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# The front lines of the “back door”: Navigating (dis)engagement, coercion, and pleasure in women’s anal sex experiences

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## Abstract

Despite the frequent depiction of heterosexual anal sex in pornography, and growing indications that heterosexual couples engage in anal sex, almost no research has examined women’s subjective experiences with receptive anal sex with men. This study draws upon qualitative interviews with 20 American women (mean age = 34, SD = 13.35) from diverse ages and backgrounds to illuminate five themes in women’s narratives about receptive anal sex: (1) initial resistance followed by submission; (2) initial interest followed by withdrawal from subsequent anal sex experiences; (3) violence and coercion surrounding anal sex; (4) social norming (e.g. men’s male friends normalizing heterosexual anal sex; seeing anal sex as normative after watching pornography); and (5) pleasurable experiences with anal eroticism. Implications for the re-evaluation of consent, imagining a continuum of sexualized violence, heteronormative assumptions about access to and power over women, silences surrounding non-penetrative anal eroticism, and women’s (dis)engagement with anal sex are explored.

## Keywords

women’s sexuality, anal sex, gender norms, sexual health, patriarchy, sexual consent

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## Introduction

As a key task of critical feminist sex research, explorations of the newer, and potentially more insidious, manifestations of patriarchy and misogyny have paramount importance, particularly as women negotiate the “rhetoric of liberation” in light of evolving sexual expectations (Gill, 2010; McRobbie, 2007; Madhok, Phillips, & Wilson, 2013). As agency and coercion coexist to inform women’s sexual lives (Madhok et al., 2013), women face a plethora of challenges to their sexual empowerment: unequal gendered scripts about sexuality, the prioritization of men’s pleasure, faking orgasm, double standards about “promiscuity,” fusions between empowerment and consumerism, conflicting scripts about sex as power versus sex as oppression, and different entitlement to sexual pleasure and satisfaction (Elliott & Umberson, 2008; Fahs, 2011; McRobbie, 2008). Further, women’s subjective experiences of their sexuality have only recently garnered scholarly attention, as *sexual health* has trumped negotiations of *sexual power imbalances*, thus largely ignoring the ways that women engage (and disengage) from sex based on feelings of (dis)empowerment. As a notable gap in the existing literatures on women’s sexuality, subjective accounts of women’s anal sex experiences remain almost entirely absent, replaced by an overwhelming deluge of public health studies that frame women’s anal sex experiences. Sexual risk-taking that produces negative public health outcomes (e.g. contraction of STIs) has dominated the discourse about anal sex (Maynard, Carballo-Diéguez, Ventuneac, Exner, & Mayer, 2009), leaving other issues relevant to feminist politics (e.g. power, consent, coercion, sexual pleasure) largely unexamined. In particular, *why* women might engage in something they do not find pleasurable and the ways that frequency and enjoyment often misalign are key questions this study takes up.

Clear gender biases in anal sex research point to cultural “blind spots” about women’s sexuality and sexual health. While much research has addressed the public health issues present in *men’s* experiences of insertive and receptive anal sex—both within and outside of the gay community (Botticelli, 2010; Carter, Henry-Moss, Hock-Long, Bergdall, & Andes, 2010; Kippax & Smith, 2001; Middelthun, 2002)—research that interrogates women’s experiences of anal sex appears far less often. A recent special issue of *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* featured a series of articles on anal sex, but only *one* (theoretical) piece that examined women’s anal sex experiences (Sedgwick, 2010). Sedgwick (2010) argued in this piece that anal desire has revolutionary potential and can undo much of our assumptions about “proper” hetero desire. With this one exception, most existing research on women’s anal sex experiences, particularly in the USA, has framed it as a public health concern and has largely ignored the social and psychological impetus behind its increasing prevalence among heterosexuals (Baldwin & Baldwin, 2000; Melby, 2007; Misegades, Page-Shafer, Halperin, & McFarland, 2001). The scant amount of research on women’s experiences of receptive anal sex, particularly their subjective accounts of this sexual engagement, suggests relevant inroads for feminist analyses and new possibilities for uniting sex research, health research, feminist theory, and qualitative psychology.

To address this research gap, this study applied a poststructuralist feminist analysis to qualitative interview data from 20 American women with diverse backgrounds who narrate what anal sex means to them. In doing so, these narratives illuminate the unique fusions between agency and coercion and between compulsory heterosexuality (that is, women's *enforced* heterosexuality rather than their chosen heterosexuality, see Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003), sexual health, gendered power negotiations, and hegemonic masculinity (that is, gendered practices that sustain men's dominance over women, see Mandziuk, 2000) present in women's experiences with anal sex. These analyses also allow for a clear critique of the "rhetoric of liberation" by revealing how narratives about anal sex are multiply produced by our contemporary cultural context (e.g. pornography, the family, changing definitions of "good" sexual citizens, neoliberalism, and so on). In doing so, women's narratives about anal sex—and the connections they make to issues of gender, power, and resistance—have the potential to expose many seemingly invisible aspects of women's sexuality.

