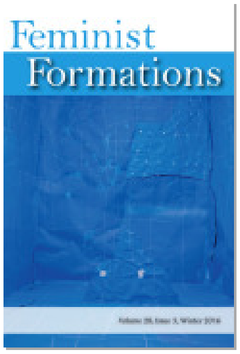
The Other Third Shift?: Women's Emotion Work in Their Sexual Relationships



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The Other Third Shift? Women's Emotion Work in Their Sexual Relationships

Breanne Fahs and Eric Swank

Sociological theories of gendered "emotional labor" have often been examined in relation to domestic work, sex work, and jobs that demand emotional caretaking and physical "pampering" of clients (e.g., hairdressers, nail salon workers, medical workers). The concepts of emotional labor have been used far less often to address inequalities within private interpersonal relationships, particularly heterosexual romantic relationships. This paper utilized thematic analysis of qualitative data from a community sample of 20 women (mean age = 34, SD = 13.35) from a wide range of backgrounds. We identified four areas of emotion work present in these women's sexual lives, including 1) faking orgasms; 2) tolerating sexual pain; 3) defining sexual satisfaction based on the partner's pleasure; and 4) narrating sex they call "bad sex" as acceptable because of a partner's satisfaction. Nearly all women mentioned emotion work as part of their current or past sexual experiences, as women described frequently enduring unsatisfying sex to provide their (male) partners with feelings of power, sexual skillfulness, and dominance, particularly during heterosex. We discuss the implications for gendered elements of sexual satisfaction, feelings about sex that women do not expect to feel pleasurable, expectations about deservingness and entitlement to sexual pleasure, sexual agency, and diverse interpretations of the significance of orgasm.

Keywords: emotional labor / emotion work / gender norms / inequalities / orgasm / qualitative feminist research / sexual satisfaction / women's sexuality

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Introduction

Feminist psychologists and sociologists have both devoted much attention to the problem of gender inequalities. While gender equity has made significant strides in public realms (e.g., women having access to education and traditionally male jobs), women have achieved far less progress in the private realms (England 2010). Famed sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1989) argued in her classic, *The Second Shift*, that women in the workforce faced a burden not only of their "first shift," that is, working an eight-hour day outside of the home, but also the "second shift": eight hours of domestic labor once they got home. Further, persistent gender essentialism, or the belief in men and women as fundamentally different, has expanded gender inequities in the home and in the workplace (England 2010), making women's "shifts" all the more difficult to bear. In particular, expectations that women continue to provide most of the domestic and childrearing labor alongside the emotional labor in the household have left women with a paradoxical reality in their sexual lives. We propose this emotion work required during women's sexual lives is an additional "third shift," building on the previously conceptualized third shift that requires women to spend hours weighing, balancing, and reconciling their choices and decisions in light of their first two shifts (Bolton 2000; Hochschild 1997). That is, while women apparently have more sexual freedoms than previous generations (Bell 2013; Fahs 2011a), they still perceive the need to engage in (demanding and taxing) emotion work with their intimate partners, including dating partners, cohabitation partners, and spouses (Daniels 1987; Erickson 2005; Hochschild 1983). That emotion work is obligatory, without discretion, and in some ways standardized in order to support their romantic relationship's demands and to survive the various power imbalances present in these relationships.

