, one study showed that women faked orgasm both with male and female partners, at times framing it as an act of love, though women faked it far more often with male partners than with female partners (Fahs 2011). When looking at women's reasons for faking orgasms, most women described partner and relational reasons for faking orgasms, including worry about hurting a partner's feelings, the 'coital imperative' leading them to engage mostly in PVI and far less in oral sex and manual stimulation, physical exhaustion and the desire to sleep, the sense that orgasm probably would not happen, desire for the sex act to end, enhancement of pleasure and excitement for their partner, perceived need for orgasm reciprocity, and avoidance of conflict with their partner(s) (Bryan 2001; Fahs 2011; Frith 2013; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010). Faking orgasm also occurred more often when women believed their partner was cheating on them (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, and Weekes-Shackelford 2012) and when they felt more love for their partner (Mialon 2012), revealing an underlying pressure women felt both to maintain their relationships ('keep their man') and to ensure their partner's satisfaction (Fahs 2011; McClelland 2011).

A few feminist studies have also started to challenge the social and sexual scripts that occur around orgasm, with one study questioning whether women got the 'fair deal' in discourses that prioritised orgasm reciprocity (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003), while another critically examined the notion of orgasm as a (male) partner's 'hard work' that must be validated by women's orgasms (real or fake) (Frith 2013). As Roberts et al. (1995, 528) argued, 'This "orgasm for work" economy of heterosexuality, however, is not unproblematic ... Women's sexuality is seen as oppositional to men's "natural" sexuality, and their orgasms are thus "unnatural"'. When women did not 'produce' the expected outcome from sex, they felt anxious, unhappy, and not normative (Fahs 2011).

The social imperative to prioritise orgasm and to perform as sexually excited, regardless of women's true feelings, has defined much of women's sexual lives (Jackson and Scott 2007; Jagose 2010), creating enormous complexity around interpretations of what orgasms mean and how to produce them (Potts 2000). Women cared more about achieving orgasm to please their male partners than for their own sexual enjoyment (Fahs 2011; McClelland 2011; Nicholson and Burr 2003), as women felt sexually dysfunctional when they could not orgasm (Nicholson and Burr 2003).

Hyde and DeLamater (1997, 261) have argued that emphasising orgasm as the primary reason for sex leads to troubling consequences in a capitalistic society:

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.

The ever-present focus on women 'ejaculating' through moaning and making noise, thrashing and performing as sexually excited, supported the partner's notion of themselves as skilled lovers and trumped women's personal enjoyment of (hetero)sex (Jackson and Scott 2001; Roberts et al. 1995).

Gendered inequalities in sex

How women in North American and in New Zealand talk about sex with their partners, and their entitlement to sexual pleasure, are also patterned along gendered lines (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003; Opperman et al. 2013; Sanchez, Crocker, and Boike 2005). Women often felt distrust, anger, anxiety, and fear when talking to their partners about

their sexual needs (Faulkner and Lannutti 2010), often because they wanted their partners to feel sexually confident and loved (Fahs 2011). One study of married women found that women felt men 'needed' sex and, in response, women overstated their sexual desire and agreed to have sex more often than they wanted to. Furthermore, husbands expected women to comply with sexual requests, and at times even exchanged housework for sexual favors (Elliott and Umberson 2008). Women also engaged in a variety of other behaviours that prioritised their partner's pleasure over their own, including agreeing to 'threesomes', performing as bisexual at parties, minimising coercive sexual experiences, and agreeing to watch pornography at the partner's request (Fahs 2011).

Correlations between sexual satisfaction and social identities also show some notable patterns, as women who engaged in unsatisfying sex often include younger, less educated, poorer women, and women of colour (Fahs and Swank 2011). Women's notions of what they 'deserve' sexually often differed greatly from what men felt they deserve, leaving women with more focus on other-directed sexual behaviours than self-directed sexual behaviours (McClelland 2010; Nicholson and Burr 2003). Related to this, women in longer-term relationships experience much higher frequencies of orgasms compared to women who engage routinely in one-night stands or shorter hookups (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012).