### *Literature review*

While popular interest in the USA has surged in how to teach women to have anal sex—primarily through "how to" manuals and guidebooks for less experienced women (DeCitore, 2012; Morin, 2010; Toirmino, 2006)—scholarly literatures have explored women's anal sex experiences far less often and primarily through a public health lens. Notably, discussions of agency, coercion, and consent are largely absent in the literature on anal sex, rendering it largely a public health issue rather than a feminist one. Because anal sex has received much attention as a public health issue—as the anal tearing that often occurs during anal sex allows for greater likelihood of transmitting STIs and HIV infections—most U.S. research on anal sex has focused on prevalence and numbers of sexual partners, particularly for gay men and less frequently for heterosexual men and heterosexual women (Baldwin & Baldwin, 2000; Erickson et al., 1995; Halperin, 1999; McBride & Fortenberry, 2010; Misegades et al., 2001; Satterwhite et al., 2007). While research has consistently demonstrated that rates of heterosexual anal intercourse have risen markedly over the past two decades (Mosher, Anjni & Jones, 2005; Satterwhite et al., 2007), collecting reliable and accurate information about anal sex behaviors has proven a formidable challenge for researchers. Cultural taboos surrounding anal sex, combined with data collection techniques that tap into participants' shame or secrecy, may influence self-reporting and result in an overall underestimation of heterosexual anal sex behaviors (Misegades et al., 2001), particularly anal eroticism that does not involve penetration (e.g. manual stimulation, anal use of sex toys, and oral-anus stimulation).

*Frequency of anal sex.* Most anal sex data in the USA has emerged from comparative studies that relay information about frequencies of anal sex, penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI), cunnilingus, and fellatio. One study of women in the age range of 25–44 that asked about lifetime occurrence of sexual behaviors found that, while

PVI (98%) and oral sex (88%) have high prevalence among women, anal sex (35%) occurred less frequently (Mosher et al., 2005). Still, even with highly variable data, studies clearly show that the numbers of people engaging in anal sex are rising, as two studies from 1991 and 1992 found that only 18–20% (Mosher et al., 2005; Reinisch, Hill, Sanders, & Ziemba-Davis, 1995) of women had engaged in anal sex. These numbers suggests a full 10–15% rise in anal sex prevalence between 1992 and 2002. Still, questions about accurate self-reporting and the problem of obtaining reliable statistics about heterosexual anal sex abound, as studies have found prevalence rates ranging from 1% (women) and 8% (men) (Erickson et al., 1995; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) to 35% (women) and 43% (men) (Mosher et al., 2005; Štulhofer & Baćak, 2011).

**Gender differences.** Studies vary about gender differences in anal intercourse for U.S. samples, particularly whether men have engaged in heterosexual anal intercourse more often than women (Petersen & Hyde, 2011; Reinisch et al., 1995). Most studies have found similar rates of anal intercourse across genders: one study found only 1% difference between men's (17%) and women's (18%) prevalence of anal sex (Mosher et al., 2005), another found a 4% difference between men (14.3%) and women's (18.6%) anal sex experiences (MacDonald et al., 1990), while another study also found almost no difference in prevalence of anal sex between genders (Petersen & Hyde, 2011). Nuancing these findings, men engaged *more often* in anal sex, particularly when assessing frequencies in the past month (26% of men vs. 15% of women) (Reinisch et al., 1995). Gender differences also appeared more strongly for sexual fantasies about anal sex, with 35.2% of men and 11.3% of women fantasizing about anal sex (Hsu et al., 1994). That said, the same study reported that slightly more women (26.7%) than men (22.2%) engaged in anal intercourse (Hsu et al., 1994), suggesting that fantasy and behavior may be misaligned. Ultimately, the most striking gender differences occurred in rates of condom use during anal sex, as American women were *seven times* more likely than American men to have unprotected anal sex (Halperin, 1999), indicating severe gender differences in perceptions of risk associated with anal intercourse.

**Sexual safety.** The anal sex literatures have focused almost exclusively on issues of sexual safety, finding that different populations have reported drastically different frequencies for engaging in protected and unprotected heterosexual anal intercourse. Younger, unmarried people reported more frequent heterosexual anal sex behavior compared to older, married populations (Erickson et al., 1995), with 20–24-year-olds and 30–34-year-olds reported the most heterosexual anal sex (McBride & Fortenberry, 2010). When assessing risk, one recent U.S. study found that approximately 70% of anal sex events between teenagers (ages 14–17) did not utilize condoms (Hensel, Fortenberry, & Orr, 2010). Another study examining comparisons between casual and committed relationships for teenage girls found that 41.2% of girls in casual relationships used anal intercourse as a form of contraception compared with only 8.5% of girls in committed sexual relationships (Houston, Fang, Husman, & Peralta, 2007). Further, religious teenage girls

(particularly Evangelicals) and those who pledged chastity more often engaged in anal intercourse to protect their virginity and lower pregnancy risks than non-pledgers (Brückner & Bearman, 2005; Fortenberry, 2005; Wiebe, 2012). Many teenage girls did not see anal intercourse as a risky sexual behavior, suggesting that health care providers have not yet successfully framed anal intercourse as high-risk behavior (Hensel et al., 2010; Houston et al., 2007).