Hochschild defined "emotional labor" as labor that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (1983, 7), and argued that women must manage and suppress their emotions and direct them according to corporate and workplace expectations (Hochschild 1983; Hochschild 2012). Much of this labor is necessary because women internalize social roles that demand friendliness, deference, and positive outlooks that affirm, enhance, and celebrate the well-being of others (1983, 165). Surface acting—where women behave in friendly and "nice" ways even if they feel bored, angry, or frustrated—differs from deep acting; in the latter, women go beyond surface performance and try to convince themselves that they really *are* feeling the emotions required of them (Hochschild 1983). Regarding women's intimate lives, there is less research on this performative element, though Sinikka Elliott and Debra Umberson (2008) have noted that emotional labor, deep acting, and "feeling rules" appeared most intensely during sexual relationships for married women. We can also glean information from sexuality research that does not overtly study emotional labor. For example, we know many gendered scripts of sexuality demand that women direct attention away from their own needs and instead prioritize their partner's needs, resulting in a variety of problematic symptoms of gender inequality such as faking orgasm (Fahs 2011a; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010; Wiederman 1997); sexual compliance (Kaestle 2009; Impett and Peplau 2003; O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998); sexual extortion and violence (DeMaris 1997); tolerating sexual pain (Elmerstig, Wijma, and Berterö 2008; Elmerstig, Wijma, and Swahnberg 2013); and the prioritization of their partner's pleasure over their own (McClelland 2011; Nicholson and Burr 2003). Ultimately, when women broke such passive stances, whether through adopting feminist sexual scripts or expecting more personal satisfaction, this ultimately led to better outcomes interpersonally, sexually, and socially (Bay-Cheng and Zucker 2007; McClelland 2010; McClelland 2011; Schick, Zucker, and Bay-Cheng 2008; Yoder, Perry, and Saal 2007).

Using the sociological literature on emotional labor and emotion work as a framework, this is an exploratory study that examined qualitative narratives from twenty women with diverse backgrounds (age, race, current relationship status, parental status, class backgrounds, and sexual identities) in order to examine the contexts where emotional/sexual labor appeared in their sexual lives. Despite the diversity of women's sexual identities, this study most closely examined women's experiences of emotional/sexual work with *men* and in the context of longer-term romantic relationships rather than "hookups" or one-night stands. In short, this study examined the social contexts surrounding women's accounts of sex that demanded emotion work and why they nevertheless endured this sex for the sake of their relationships.

Literature Review

The concept of emotional labor has appeared in both sociological and psychological literatures, with attention directed primarily to emotional labor in the domestic sphere (Daniels 1987; Erickson 2005; Hochschild 1989); sex work (Sanders 2005); the transfer of racial and classed scripts to children (Froyum 2010); and jobs that require physical pampering and emotional caretaking (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002), often exacting a great toll on women's physical and emotional well-being (Judge, Woolf, and Hurst 2009; Pugliesi 1999). Within marriages, this emotion work may appear as offering encouragement and affirmation, showing empathy, demonstrating affection, or putting the partner's needs above one's own needs (Erickson 2005; Hochschild 1983).

In the domestic sphere, women's emotional labor (most often called "emotion work") often applies to caring for their partner and children's emotional needs such as comforting them when distressed, caring for them while sick, and managing the emotional needs of the household (Hochschild 1983; Erickson 2005). Married women overwhelmingly engage in more domestic labor than their husbands, often because this divide fits into their husbands' notions of the gendered self (Twiggs, McQuillan, and Ferree 1999). This gender gap also influenced how married couples felt about each other (Voydanoff and Donnelly 1999), as wives reported less marital satisfaction when they perceived a more unequal division of gendered labor (Piña and Bengtson 1993).

Most often, sociologists have pointed out the deleterious effects of emotional labor on working people, particularly those in jobs that demand emotional performance or that require emotional caretaking such as service workers, teachers, medical workers, beauticians, psychologists, and flight attendants (Hochschild 1983; Wharton 1999); for example, flight attendants must engage in fake smiles and cheerfulness, while teachers must soothe anxious parents and students. Emotional labor has been linked to job dissatisfaction, burnout, high turnover, decreased work performance, low productivity, and emotional exhaustion (Morris and Feldman 1996; Wharton 1999). In particular, the denial of self-needs while being other-focused increased job stress, decreased job satisfaction, and increased personal distress (Pugliesi 1999). Similarly, "surface acting"—that is, the need to explicitly perform emotional labor to another person or group—resulted in emotional exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction, even for extroverts (though extroverts fared better than introverts) (Judge, Woolf, and Hurst 2009). Notably, even for jobs with supposedly high job satisfactions, including nonprofit work and academia, emotional labor taxed workers via expectations that they suppress disappointment, tolerate low pay and unreasonable demands for productivity, and engage in caretaking of the populations they served (e.g., students reporting sexual trauma, sexist colleagues, et al.) (Eschenfelder 2012; Gill 2009).