Research on sexual dysfunction has shown that remarkably high numbers of women reported difficulty with sexual arousal and orgasm, with one study finding that 40% of women reported some form of sexual dysfunction (Shifren et al. 2008), although far fewer women felt distressed about this lack of function (Hayes et al. 2008; Shifren et al. 2008). Most sex research on women's orgasms prioritises a focus on dysfunction and distress, most often ignoring women's experiences with orgasmic pleasure or joy (Arakawa et al. 2013). Women describe a range of problems that interfered with their sex lives, including relationship dissatisfaction, cognitive distraction, sexual abuse, failure and disengagement thoughts, lack of affection from their partners, sexual passivity, lack of erotic thoughts, and contextual interference (Burri and Spector 2011; Cuntim and Nobre 2011; Tiefer 2006). Of all sexual 'dysfunctions', women most often report low sexual desire and difficulty with orgasm (Burri and Spector 2011; Shifren et al. 2008), suggesting that clear definitions for 'normal' desire and orgasm exist in women's minds.

In addition to concerns about dysfunction, women often engage in 'compliant' sexual behaviours to avoid sexual violence, maintain relationships, and 'sacrifice' for their male partners (Impett and Peplau 2003; Kaestle 2009), as 38% of women engage in unwanted sex with their partners (O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998), most often to satisfy their partner's needs, meet their perceived obligations to their partners, promote love and intimacy, avoid relationship tension, and avoid violence (DeMaris 1997; Kaestle 2009; O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998).

Sexual pleasure and agency

Recent studies of embodiment, particularly those that utilise a feminist lens, have pointed out that women also construct their sexual practices and orgasm experiences as deeply connected to their social contexts and are thus permeable, changeable, and flexible (Jackson and Scott 2007; Jagose 2010; Potts 2000). For women, orgasm becomes infused with multiple and diffuse meanings: 'Women, however, rarely describe orgasm in purely physical terms – it has become bound up with mystical ideas of ecstasy and transcendence and associated with the romantic trappings of love and intimacy' (Jackson and Scott 2007, 88).

The notion of sexual agency has become of particular concern for sex researchers interested in women's embodied sexual selves, as women who assert their sexual needs, refuse unwanted sex acts, proactively engage in what they want, and interrogate their own practices tend to feel more agency during sex (Maxwell and Aggleton 2012). Other studies have attempted to unpack some of the complexities surrounding the dual reality of 'having/not having' sexual agency (Bell 2013; Fahs 2011), as women engage in 'relational sex work', that is, the unacknowledged effort and continued monitoring devoted to managing their and their partners' desires and activities, which influences in turn women's feelings of sexual function, power, and agency (Cacchioni 2007). Women's sexual lives are rife with contradictions between the desire for sex and the desire for relationships (Bell 2013), and the need to perform their sexual desires and embody their sexual desires (Fahs 2011).

A handful of studies have found the links between feminist attitudes and sexual satisfaction, as feminist attitudes correlate with women initiating sex, engaging in lower-risk behaviours, challenging sexual double standards, and having higher sexual satisfaction and sexual motivation (Bay-Cheng and Zucker 2007; Yoder, Perry, and Irwin Saal 2007). Researchers have also noted that framing women as solely or only the passive recipients of men's desires takes away their potential for enacting agency: 'Far from serving as a passive surface upon which sexual scripts are inscribed, the body in sexual action is itself a dynamic force in generating sexual subjectivities' (Bryant and Schofield 2007, 321).

Research questions

Given the clear focus on orgasm in studies of sexual satisfaction, and the relative dearth of information on women's subjective feelings about orgasm, the present study drew from several research questions to guide its analysis: first, how do women's narratives about orgasms – both fake orgasms and their best orgasms – reflect the gender and power dynamics of sexual satisfaction both within and outside of their relationship dynamics? Second, how do stories of faking orgasm appear in women's narratives, and what do these stories reveal about the failures and pleasures of (hetero)sex (Jagose 2010)? Third, how do women's best and most memorable orgasms differ from their experiences with fake orgasms, and what does this suggest about notions of sexual entitlement, reciprocity, and pleasure? Finally, how do emotions – anxiety, satisfaction, fear, joy, resentment, pleasure, and so on – matter in the context of better understanding women's orgasm experiences?