Literatures on anal intercourse have overwhelmingly found that those who engage in heterosexual anal intercourse often do not recognize it as risky (Erickson et al., 1995; Houston et al., 2007; Maynard et al., 2009; Reinisch et al., 1995; Štulhofer & Baćak, 2011). In particular, women often engaged in anal sex in tandem with other high risk activities such as intravenous drug use (38% of IV drug users reported heterosexual anal intercourse) (Lewis, Watters, & Case, 1990), alcohol abuse (Erickson et al., 1995), and lack of condom use (Erickson et al., 1995; Houston et al., 2007). One U.S. study found that heterosexuals reported *nearly universally* lower rates of condom use when engaging in anal sex compared to vaginal intercourse (Halperin, 1999), with a Croatian study finding 70% having unprotected heterosexual anal sex (Štulhofer & Baćak, 2011). Heterosexual women, compared to gay men, also used condoms less frequently (Rosenberger et al., 2012), perhaps because they equate condoms with pregnancy prevention rather than STI prevention. Female sex workers, inner-city adolescents, serodiscordant (HIV status as different) heterosexual couples, substance abusers, and those with an incarcerated partner also practiced more unprotected anal sex than other populations (Halperin, 1999; Jenness et al., 2011). Public health experts in the USA have directed particular concern that Latina(o) college students (Gurman & Borzekowski, 2004), African-Americans (Salazar et al., 2009), those in urban centers with high HIV transmission rates (Jenness et al., 2011), and those with a history of same-sex partners (Foxman, Aral, & Holmes, 1998) reported higher likelihood of heterosexual anal intercourse, often without condoms, thus making them particularly vulnerable to STIs and HIV transmission. (Conversely, however, two other studies found no racial or ethnic differences for heterosexual anal sex—Baldwin & Baldwin, 2000; Wiebe, 2012). Collectively, this suggests that women who engaged in heterosexual anal sex often came from more disadvantaged backgrounds, a finding with clear implications for links between power, agency, and anal sex.

*Agency and anal sex.* Notably, the likelihood of engaging in heterosexual anal sex also hinged upon women's perception of power, control, and agency, a finding that also ties in with previous feminist scholarship coming out of the UK on sexual agency and the overlaps between coercion and consent (Gill & Donaghue, 2013; Madhok et al., 2013) In the USA, when male partners made the decisions about sex and contraception, those couples more often had anal sex; when women made decisions about sex and contraception, anal sex became less common (Billy, Grady, & Sill, 2009; Wiebe, 2012), suggesting that interventions must target *both* partners. A qualitative study of women who had unprotected sex with HIV-positive men found that women did this to experience physical pleasure, enhance emotional intimacy, please their male partner(s), or avoid violence (Maynard et al., 2009);

women also avoided condoms largely to please their partners even when they had knowledge about STIs and HIV risks (Maynard et al., 2009), again suggesting that women's perceptions of power and efficacy impact risk-taking decisions related to anal sex. One recent study also found that feelings of love increased the likelihood of men engaging in anal sex with other men, but *not* for women engaging in anal sex with men (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007). These findings clearly tie in to other feminist research on agency and consent that has found, for example, that women's perception of consent changes over time (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011) and that coercion and "agency" is flexible and shifts according to context and social norms (Madhok et al., 2013).

Gender and power differences also impact women's perceptions of pleasure related to anal sex. Some U.S. feminists have theorized that unprotected anal sex, and the lack of awareness about the risks of such activities, are produced by a cultural context that normalizes rape (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011) and promotes the high prevalence of anal sex in heterosexual pornography (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010; Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, & Irizarry, 2010). In one study, researchers found that mainstream pornography featured heterosexual anal intercourse in 56% of scenes (Bridges et al., 2010), a notable rise from previous decades. In a study of Swedish women who watched pornography, one-third said that pornography influenced their sexual behavior, as 47%—a number much higher than the average population—had experienced anal intercourse (including 51% of older women and 31% of teenagers) (Rogala & Tydén, 2003). Further, those women who watched pornography and had anal sex described anal sex more negatively and used condoms only 40% of the time (Rogala & Tydén, 2003). A recent study also found that, regardless of the frequency with which women engaged in anal sex, women felt *less pleasure* during anal sex than men did (Pinkerton, Cecil, Bogart, & Abramson, 2003), indicating that frequency of sexual activity did not always yield feelings of pleasure. Other studies of vaginal intercourse have found similar results, as women with less socially inscribed power tended to report higher amounts of sexual activity and lower amounts of sexual pleasure (Fahs & Swank, 2011). In short, frequency of engaging in a sexual behavior does not always indicate enjoyment, as women often engage in sexual activities they do not enjoy; asking *why* this occurs is crucial to a feminist understanding of anal sex.

*Sexual pain.* Studies have also started to address women's pain during anal intercourse, known as *anodyspareunia*, in part because anal sex has appeared more frequently in mainstream heterosexual pornography—leading to more anal sex attempts, often among less-skilled partners and without appropriate patience and lubrication. (Hollows, 2007; Rosser, Short, Thurmes, & Coleman, 1998; Štulhofer & Ajduković, 2011). Debates have ensued in Croatian research about whether anal pain during anal intercourse should constitute a sexual dysfunction or whether it represents a normative experience of heterosexual anal sex (Štulhofer & Ajduković, 2011) and, thus, not a dysfunction per se. Other studies found that women's experiences of anodyspareunia may differ significantly from gay men's experiences of it (Hollows, 2007). One South African study found evidence that

women experienced pleasure during anal sex even if they also experienced pain (Stadler, Delany, & Mntambo, 2007). Pleasure from anal sex typically occurred less often than pleasure from oral sex, manual stimulation, and intercourse for women (Pinkerton et al., 2003); further, lubrication served as a key determinant in women's pleasure from anal sex (Herbenick et al., 2011). Thus, the fact that pain may be clinically normative deserves more attention from scholars and health practitioners.

When examining gender differences of pain during receptive anal intercourse, 12% of gay men rated anal sex as too painful to continue, often due to inadequate lubrication, psychological factors like not feeling relaxed, and lack of stimulation with fingers prior to penetration (Rosser et al., 1998). Gay men felt more pain depending on the depth and rate of thrusting, the lack of social comfort with gay men, degree of being "closeted," and their level of anxiety (Rosser et al., 1998). Conversely, a study of women engaging in heterosexual anal sex found that 48.8% of women had to discontinue anal sex on their first attempt because they found it "unbearable" and too painful to continue. Further, 8.7% of women described severe pain during every instance of anal sex, most often due to the inability to relax and lack of sexual assertiveness (Štulhofer & Ajdukovič, 2011). Taken together, this suggests that women's experiences of receptive anal sex involve more severe and consistent pain compared to gay men.