This study, however, directed attention to women's emotion work *within their sexual lives*, as they managed the dual demands of maintaining their identities as daughters of post-second-wave "sexual liberation" while also supporting their partners' emotional needs. While this topic has mostly been conceptualized in the abstract and not by looking at numerous aspects of sexuality (as this study does), some research has addressed the connection between emotion work and sexuality. Elliott and Umberson (2008) addressed married couples' sexual labor and found that married women worked to perform more desirously than they truly felt. Further, the researchers found many husbands expected their wives to perform desire, whether in the form of acting more interested in sex or having more sex.

Managing Feelings during Sex

The relationship between the self and other, between women and their partners, was felt not only in the context of orgasm—where meaning-making often revolves around orgasm as the ultimate goal of sex and/or something that must be performed and, for the partner, achieved (Fahs 2011a; Opperman et al.

2014)—but also as women managed their own and their partners' feelings during sex. Women's ability to both express their sexual needs and manage their partners' feelings frequently led to sexual ambivalence. Women often felt distrust, anger, and fear about talking to their partners about their sexual needs (Faulkner and Lannutti 2010), all while trying to ensure that their partners enjoyed sex and felt comfortable and loved (Fahs 2011a). Elliott and Umberson (2008) described this as "emotion work" within marriages around the performance of sexual desire, while Breanne Fahs (2011a) articulated that women perform emotion work around a variety of sexual events including not labeling coercion as rape, performing as satisfied, and engaging in "performative bisexuality."

The kinds of emotion work women performed during (hetero)sex ranged from engaging in (unwanted) sex in exchange for their male partners doing the housework to women expressing sexual desire to their partners even when they would rather not have sex (Elliott and Umberson 2008). Particularly given the strong imperative for orgasmic reciprocity during sex (Jagose 2013), many women across a range of backgrounds felt obligated to both have an orgasm and to provide their partners with pleasure (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003; Fahs 2011a; Fahs 2014). Further, women who valued gender conformity often based their sexual satisfaction on their partners' approval, leading to lower sexual autonomy (Sanchez, Crocker, and Boike 2005).

Women also engaged in emotion work when managing their bodies and bodily fluids during sex, in part because women's bodies are often labeled as leaky, troublesome, messy, disgusting, and difficult to manage. For example, women managed their partner's perceptions of menstrual blood as "gross," felt they must clean up after having menstrual sex, and emphasized their partner's feelings about menstrual sex, often at the expense of their own pleasure (Fahs 2011b). This labor emphasized how women manage others' perceptions of their body alongside their own perceptions of themselves as "gross." Another study on menstrual sex found that one third of women said that they would *never* engage in it, often because it threatened their partners, though women in relationships more often engaged in menstrual sex than those who were not (Allen and Goldberg 2009).

Interestingly, women's need to manage their partner's feelings during sex may also extend into their empathic experiences with pornography viewing. One study found that women's strongly ambivalent feeling about watching pornography reflected their perception of women's emotional labor in pornographic production. Concern for, and disgust about, the female actor's need to perform their enjoyment—symbolized by excessive moaning or "fake" orgasms—lessened women's desire to watch the pornographic films (Parvez 2006). Further, those with feminist values reported far less pornography viewing than those without feminist values (Burnham 2013). In addition, Croatian men who watched pornography reported lower sexual satisfaction and suppression of intimacy (Štulhofer, Buško, and Landripet 2010), while women who watched pornography designed with male-centered sexual scripts felt less responsive and aroused compared to female-centered scripts (Mosher and MacIan 1994), raising questions about identification, empathy, and enjoyment of pornography. Ultimately, women's perceptions of emotional labor and identification with other women's emotional labor in pornography shows how such labor permeates multiple spheres outside of intimate relationship dynamics.