Method

This study drew on qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women (mean age = 34 years, SD = 13.35 years) recruited in 2011 in a large metropolitan South-western US city. Participants were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings distributed free to the community as well as the volunteers section of the local online section of Craigslist (for the benefits of using Craigslist to recruit participants see Worthen 2013). Both outlets reached wide audiences and were freely available to community residents. The advertisements asked for women ages 18–59 years to participate in an interview study about their sexual behaviours, practices, and attitudes. Participants were selected only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age; no other pre-screening questions were asked. A purposive sample was selected to provide greater demographic diversity in the sample: sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were

intentionally oversampled and a diverse range of ages was represented (55% aged 18–31; 25% aged 32–45; and 20% aged 46–59). The sample included 55% white women and 45% women of colour, including three African-American women, four Mexican-American women, and two Asian-American women. For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 60% heterosexual women, 30% bisexual women, and 10% lesbian women (although women's reported sexual behaviour often indicated far more same-sex eroticism than these self-categorised labels suggest). All participants consented to have their interviews audiotaped and fully transcribed and all received USD 20 compensation. Identifying data were removed and each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Participants directly reported a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, employment histories, and parental and relationship statuses.

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 1.5 to two hours, in which they responded to 36 questions about their sexual histories, sexual practices, and feelings and attitudes about their sexuality and their body. This study and the specific interview protocol were both approved by the Institutional Review Board of Arizona State University. All participants were interviewed by the author in a room that ensured privacy and confidentiality of responses. Questions included aspects of their best and worst sexual experiences, feelings about sexual satisfaction, and questions about body image. Several of the prompts addressed issues relevant to this study on women's orgasm experiences. For example, women were asked one primary question about orgasm ('Many women report that they engage in sex but that they don't always orgasm. What are your experiences with orgasm?') along with several follow-up questions about orgasms during partnered and masturbatory sex and the importance of orgasm to them. Women were also asked a direct question about faking orgasms ('What are your experiences with faking orgasm or with faking your experience of pleasure?') and one question about their best orgasm experience ('Can you describe your memories of your best orgasm?'), each with a series of follow up questions. These questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about related topics, as follow-up questions were free flowing and conversational. As the questions were broad and open-ended, participants could set the terms of how they would discuss their orgasm experiences and what information they wanted to share.

Responses were analysed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis drawing from poststructuralist feminist theory and gender theory (Braun and Clarke 2006). This type of analysis allowed for groupings of responses based on women's attitudes and feelings (e.g., wanting to reinforce a partner's sexual skills; pleasure from masturbation). This method of analysis also supported an examination of the intersections between orgasm experiences and interpersonal contexts. To conduct the analysis, I first familiarised myself with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly, and then identified patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. In doing so, lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts were reviewed, looking for patterns in their ways of discussing orgasm (Braun and Clarke 2006). I selected and generated themes through the process of identifying logical links and overlaps between participants. After creating these themes, they were compared to previous themes expressed by other participants in order to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns. After this initial reading, I also utilised two independent readers to repeat this same process; in the course of a meeting together, we refined and reworked the themes until we arrived at a mutually agreed upon list of three themes for each orgasm experience.

Results

While not all study participants faked orgasm, and not all participants had experienced orgasm, most participants had engaged in both behaviours. Fifteen of the 20 women (75%) interviewed reported that they had faked orgasm at least once, with nine women (45%) saying that they faked orgasm regularly during their sexual encounters. Eighteen of the 20 women (90%) said that they had had an orgasm at least once in their lives, with all but two of these women saying that they regularly had an orgasm either during masturbation or during partnered sexual contact. All 20 women had masturbated at least once in their lives, though not all women reached orgasm during masturbation.

Because this study focused on women's experiences with faking orgasm and with their best orgasm, I was able to identify three themes under each category. For faking orgasm, women discussed: (1) wanting to reinforce a partner's perceived sexual skills; (2) strategically ending sexual interactions; and (3) suppressing feelings of abnormality and shame. For their best orgasm, they mentioned: (1) the power of interpersonal connection; (2) the joys of masturbation and other non-PVI behaviours; and (3) the significance of 'transformative embodiment', that is, women feeling completely aware of, and generally positive toward, their bodies as a conduit for sexual pleasure. As evident in the descriptions below, some participants' responses overlapped between themes in that one participant's responses fitted into multiple themes.

Faking orgasm

Wanting to reinforce a partner's sexual skills

By far the most common reason women had for faking orgasm was to protect their partner's feelings and to avoid hurting them. Angelica, a 32-year-old heterosexual Mexican-American woman faked orgasm to validate her sexually insecure male partner:

Sometimes just because I want to get it over with, and I know they're trying to wait for me to go, I just make them feel better. Like, 'YAAAAAY', or whatever. I want them to feel like they accomplished something with me.