*Theoretical Framing and Research Questions.* Feminist theorists have contributed much to the theorization of sexual agency and the problematizing of the "rhetoric of liberation" (Gill, 2010; Gill & Donaghue, 2013; Phillips, 2013). Though these UK authors have not specifically examined cultural ideologies related to women having anal sex, they have argued that agency and coercion should be framed not as *opposites*, but as entities produced *together*, that is, conditions produced by deep gendered inequalities (Gill & Donaghue, 2013; Madhok et al., 2013). Poststructuralist feminists have critiqued the "postfeminist" notions that women's choices to engage in sexual behavior represent *only* their empowered selves, arguing instead that women have learned to engage in "intimate entrepreneurship," burdensome remodeling of their psyches, and relationship maintenance as a consequence of their oppression (Gill, 2010). The research questions draw from this framework, as women's experiences with anal sex are theorized within the context of the discursive production of bodies and sexualities. This study asks what women's stories about anal sex look like in light of these simultaneously lived contradictions between agency and coercion.

Given the notable absence of research on women's subjective experiences with anal sex, and the clear links between heterosexual anal sex and high-risk sexual behavior, more research on why women engage in anal sex and how anal sex fuses together ideas of agency and coercion is needed. Because anal sex has become more popular among heterosexuals and because public health campaigns and scholarly research has largely ignored women's subjective experiences of anal sex—particularly the relationship between gender, power, and (dis)pleasure—this study interrogates anal sex as an important link between feminist (particularly poststructuralist feminist), psychological, and sexuality literatures. Specifically,



this study asks three central research questions: What do women's narratives about engaging in, and disengaging from, anal sex reveal about the relationship between gender and power? How do these subjective experiences connect to larger stories about hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality, particularly the fusion between agency and consent? Finally, how might women's renegotiation of consent during anal sex produce new knowledge and a deeper exploration of sexual permission, partner negotiation, sexual engagement, and resistance?

## Method

This study used qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women (mean age = 34,  $SD = 13.35$ ) recruited in 2011 in a large metropolitan southwestern U.S. 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. The advertisements asked for women in the age group of 18–59 to participate in an interview study about their sexual behaviors, practices, and attitudes. Participants were screened only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age; no other pre-screening questions were asked. A purposive sample was selected to generate 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% ages 18–31; 25% ages 32–45; and 20% ages 46–59). The sample included 55% white women and 45% women of color, 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 (though women's reported sexual *behavior* often indicated far more same-sex eroticism than these self-categorized labels suggest). All participants consented to have their interviews audiotaped and fully transcribed and all received USD\$20.00 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 1.5–2 h, where they responded to 36 questions about their sexual histories, sexual practices, and feelings and attitudes about sexuality. All participants were interviewed by the same interviewer (Fahs) in a room that ensured privacy and confidentiality of responses. Questions included aspects of their best and worst sexual experiences, feelings about contemporary sexual culture and media, personal experiences with anal sex and oral sex, negotiations of power with partner(s), and reflections on their bodies and body image. Several of the prompts addressed issues relevant to this study on women's attitudes about anal sex. A clear methodological decision was made to ask women about their "experiences with" anal sex rather than to ask them who "had" anal sex, as so much of women's anal sex experiences involve partial or attempted anal sex rather than "completed" anal sex. For example, women were asked one primary question about anal sex: "Women often report conflicted emotions about different sexual acts they have tried.

Can you talk about your experiences with anal sex, oral sex, intercourse, and other acts that you would consider to be ‘sex?’” This question was 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 attitudes about anal sex and what information they wanted to share. Notably, women self-defined “anal sex” as the researchers did not give them a set definition for what this meant.

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that draws from feminist theory and gender theory. Specifically, we drew from poststructuralist gender theory that argues against any essentialist claims about gender (e.g. sexual desire as “natural”) and instead posits that desire, sexual behavior, and sexual attitudes are discursively produced by a variety of cultural contexts (e.g. pornography, gender relations, family systems, etc.). This type of analysis allowed for groupings of responses based on women’s attitudes and feelings (e.g. reluctance to engage; pleasure; violent coercion). This method of analysis also supported an examination of the intersection between anal sex and other components of women’s sexual lives (e.g. anal pleasure, partner coercion, desire to please partners, etc.). To conduct the analysis, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly, and we then independently identified patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. In doing so, we reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in their ways of discussing anal sex (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We selected and generated themes through the process of identifying logical links and overlaps between participants. After creating these themes, we compared them to previous themes expressed by other participants in order to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns.

## Results and analysis

Twelve women (or 60%) in the sample reported that they had attempted to have anal sex at least once in their lifetime, with nine describing it as a regular part of their sexual repertoire when they had partners. Thus, even though eight women (40%) had not attempted to have anal sex, we included their responses because they provide important insight about why women may choose to *not* engage in anal sex; further, a few of these women also discussed some sort of anal eroticism or anal play. We also included both heterosexual and queer women’s responses, as many women, regardless of sexual identity, had either engaged in anal play with women or had engaged in (or felt pressured toward) anal sex with men. From these responses about anal sex, five themes were generated, drawing from the previous literatures on consent, agency, power, and coercion. As noted in the descriptions below, some participants’ responses overlapped between themes in that one participant’s responses fit into multiple themes. The six themes included (1) initial resistance followed by submission; (2) initial interest followed by withdrawal from subsequent anal sex experiences; (3) violence and coercion surrounding anal sex; (4) social norming; and (5) pleasurable experiences with anal eroticism.