Sexual (Dis)Satisfaction

While people often tout the goal of sexual reciprocity (that is, the goal of mutual orgasm and mutual pleasure during sex) in their sexual relationships, recent feminist work has started to question sexual reciprocity in light of entitlements (male) and obligations (female) patterned along gender lines (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003). Many women engaged in sex despite not feeling satisfied emotionally or physically, particularly for younger, less educated, and poorer women as well as women of color, raising questions about the relationship between social justice and social identities (Fahs and Swank 2011). Several studies have shown that women, particularly younger women, prioritized the sexual pleasure of their partners over their own (McClelland 2011; Nicholson and Burr 2003), indicating that their feelings of "deserving" and entitlement to orgasm and sexual pleasure often received less priority than other-directed sexual behaviors (McClelland 2010).

Thea Cacchioni (2007) has theorized that women often engage in "relational sex work," that is, the unacknowledged effort and continuing monitoring women devote to managing theirs and their partners' desires and activities, which may influence their definitions of themselves as sexually functional, powerful, or having agency. What women *expected* to feel often differed from what men *expected* to feel from sex, something no doubt fed by interpersonal scripts and cultural constructions about sexual satisfaction (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; McClelland 2010; Ott et al. 2006).

As a way to describe engagement in sexual activity despite *not* wanting it, studies of sexual compliance have also revealed deep-seated gender inequalities that occurred within coupled sexuality. A review essay on sexual compliance found that women engaged in unwanted sex to avoid sexual violence, maintain relationships, and "sacrifice" for their male partners (Impett and Peplau 2003). While one study of over 4,000 young women found that 8 percent engaged in unwanted sex at their partner's insistence (12 percent of whom engaged repeatedly in sex acts they did not enjoy) (Kaestle 2009), another study of 80 college women found that 38 percent of women engaged 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 partner, promote intimacy and love, and avoid relationship tension (Kaestle 2009; O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998) and violence (DeMaris 1997). Further, certain types of sexual behavior, particularly anal sex, occurred more often in physically violent relationships for young women (Hess et al. 2013), suggesting that sexual compliance may also be linked to sexual extortion, emotional abuse, and physical violence as well as engagement in painful or more high-risk sexual behaviors (DeMaris 1997; Impett and Peplau 2003).

Studies on sexual pain also reveal notable links between gender and power, as women reported tolerating sexual pain in order to please their partners (Dewitte, van Lankveld, and Crombez 2010; Elmerstig, Wijma, and Berterö 2008; Elmerstig, Wijma, and Swahnberg 2013). One study of 16 young Swedish women found that they associated sex with resignation, sacrifice, and feeling guilt, leading them to construct the "ideal sexual woman" as one who willingly had sexual intercourse, was perceptive of their partner's needs, and could satisfy their partner; further, having penile-vaginal intercourse made women feel "normal" regardless of pain or discomfort (Elmerstig, Wijma, and Berterö 2008). Another study of Swedish teenagers found that one third reported experiencing pain during intercourse and a full 47 percent continued to have vaginal intercourse despite feeling pain, most often because they did not want to spoil sex or hurt their partner's feelings (Elmerstig, Wijma, and Swahnberg 2013).

In contrast, some studies have looked at "sexual agency," finding that women who engaged in assertiveness, refusal of unwanted sex acts, proactive engagement in what they want, and interrogative practices tend to feel more agentic during sex (Maxwell 2012). A handful of studies have found links between feminist attitudes and sexual satisfaction as well as the ability to assert agency, challenge double standards, and feel sexual motivation, while nonfeminist attitudes predicted endorsement of traditional gender roles around sexuality, less assertiveness about condom use, and less initiation of sex (Bay-Cheng and Zucker 2007; Schick, Zucker, and Bay-Cheng 2008; Yoder, Perry, and Saal 2007).

Faking Orgasm

Perhaps the most striking and obvious form of sexual emotion work women engaged in revolves around pretending or faking orgasm. While the literature on faking orgasm is relatively new—with only a handful of studies on the topic—the prevalence for women faking orgasm is quite high. Studies consistently show that over half of women have faked orgasm (Darling and Davidson 1986; Fahs 2011a; Fahs 2014; Hite 1976; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010; Opperman et al. 2014; Wiederman 1997), and that most men believe they cannot know when women fake their orgasms (Knox, Zusman, and McNeely 2008). One study reported that 67 percent of college women faked orgasm during penile-vaginal intercourse but that they also faked it (less often) during oral sex, manual stimulation, and phone sex (Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010). Another study showed that women faked orgasm during 20 percent of their sexual encounters, with many women reporting much higher frequencies (Bryan 2001), particularly with male partners (Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010) but also with female partners

(Fahs 2011a). Those who faked orgasm had intercourse at a younger age, had more lifetime sexual partners, had a high desire to please their partners, and had difficulty communicating with their partners (Wiederman 1997). However, the picture of women more prone to faking is complicated because these women also scored higher on measures of self-esteem (Wiederman 1997) and had more formal education (Mialon 2012).