Similarly, Cris, a 22-year-old white lesbian, faked orgasm with her female partner to validate her feelings and reinforce her sexual skills:

With guys I faked it all the time. Now, with her, I've faked it occasionally pretty much because I was really tired and I just couldn't do it, and I felt bad because she was trying like really hard and so I didn't want her to think she wasn't doing anything good.

Inga, a 24-year-old white bisexual woman, also felt this way, noting that her partner's orgasms seemed more important than her own:

I am very much a giver so I would say when my partner or the person I'm with gets off, I am satisfied. When they have an orgasm or when they're happy and satisfied, I'm satisfied. You can see it in their eyes that they feel good.

These narratives portrayed faking orgasm as an emotional management strategy, where women took care of their partners' feelings by pretending to orgasm.

Other women constructed their fake orgasms as a necessary condition to maintain her relationship. Shantele, a 30-year-old African-American heterosexual woman, faked orgasms in order to produce an orgasm in her partner:

I fake my orgasms, I do, yes. Sometimes some guys are very insecure and they feel like if I'm not coming they didn't do their job. They make me feel like if I don't orgasm then I didn't

enjoy sex, so sometimes I have to pretend just to perform it. Sometimes I take too long and just tell them I'm about to come and then they come.

Abby, a 26-year-old white heterosexual woman, recalled having to 'break the news' to her (now ex) husband that she had always faked her orgasms:

I didn't want to tell him right away that I was faking orgasms. I don't think it's something they need to know right away. I'd rather they know just that they're doing a good job until I can break it to them. When I did finally tell my husband, he was furious.

These experiences reveal the deep-seated tendencies women had to suppress their own needs in order to avoid conflict, hurt, and pain in their relationships.

Strategically ending sexual interactions

Women also faked orgasm to strategically end a sexual encounter, often due to physical and emotional exhaustion. Florence, a 38-year-old white bisexual woman, faked orgasm because she found sex frequently dissatisfying:

I fake it just to get it over with. You go into an act but you're not really orgasming. You're not doing anything, not even feeling anything. You don't want it at all, and it's sad. I just want it to end but I can't just say, 'Stop! We're done.' I'm not a hurtful person.

The notion that honesty would be hurtful, while faking orgasm brought sex more efficiently to an end, suggests that Florence perceived the cost of honesty to be too high.

Inga also faked orgasm to end sex because she believed her partner would never listen to her feelings otherwise:

I faked orgasm to get the guy off of me, just because I was done and just wasn't into and I just didn't want him there anymore so I did that to get him off of me. He wouldn't listen to me otherwise.

Similarly, Keisha, a 32-year-old African-American bisexual woman, faked it when she had ambivalent feelings about sex with men:

I've been there, faked it, just to obviously agree with him, like 'Oh he was good!' or make him seem that he isn't incompetent or bad. I fake it mostly during the times when you're agreeing to have sex when you don't really feel like it.

Sometimes, women faked it when they felt preoccupied and wanted to do other things, such as Sylvia: 'I wasn't emotionally attracted to them and I probably had a million other things on my mind. I felt purposefully preoccupied and just wanted it to stop.'

Suppressing feelings of abnormality and shame

Underlying women's fake orgasms, women also often felt worried about their 'abnormality' for not regularly reaching orgasm during PVI. Patricia, a 28-year-old African American heterosexual woman, described trying to mimic the sensations of a real orgasm in order to portray herself as a 'normal' woman: 'I don't always know how to fake one. People make different faces and sounds and they gyrate differently when they have orgasm. I know how to have one by myself but not with him so I don't feel good about that.' Angelica also admitted to exaggerating her sexual pleasure with her partner in order to feel normal: 'I guess I fake the intensity of the action, but not fake a complete orgasm. I just say, "Oh that was great!" even though it wasn't something I necessarily enjoyed.'

Sometimes, women faked orgasms to escape feelings of shame and guilt. Hannah, a 57-year-old white bisexual woman, often felt guilty and dysfunctional when she did not orgasm during PVI:

I've struggled with this for a long time because I always hear how women have orgasms all the time during sex. I never seem to from intercourse alone so I always have to fake it. I don't want him to know that I'm one of *those* women who can't get aroused from a penis inside of her.

In this description, Hannah not only struggled with feelings of abnormality but also with an internalised mandate to eroticise penetration.