### *Theme 1: Initial resistance followed by submission*

Initiation of anal sex often occurs within a context where gender and power interact, as many women described reluctance to have anal sex but eventually gave in to men's demands or requests. Shantele, a 30-year-old African-American heterosexual woman, described that she frankly hated anal sex but agreed to it to satisfy her partner, particularly during her menstrual cycle: "I don't like anal sex. It's not pleasurable for me. Sometimes I do actually cry because it's a weird feeling and you tear up because of the pressure. Usually I do it if I'm on my period and he wants to be pleased so, okay, it's 'whatever.' He'll ask and ask it will be like okay, okay, *okay*. It's very intense and he knows that he's hurting me because I'm so tense." This reinforces the ideologies that many women maintain about men's inherent "need" for sex and the importance of placing that above their own needs. Angelica, a 32-year-old Latina heterosexual woman, also felt resistant to anal sex at first, believing she should succumb to please her boyfriend even when she felt displeasure: "He asked me if I was open to that, like, 'Would you ever consider doing it from behind?' That's how he put it. I was like, 'You mean doggy or you mean in the butt?' And he's like, 'No, in the butt.' And that's pretty much how it came up. I had never done it because the vagina is where you're really supposed to do it." She followed up this statement by noting that, once she agreed to have anal sex, it became the only time her boyfriend treated her with gentleness: "It was kinda painful, but that's the one thing he was sensitive to, like when we had anal sex from then on he would be careful and he wouldn't try to hurt me or anything like that." This interesting construction of aggressive vaginal sex and gentle anal sex also complicates the lines between coercion, aggression, and consent, particularly as their partners knew they were hurting but proceeded anyway.

A few women described anal sex as something they did to signal the newfound seriousness of a longer-term relationship, noting that they first resisted and eventually gave in to satiate a long-term partner's desires, such as Kelly, a 23-year-old white heterosexual woman, who said: "My partner really wanted it, so it's good to experiment and explore. I think if you're in a solid trusting relationship, then it's okay. I would never do that with a stranger or anything. It's really painful for me. It's been a long time with him and I still try for him and I would try again but still, I just can't get over that pain." This supports the notion that women may consider anal sex to be a "gift" they offer up to a serious relationship partner, again raising questions about women finding it inherently pleasurable. Rhoda, a 57-year-old white heterosexual woman, also said that she begrudgingly agreed to have anal sex with her husband after resisting for quite some time: "I tried it once or twice. It was painful, not satisfying whatsoever to me. It was more like a chore, but it was kind of like 'Okay, I'll do it.' He requested it. It was just one of those things that's supposed to be pretty good, you know, but I'm like, 'If it's so good, go find a *guy* who likes anal sex.' He didn't like that very much." The tension between agency (choosing to engage in anal sex) and coercion (feeling pressured to engage in it) appears in this construction, as submission to anal sex became a form of emotional labor women engaged in for their partner's pleasure.

Women's resistance to future engagement in anal sex often centered on women's perceptions that future episodes of anal sex would not feel pleasurable. Leticia, a 41-year-old Latina bisexual woman, noted that she and her boyfriend tried to have anal sex without using lubricant: "My first experience with anal sex was just pain. It was ugly and I didn't even enjoy it. It was embarrassing just because I did it because my boyfriend asked me to. You know, I did it just to please him, but we didn't even use a lubricant. I don't know why we did it. He was just all gung ho for it so I was like, 'Okay, it can't hurt that bad,' but it did." Notably, both Leticia and her partner did not initiate the use of lubrication, perhaps signaling socialization from pornography or their overall lack of experience with anal sex.

### *Theme 2: Initial interest followed by withdrawal*

As the most common theme in women's descriptions of anal sex, many women (six out of the twelve who had engaged in anal sex) tried it willingly (though often reluctantly) only to discover their lack of enjoyment or too much pain. Patricia, a 28-year-old African-American heterosexual woman, recalled her interrupted experiences of anal sex, noting that she often had to discontinue anal sex because of the pain: "I tried anal sex and I didn't like it. I just told him, 'No, it's not going to work.' He was just like, 'Okay fine.' I wasn't into it so now I tell people I date, 'If that's what you're into, then it's not happening.' I don't want them to think that's what I'm into so I kind of give them a heads up." Similarly, Abby, a 26-year-old white heterosexual woman, attempted anal sex but discovered that it did not suit her: "I've tried anal sex only once and it wasn't for me. I was with my first boyfriend and I was young, so we were all about experimenting and we'd try anything just for the sake of it. I just wasn't into it. He didn't seem to care. I wasn't getting aroused by it at all. It was just painful." These two encounters also represented women's insistence upon renegotiating consent partway through sex while also experimenting with anal sex as a new sexual behavior in their repertoire; importantly, their initial interest in anal sex seems to get engulfed in the larger narratives of pleasing their partner.

Anal sex also represented the disjuncture between fantasy and reality, as some women imagined they would enjoy it, only to discover that their fantasies did not translate into a pleasurable reality. Hannah, a 57-year-old white bisexual woman, renegotiated her fantasies about anal sex with her husband: "I had thought it would be this great thing but once we actually tried it I realized how awful it really was! He didn't use enough lube and we were fumbling around trying to make it sexy while I was all tense and embarrassed. He lost his erection in the middle." Hannah's fantasy story about how anal sex would go—perhaps that it would feel more intuitive and less "clunky"—signaled a common theme in women's ideas about anal sex.