When situated in the context of gendered labor and sexual stereotypes, faking orgasm clearly functioned as a form of women's emotion work. As Celia Roberts and colleagues 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'" (1995, 528). Women's reasons for faking orgasm appeared similarly across studies, and emphasized partner and relational dynamics most centrally: concern for partner's feelings, the "coital imperative" leading to penile-vaginal intercourse, a sense that orgasm was unlikely to occur, a desire for the sex acts to end, enhancement of pleasure and sexual excitement for their partner, the perceived need for reciprocity, and avoidance of conflict and pain in the relationship (Bryan 2001; Fahs 2014; Frith 2013; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010). Women also faked orgasm more often when they perceived a higher risk of partner infidelity (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, and Weekes-Shackelford 2012) and when they expressed more love toward their partner (Mialon 2012). Concerns that women felt responsible for men's orgasms, and responsible to "keep their man," appeared prominently in studies about faking orgasm.

The social imperative to prioritize orgasm (even fake ones) and to perform as sexually excited (even when not actually excited) has increasingly appeared in women's sexual lives (Jackson and Scott 2007), adding great complication to women and men's interpretations of what orgasms mean for themselves and others (Potts 2000). Along these lines, one study found that women care more about achieving orgasm to please their *male partners* than for their own sexual enjoyment, and that women construct themselves as sexually dysfunctional when they cannot orgasm (Nicholson and Burr 2003). Janet Hyde and John DeLamater argued that prioritizing orgasm as the central reason for sex has 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" (1997, 261). The ever-present focus on women "ejaculating" through moaning and making noise, thereby supporting the (male) partner's notions of themselves as successful lovers, trumped women's own personal enjoyment of sex (penile-vaginal intercourse especially) (Jackson and Scott 2001; Roberts et al. 1995). In short, "If a woman feels the need to reassure her male partner of the adequacy of his performance, that felt need will persist whether or not she 'really' experiences orgasm" (Jackson and Scott 2007, 88).

Research Questions

Given the notable lack of research that integrates seemingly disparate aspects of women's experiences of emotion work in their sexual relationships, and the ways that both psychological and sociological research have largely ignored the *emotional narratives* present in discourses of sexuality, this study utilized several research questions to guide its analysis. First, in what ways do women's narratives about sexual (dis)satisfaction, orgasm, and pleasure contain stories about the performance of emotion work? What does "emotion work" in the context of sex look like, and how does it connect to patterns about gender and power? How do women manage their own, and others', emotional experiences of sex, and what toll, if any, does this take on women? Finally, how does emotion work around "bad sex" (variously defined) appear for women engaging in sex with men, and how do these descriptions map onto issues of sexual entitlement and reciprocity (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003)?

Method

This study utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women (mean age = 34, SD = 13.35) recruited in 2011 Phoenix, Arizona. (As such, the percentages reported here only refer to this sample and cannot generalize to the larger population.) 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 a study about the benefits of using Craigslist to recruit participants, see Worthen 2014). Both outlets reached wide audiences and were freely available to community residents. The advertisements asked for women ages 18–59 to participate in an interview study about their sexual behaviors, practices, and attitudes. Participants were selected only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age; no other prescreening questions were asked. Over sixty women responded by emailing the lead author but only twenty were selected by the Fahs to participate in the study. No one declined to participate after they heard more specific information about the interview questions; emotion work was not advertised during recruitment stages, but was included in the interview protocol.