Best orgasm

Interpersonal connection and equality

Several women commented that their best orgasms happened in the context of an intense, deep personal connection with their long-term partner. Inga recounted that the combination of emotional connection and physical arousal led to her best orgasm:

My best would definitely be with the person I'm with now. I think it might just be the way we position or the fact that I'm more in tune with her – A more emotional state maybe. It's definitely a whole body experience for me, like it makes my whole body tremble and I lose control of my body. I usually can't walk afterwards and I pass out!

Similarly, April, a 27-year-old Mexican-American lesbian, felt highly emotional during sex with her first partner:

It was with my first partner and I cried afterwards. In that moment it felt really like the first time – I know this sounds corny but – we made love, you know, and there was a very intense physical connection but also like a direct emotional connection at that moment.

In addition to love and connection, the novelty of sex also contributed to best orgasm experiences. For Leticia, a 41-year-old Mexican-American bisexual woman, she felt thrilled to start having sex with a more experienced partner: 'My best orgasm was when we both had an orgasm at the same time during intercourse. I was 17. It was just great. I couldn't believe what was happening, and he was more experienced, and I felt great.' This description of mutual orgasm and equality with her partner seemed to deepen Leticia's orgasmic pleasure as well.

The joys of masturbation and non-PVI

Aside from the narratives mentioned above, no other women described PVI as producing their most pleasurable orgasm, as oral sex, masturbation, and manual stimulation typically brought on women's most intense orgasms. Patricia described her intense bodily pleasure resulting from oral sex with her partner:

My ex-boyfriend gave me oral sex and it almost felt like he had a vibrator on his tongue. It was like five minutes and I was done, and then I was still shaking for two minutes after the fact and I was asleep like five minutes later. It was really, really intense and, like, I didn't want penetration, because if I had to choose between oral sex and just sex, I would probably pick oral every time. You just take your panties off and go.

Shantele also said her best orgasms happened through oral sex: 'When someone goes down on me, that's the best. It's better than the other because they learned my body and what works and that's really good.'

Other non-PVI activities like manual stimulation, masturbation, and sex toy use also led to women's best orgasms. For Dessa, a 19-year-old Mexican-American heterosexual woman, she enjoyed the combination of oral sex and manual stimulation with her boyfriend: 'I got the full body shakes. It was pretty amazing. I think he was fingering me

and it was so intense. I love oral and fingering together the most though!’ Hannah talked about masturbation and the self-control of self-stimulation as her best orgasm: ‘I know just how to please myself, so I can touch myself in just the right way. It sends electric shocks through my body. It’s perfect!’ Jane, too, enjoyed masturbation as her best orgasmic experience:

Generally what happens now is that I use Mr. Buzz, my vibrator, and I have multiple orgasms. My partner will be involved in helping him and then I will have orgasms afterwards. Sometimes I can have more than one and I never did that before.

These descriptions of women knowing their bodies and using behaviours typically associated with ‘foreplay’ or non-PVI revealed the range of ways women felt both excited and satisfied.

Transformative embodiment

Some women also described feelings of ‘transformative embodiment’, or feeling wholly present in their bodies and sensations while ‘losing themselves’ in the experience of physical pleasure. Abby described sexual experimentation that made her feel in control of how to give herself sexual pleasure:

I really enjoyed when I was 12 and I realised that the sensations were so different than anything I had ever experienced. I specifically remember that I kept like almost getting myself there and then stopping and then starting again and then stopping. That’s when I really enjoyed learning about myself, and it got more intense and more intense, and knowing how to make it more intense was amazing for me.

Cris described this in more frankly bodily terms: ‘It’s kind of just like an explosion. That’s pretty much the only way to describe it, as an explosion.’

Some women described their best orgasms as a feeling of embodiment where they lost control of themselves, or stopped worrying about or managing their bodies. Angelica remembered her best experience as producing a strong bodily reaction that evaded words:

It was so intense. My body did things that I couldn’t really control. My legs were shaking and my whole body was shaking and I just felt like it was so good it almost hurt. I don’t know how to explain it.

Zhang, a 36-year-old Asian-American bisexual woman, also described her most memorable orgasm as both relaxing and intense:

When I’m really relaxed and with no interruptions and when we feel nice and cozy and warm, that’s the best. There’s the intimate orgasm and the excited orgasm, and the OH MY GOD what-did-we-just-do, get-away-from-me orgasm. It was mind-blowing when we got there.