### *Theme 3: Violence and coercion surrounding anal sex*

One quarter of the sample also had overtly violent encounters with anal sex, revealing the ways that norms of gender and power may reinforce men's dominance over,

and violence toward, women and their bodies. As a severe example of violence, Jean, a 57-year-old white heterosexual woman, described getting her back broken during anal sex while trying to accommodate a partner's desires: "I don't like anal sex but I've had it once or twice with this guy who was really just horrible. He broke my back doing it. I didn't know at the time but I had osteoporosis and so in the course of doing these stupid things with him I broke my back. I remembered that I'd be on my knees in this kind of position and your back is sort of arched and he pushed down on my back and snapped it . . . He raped me that way." This story signaled Jean's perception that men used anal sex to directly control her or force compliance with their desires, as she reported numerous coercive incidents with anal sex throughout our interview. Florence, a 38-year-old white bisexual woman, also recalled that her boyfriend used anal rape to dominate and punish her: "I had a boyfriend and I had cheated on him and we were in the shower after he found out. He 'disciplined' me by doing that [anal sex], and from then on I never did it again. He raped me because he was angry about it." These experiences also seemed to signal the normative aspects of sexual violence that many women encountered in their lives, as sexual violence was used to control and dominate them.

Discussing the coercive dimensions of many anal sex experiences, Keisha, a 34-year-old African-American bisexual woman, reflected on the difficulty of men's pressures on her to have anal sex: "Anal sex I tend to stay away from but there are so many men out there that want it. The last guy I was with was not forcing me but he would definitely try to make me have it and I'd be like, 'No. No. No.' I'd like literally get up out of bed and be like, 'No. Just stop! STOP!' I like a suggestion my girlfriend made who said, 'Why don't you try it on yourself? If you do yourself first, and then maybe you'd be more understanding of what this feels like!' I agree, you know, you have an asshole, I have an asshole, so if you do me, then I do you. That's when they pretty much back down." Cris, a 22-year-old white lesbian woman, also recalled a forced anal sex encounter with her boyfriend even after she had turned him down: "One of my boyfriends tried to do anal sex one time and I screamed and slapped him and told him, 'Absolutely not. That's not happening.' He just said, 'Oh just try it, all my friends say it's great,' and I said, 'I don't really want to.' He tried for a second anyway and I'm like, 'NO. I'm not a dog. You're doing this to me right now.' He just begged and begged and said I was stupid for not wanting to do it." These two stories also represent the blurred lines between agency, consent, gender, and power, as women sometimes forcefully turned down anal sex pleas while also constructing it as abject; their agency, perhaps, is embodied not only in the refusal but in the gender reversal shaming they engage in.

#### *Theme 4: Social norming*

In light of changing sexual norms, some women noted that their male partners believed anal sex constituted a normal part of heterosexual routines. Some women framed anal sex as an emerging social norm that allowed men to feel similar to their guy friends, women to feel similar to their female friends, women to avoid

pregnancy, or both men and women to emulate pornography. Many women, like Abby, mentioned that male partners had pressured them to have anal sex after the men had heard about or discussed anal sex with their male friends: “You can’t get pregnant from it, right? Something about it makes every guy want to try it, like they hear all these stories about how amazing it is and every guy wants to try it and lots of girls want to please them and they’ll do it. That’s the experience I had. My friends too.” Even for women who had never personally tried anal sex, like Dessa, a 19-year-old Latina heterosexual woman, they often perceived themselves as non-normative for not trying it: “I know studies-wise that anal sex is up. It seems to have, what’s the word? Normalcy around it. More people are getting used to it. It’s still taboo to a lot of people but I think there are a lot more incidents of it now.”

Women also faced pressures to engage in anal sex based on what they (and their partners) had viewed in pornography, such as Leticia, whose boyfriend wanted to mimic porn stars: “It just seems like it’s the thing to do now. I think it’s from watching porn and stuff. They feel the need to compete with the porn stars.” Sylvia, a 23-year-old white heterosexual woman, also described that her ex-boyfriend became obsessed with acting out fantasies he saw in pornography: “He watched a lot of porn, so he wanted to try every little single thing out there that had to do with anything that he’d seen. It went from ropes and gags to meeting people on Craigslist to having sex with couples to anal sex. Girls talk about anal sex all the time and it’s no big deal to them.” The complex ways that the cultural context *produces* interest in anal sex (or the belief that *most* women engage in anal sex) seems evident in these narratives, as peers and pornography collide to create new norms about sexual behavior.

Anal sex also served as an option for women to avoid pregnancy and to preserve virginity. Inga, a 24-year-old white bisexual woman, recalled that she had anal sex exclusively for two years because it protected against pregnancy and kept her “virginity” intact: “I performed anal sex when I was younger. He basically thought that if we had it like that then it would still be penetration so it would feel good to him but it wouldn’t get me pregnant so that’s primarily why we did it. I was really into pain so I got used to it more and more over time. We only had vaginal intercourse once because he didn’t want to get me pregnant.” Notably, Inga still references her boyfriend’s desires for what would “feel good to him” rather than what would feel good to her, thus prioritizing his pleasure and her not getting pregnant but largely neglecting her narratives of pleasure.

### *Theme 5: Pleasurable experiences with anal eroticism*

While not in the majority, some women mentioned that they felt pleasure from penetrative anal intercourse either because they liked the sensations or because they “fit in” more with others. Leticia mentioned that anal sex seemed “cool” and felt excited to try something that seemed “hip” and “in” right now: “When I hear my friends talk about it, or my sisters (I have two sisters), or my cousin, they really enjoyed it and it piqued my interest to want to try it. It seems like the thing to do

instead of ‘regular’ sex.” Again, the production of anal sex as common, fun, and intriguing infused some women’s stories about anal sex.

Zhang, a 36-year-old Asian-American bisexual woman, who engaged somewhat regularly in anal sex, described it as pleasurable for both her and her partner, though she felt ambivalent about how to describe the pleasure: “He likes it a lot. I like it but when he starts asking, ‘What is it you like about it,’ I can’t really describe it to him. It’s hard to describe. I told him there are certain emotions, certain feelers about it, but I told him I that’s not the only thing I like doing.” Inga had a more clear description of the pleasure of anal sex, saying that she enjoyed sexual pain and that anal sex had an appeal based on the pain: “I’m actually a big pain person so I like the pain, just how it felt. It hit certain different points and stuff and it was something different to try. I liked it a lot.” For Inga, the eroticization of pain signified one avenue to enjoying anal sex and embracing its sensations.

One woman also mentioned that other kinds of anal stimulation felt satisfying, including some accidental moments of anal touching. For example, Angelica recalled pleasure from when her boyfriend accidentally used his penis to stimulate her anus without penetrating her: “I don’t know if it kind of slipped. I don’t know what happened but it kind of went in there a little bit so I just gave it a go and it worked out that way, but it wasn’t painful. I don’t know if it was because I had control over how much went in.” Whether adding to the emotional range of sex, experimenting with pain, or accidentally exploring anal eroticism, descriptions of pleasure did appear in some women’s stories about anal sex.

## General discussion

Given the relative silences surrounding women’s subjective experiences of anal sex, this study reveals the way gender, power, and (dis)pleasure help to construct women’s experiences with anal sex. While the literature on anal sex remains almost entirely focused on the public health implications of heterosexual anal sex—particularly the high rates of unprotected anal sex and accompanying risky behavior heterosexual anal sex predicts—this study suggests that a feminist analysis of women’s anal sex experiences could provide a wider lens for viewing this behavior. This study points to several gendered processes that occur when women decide to have (or not have) anal sex: first, a strong desire to please their male partners; second, the belief that anal sex can be both normative and potentially pleasurable; third, the knowledge that, even if frankly painful, women’s physical experiences of (anal) sex do not often overshadow the emotional and relational aspects of sex; fourth, assumptions about decision-making and power in heterosexual dynamics often lead to coercion, violence, and suppression of resistance; and finally, women’s resistance and agency often take the form of renegotiated consent partway through, or after, anal sex.

Given the highly medicalized view of anal sex as a health risk, feminist analyses of anal sex have been largely invisible in this literature, a trend we hope to combat in this study. Still, women’s feelings about, and reasons for engaging in, anal sex speak directly to the potential risks they may take as well as the power dynamics they endure. Women’s desires to please their male partners and to accommodate their

male partners' fantasies represent a pivotal factor in why they may engage in sexual behaviors that they find painful, risky, not pleasurable, or less pleasurable than other sexual activities. As shown in these narratives, women simultaneously respond to external pressures to accommodate male fantasies (e.g. a boyfriend "begging" or directly requesting anal sex) and they create internal pressures to be sexually "normal" (e.g. believing they should compete with porn stars, hearing their friends talk about anal sex as "cool," etc.). Consequently, the connections between pornography (mediated pleasure), men's subjective desires (other-directed pleasure), and women's internalized desires (self-generated pleasure) become conflated and difficult to tease apart. Certainly, any time women engage in sexual behavior that feels painful, questions arise about the reasons why they endure and engage in painful sex. (Similar discussions have arisen around women's endurance of vaginal dyspareunia and vaginismus, where vaginal intercourse creates severe pain but women nevertheless want to continue). Given the literatures on faking orgasm (Fahs, 2011), vaginal pain (Kleinplatz, 1998), BDSM (Langdridge & Barker, 2008), and sexual desire (McClelland, 2010), the emotional and relational aspects of sexuality often overshadow women's physical experiences and sensations of sex.

These data also suggest that there is a convergence of violence against women (as some women reported frank coercion and violence in their anal sex experiences), pressure to engage in anal sex (other-directed pleasure), and some pleasure experienced during anal sex (self-generated pleasure), leaving this behavior saddled with three separate and often-incompatible feminist projects. How to meaningfully interrogate violence, partner pressure, and self-generated pleasure remains a formidable challenge for feminist sex researchers, particularly for behaviors such as anal sex that may combine all three areas. It is extremely important that, while undertaking the project to de-pathologize pleasurable sex and better understand relationship and sexual satisfaction, we do not ignore *violence against women* in the process. The continuum of coercion and sexual violence present in these narratives—from attempting anal sex without proper lubrication to proceeding with anal sex without women's consent to actual back-breaking violence—indicates that women have a complicated relationship to consent when they engage in anal sex. While some feminist work has problematized ideas of consent, pointing to confusion about women's agency (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012) and social versus interpersonal coercion (Gavey, 1989), too often consent is framed as a dichotomy (yes or no). This study speaks to the complicated relationships women have to consent—including slippages such as partial or halfhearted consent, renegotiated consent, and how consent may inform people's notions of what "counts" as sex (i.e., if someone does not "finish" or ejaculate during anal sex, and renegotiates consent, does that mean they have ever had anal sex?). Assumptions that men *should* have anal sex, can have access to women's bodies, and have more control over decision-making and definitions of pleasure all contribute to the fusion between violence and anal sex. This may also underlie studies that depict women as experiencing more "unbearable" pain than do gay men during anal sex (Štulhofer & Ajdukovićb, 2011), as gay men likely have more skill, sensitivity, and patience directed toward their partners than do heterosexual men toward women partners.