For these women, their best orgasms seemed to bring them to a new plane of understanding themselves and their bodies, as their orgasms transformed their understanding of the possibilities of sexual pleasure.

Discussion

By placing women’s fake orgasm narratives in contrast to their best orgasm experiences, the range of subjective feelings women experienced about orgasm became visible in this study. These findings suggest several important new directions for research on women’s orgasms. First, women rarely discussed feeling sexually dysfunctional (as their own ‘deficiency’) and instead often mentioned in their fake orgasm narratives concern about their partners’ feelings and the emotional dynamics of their relationship. Second, in

relationships where heterosexual PVI was more of an expected norm, women had far less positive experiences with orgasms, as women's best orgasm experiences occurred most often during non-PVI activities and while perceiving their partner as generous, giving, and concerned about women's pleasure. Third, these findings reinforce the potential for orgasm to symbolise the hopelessness, resentment, and conflict that can grow in relationships, while also signifying the potentially transformative experiences that can emerge from sexual life. Orgasm is a multiply understood, flexible, and complicated phenomenon, made all the more complicated by the relationship dynamics that orgasm seems to reflect for many women.

Women's feelings about orgasm also seemed to reflect their understanding of the overall health and wellbeing of the relationship, particularly around entitlement to pleasure. In dynamics where women felt insecure, uncertain, or over-concerned about a partner's feelings, faking orgasm occurred more often. In relationships where women felt free to experience intense pleasure, ask for what they want (for example, Jane asking for her partner to participate with Mr. Buzz), and allow themselves to disappear into the intense physical experience of sex, they reported intense and powerful orgasmic experiences. Notably, the same women often reported both experiences with faking orgasm and with having body-shaking, all-powerful orgasmic pleasure, raising questions about the dichotomous characterisations of women as either sexually functional or sexually dysfunctional. Instead, researchers and practitioners may want to look far more closely at the contextual factors in women's sexual lives, particularly relational dynamics and feelings of (in)security about meeting their own, and their partners', sexual needs. In a gendered context where women learn to prioritise their (male) partners' pleasure over their own pleasure, more evidence of faking orgasm will likely appear. That said, if relationships can move instead toward less compulsory performances that prioritise men's sexual needs and instead value awareness of women's bodies and sexual needs, women may feel more inclined to have intense orgasmic experiences together with their partners. Sexual 'dysfunction', then, may really be more about relationship dysfunction or failures of communication than about bodily problems.

The transformative potential of orgasm, particularly for helping women to feel embodied and agentic about their sexuality, is something that appears far too little in the existing research on women's sexuality. These orgasm descriptions present scenarios when women experience their bodies positively and affirmatively. How women express pleasure or experience pleasure appeared in this study as more uniform than I had anticipated, as many women described leg-shaking, body-shaking, and 'losing control' as experiences of great orgasms. That we largely do not see these descriptions in the existing satisfaction research implies that we have not (at least often enough) properly asked women to narrate their experiences of pleasure. There is much terrain to still cover when assessing and understanding women's pleasurable sexual experiences and what they want from sex, orgasm, and relationships. The pulsating, powerful descriptions of these best orgasms evoke images of women that differ sharply from the ones presented in the sexual dysfunction literatures. In the present study, women's best orgasms portrayed them in control of their bodies, seeking new sensations, and powerfully desirous and even lusty, sometimes just for themselves.

The narratives about fake orgasms – and their striking contrast to women's best orgasm experiences – also adds to the growing body of work that is addressing the relative failures of (hetero)sex, particularly PVI, as an avenue for pleasure for women. Or, more accurately, the narratives suggest that the pleasure women do feel from PVI is often derived more from satisfying their partner's needs rather than meeting their own desires

for intense ‘mind-blowing’ orgasms. That we have socialised women to want PVI, and construct it as ‘real sex’, may do a huge disservice to their orgasmic potential, another finding that practitioners of sex therapy and researchers of women’s sexual ‘dysfunction’ should take seriously.