Perhaps more interestingly, this study speaks to the significance of renegotiating consent partway through a sexual act—something often neglected in legal and social discourses of rape and consent. Most women’s narratives described either agreeing to anal sex and then changing one’s mind, or not wanting anal sex but then agreeing to it. These narratives also revealed the repeated *failures* of attempting to engage in anal sex altogether, as many women tried and then decided to disengage because it caused too much pain or did not create pleasurable sensations. These stories of consent that *change* partway through sex serve as a model for reimagining consent during all sexual intercourse acts, as women *should* feel free to change their minds about consent before and during the encounter. The politics of “Yes” and “No” can learn much from women’s experiences with anal sex, as women sometimes fantasize that something will feel good but then decide that it does not, penises often cannot successfully penetrate anuses, and men fumble or fail to realize their intercourse-until-orgasm narratives. In short, anal sex is rife with complicated stops and starts, partial successes, and slippery “yes” and “no” signals, all of which could invoke the feminist poststructuralist lens of challenging and reimagining what sorts of sexualities are produced by the contemporary cultural context that fuses agency and coercion.

These findings also suggest that the relational power dynamics found in women’s anal sex experiences (especially with men) may overshadow and obscure women’s ability to express their desire or need for other forms of stimulation, lubrication, relaxation, and play as a part of anal sex, potentially resulting in less pleasurable experiences overall. What women *did* say seemed as important as what they *did not* say. The notable lack of discussion surrounding anal eroticism—as women assumed “anal sex” meant “penis-anus penetration”—presented a notable area for future research, as women had difficulty expressing or imagining anal eroticism in more diverse ways. How might women differently imagine anal sex if the context around which they experience anal eroticism became more broad, consensual, and less coercive?

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the women in this study linked anal sex to a desire to please male partners rather than a behavior that yields pleasure for repeated practice or further exploration. This does not mean that anal sex was inherently unpleasurable for these women but rather that the manner in which it was experienced emphasized the penetrative experience of the men with whom they have engaged in anal sex rather than for themselves. Thus, disengagement with anal sex (finding it frankly aversive, not discussing non-penetrative anal play, seeing it as a symbol of male pressure or force, etc.) yields important insights about gender, power, and consent.

## Limitations and future directions

Some research decisions certainly may have affected the results of the study, as the choice of wording for the interview questions may not have sufficiently interrogated women’s experiences with non-penetrative anal play. Further, explorations of women’s anal eroticism with other women seemed to almost completely disappear,

suggesting that future research needs to interrogate these “invisible” practices as part of an effort to better understand women’s subjective accounts of anal eroticism. The strong emphasis on women’s ambivalence about and aversion toward anal sex deserves more specific interrogation as well, just as larger scale quantitative research could provide more insights into *who* engages in anal sex and *why*.

Nevertheless, the power of qualitative data—however, limited by numbers and generalizability—lies in its illumination of nuance often erased from quantitative (and in this case, public health) studies. This anal sex study reveals a messy cocktail of ingredients—normative representations in pornography, desire for “edgy” and “hip” sexual activities, heterosexual men encouraging each other to try it, women wanting to please and seem “normal” or “cool” via trying anal sex, avoiding pregnancy and (for some) maintaining “virginity,” beliefs that women should accommodate men’s desires, focus on the anus as an abjected site, distance between the imagined and lived realities of sex, tentative desire for anal eroticism—that have all created a growing momentum behind a sexual act that many women find prescriptive, painful, or dissatisfying. This study also hints at the relevance of intersectional analyses of gender and sexuality, as gay men likely struggle with different challenges than do heterosexual women, even when engaging in the same sexual behavior. Similarly, future work could interrogate the relationship between race, sexual identity, age, and social class when imagining women’s relationship to anal sex; perhaps norms differ between different groups just as women’s access to power, decision-making, and agency differ depending on their intersecting social identities. We felt struck with the importance of including queer-identified women in discussions of heterosexual anal sex, as so many of the queer identified women had experienced anal sex with men at one time, often under negative conditions. While this study did not (and, due to sample size *could* not) outline definitive differences between groups of women, such work could yield important and relevant insights into both risky sexual behavior and narratives of power and pleasure.

Given the relative lack of psychological and feminist analyses of heterosexual anal sex, particularly compared to other kinds of sexual behaviors like oral sex and vaginal intercourse, interrogations into women’s increasing engagement in anal sex seem especially crucial to understanding the status of women’s sexuality today. By examining women’s experiences with anal sex in light of other emerging (and alarming) “postfeminist” discourses—particularly the fusion between empowerment and consumerism and notions of unquestioned sexual “agency” without an examination of coercion—we can see the potential pitfalls of an overly reductive reading of these women’s narratives. Looking closely at the “front lines” of anal sex, a variety of tough questions converge around these data: How do compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity infuse women’s experiences of anal sex, and how do these intersect with “postfeminist” notions of the neoliberal sexual subject? Who can (and does) disengage from anal sex, and who feels they cannot or should not disengage from it? Finally, how can we make room for multiple and diverse understandings of sexual pleasure without losing our critical voice and deep-seated suspicion toward narrow, overly mediated, and potentially painful prescriptions for the so-called “normative” sexuality?

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