Limitations and future directions

Certain research decisions may have affected this study’s results, as the choice for wording the interview questions may have captured only some, but certainly not all, of the facets of women’s orgasmic experiences. Future research on women’s sexual dysfunction as related to lack of orgasm should focus most specifically on the contextual factors of women’s current relationships (Tiefer 2006), just as sexual satisfaction studies should continue to ask women how they define their satisfaction as they negotiate their own, and their partners’, sexual needs (McClelland 2011). Studies could also interrogate men’s experiences with orgasm to determine whether they, too, struggle with performative dimensions of their sexual experiences. A larger sample size of women along with more quantitative research questions, approach, and analysis could also work to identify patterns along gender, race, class, and sexual identity lines. Research that examines relationship length and type could also yield compelling findings about orgasm. Additional research on women’s powerful experiences with sexual pleasure would also help to provide a better balance to the dysfunction-based sex research literature currently available (Arakawa et al. 2013).

Ultimately, this study validated the notion of women’s orgasms as elusive, intense, politically-complicated, and full of the possibility for ‘projection’ from researchers, practitioners, and laypeople alike (Jagose 2010; Lloyd 2005). It also provided an exciting window into terrain we know little about, especially women’s stories of their orgasms, and the vivid language that they use when describing their orgasmic experiences. The twin functions of orgasm symbolising a social mandate with the potential to injure others (fake orgasm) and an avenue to better self-understanding (best orgasm) serves as a stirring reminder of the immense complexity in studying, understanding, and assessing the social meanings of sexuality ‘on the ground’. That said, 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-medicalised, reductive lens through which women’s orgasms are typically viewed.

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Résumé

La recherche s'est déjà penchée sur la question de la satisfaction sexuelle des femmes et, dans une moindre mesure, sur celle de la simulation de l'orgasme par celles-ci. Mais peu d'études ont examiné le contexte et les conditions dans lesquelles se produisent les orgasmes féminins les meilleurs et les

plus mémorables. Cet article s'est appuyé sur une analyse thématique des données qualitatives obtenues aux États-Unis, dans un échantillon communautaire de 20 femmes (âge moyen = 34 ans, SD = 13,35 ans) dont les horizons ethniques, socioéconomiques et d'identités sexuelles étaient très divers, pour apporter un éclairage sur leurs expériences d'orgasmes simulés et des orgasmes les meilleurs. Alors que les récits sur les orgasmes simulés reflétaient les notions de renforcement des compétences sexuelles d'un partenaire; du désir d'en finir, stratégiquement, avec les interactions sexuelles; et de l'élimination des sentiments d'anormalité et de honte, les récits sur l'expérience des meilleurs orgasmes ont mis en évidence le pouvoir de la connexion interpersonnelle, les joies de la masturbation et des autres comportements sexuels non limités aux rapports pénis/vagin, et l'importance de « l'incarnation transformative ». Les implications pour les échecs relatifs de l'hétéro-sexe, en particulier dans le contexte des déséquilibres de pouvoir entre genres, et de l'importance de la déconstruction de la femme sexuellement « fonctionnelle » ou « dysfonctionnelle » sont explorées.

Resumen

Si bien algunas investigaciones se han orientado a examinar las experiencias vinculadas a la satisfacción sexual de las mujeres y, en menor grado, las vivencias de las mujeres que fingen tener un orgasmo, pocas investigaciones han analizado el contexto y las condiciones existentes en torno a los mejores y más memorables orgasmos de las mujeres. Con el fin de examinar las experiencias de las mujeres con los orgasmos fingidos o simulados y con sus mejores orgasmos, el presente artículo empleó un análisis temático de datos cualitativos obtenidos de una muestra a nivel comunitario de veinte mujeres de ee. uu. (edad promedio = 34 años; de = 13.35 años), quienes detentaban una amplia variedad de procedencias raciales, socioeconómicas, así como de identidades sexuales. Si bien las narrativas en relación a los orgasmos fingidos reflejan ideas vinculadas al deseo de querer reafirmar las proezas sexuales de la pareja, o de estratégicamente dar por terminadas las interacciones sexuales y de reprimir sentimientos de anormalidad y de vergüenza, las vivencias relacionadas con los mejores orgasmos mostraron el poder de la conexión interpersonal, además del deleite que proporcionan la masturbación y otros actos sexuales no asociados a la penetración pene-vagina, así como el significado de la “encarnación transformativa”. Asimismo, en el artículo se examinan las implicaciones que lo mencionado anteriormente tiene sobre el fracaso relativo del acto (hetero) sexual, particularmente en el contexto de los desequilibrios de poder entre los sexos, así como la importancia de deconstruir el concepto de mujer sexualmente “funcional” o “disfuncional”.