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 percent ages 18–31, or eleven women; 25 percent ages 32–45, or five women; and 20 percent ages 46–59, or four women). The sample included 55 percent (11) white women and 45 percent (9) 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 percent (12) heterosexual women, 30 percent (6) bisexual women, and 10 percent (2) 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 to 2 hours, where 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 questionnaire were both approved by the Institutional Review Board. All participants were interviewed by Breanne Fahs (white female, mid-30s, middle-class, cisgender associate professor) in a room that ensured privacy and confidentiality of responses; data were analyzed by both Fahs and Eric Swank (white male, mid-40s, middle-class, cisgender associate professor) subsequent to these interviews. Questions included aspects of their best and worst sexual experiences, feelings about sexual satisfaction and sexual behaviors, and questions about body image, sexual culture/technology, and relationships. Several of the prompts addressed issues relevant to this study on emotion work in sexual relationships. For example, women were asked one primary question about sexual satisfaction—"There are many different definitions and motivations for sex. What do you consider to be satisfying sex?"—along with several follow-up probing questions about motivations for sex and sexual satisfaction. Women were also asked a question about faking orgasms ("What are your experiences with faking orgasm or with faking your experience of pleasure?") and one question about their experiences with sex as a whole ("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'?"), 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 probing questions sought greater elaborations and clarifications of meanings. As the questions were broad and open-ended, participants could set the terms of how they would discuss their sexual lives and what information they wanted to share.

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis that draws 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., faking orgasms; tolerating sexual pain). This method of analysis also supported an examination of the intersections between emotion work and sexual experiences/attitudes. To conduct the analysis, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly, and we then identified patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. In doing so, we reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in women's ways of discussing emotion work in their sexual relationships (Braun and 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. Finally, we connected our inductively generated themes back to earlier studies on faking orgasms, sexual (dis)satisfaction, and emotion work.

Results

Emotion work appeared as normative in women's sexual lives, as all but one woman referenced emotion work—either directly or more subtly—as a part of their current or past sexual experiences, particularly during their sexual experiences with men. Direct references to emotion work included claims about sacrificing one's own needs to please a partner (e.g., painful intercourse); subtle emotion work occurred more around engaging in emotion work that may or may not have been displeasing to women (e.g., faking orgasm). This study identified four key areas where emotion work in women's sexual experiences appeared: 1) faking orgasms; 2) tolerating sexual pain; 3) defining sexual satisfaction based on the partner's pleasure; and 4) narrating sex that they call "bad sex" as acceptable because of a partner's satisfaction. As evident in the descriptions below, some participants' responses overlapped between themes in that a participant's responses might fit into multiple themes. For example, the same women sometimes reported faking orgasm and tolerating sexual pain.

Theme 1: Faking Orgasms

Fifteen of the twenty women (75 percent) interviewed reported that they had faked orgasm at least once, with nine women (45 percent) saying that they faked orgasm regularly during their sexual encounters. Notably, faking orgasms did not appear more often for married women, but definitely appeared more often for women engaging in heterosex. (While women in same-sex relationships described *having* more orgasms with women, they did endorse feelings that faking orgasm was necessary; see Fahs 2011a.) Most women framed this as the need to reinforce their male partner's sexual skills and avoid hurting their feelings. Shantele, a 30-year-old African-American heterosexual woman, described faking orgasm as emotion work that helped to manage her male partners' feelings of disappointment: "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." Note that she also engages in a variety of small moments of emotion work (e.g., worrying about taking too long, trying to hurry, trying to have an orgasm to please a partner). Similarly, Jane, a 59-year-old white heterosexual woman, felt that men were *entitled* both to their own and to her orgasm even if it was faked: “I usually have my eyes closed and I just fake it. I felt that my partner was entitled to it, or I wanted to give that to him. I felt it was important because he would be disappointed if I didn’t have an orgasm.”

Pressure to assist men’s arousal, or not disappoint them, appeared strongly in these narratives; notably, this perception was not something women merely perceived, as three women described the actual consequences of them not having an orgasm. Hannah, a 57-year-old white bisexual woman, described her male partner as getting “furious” when she did not orgasm and told him so in an honest way: “I remember he just sulked about it when I straight up said, ‘It didn’t happen.’ He got angry and flipped it around with, ‘Why was *she* [referring to her ex-girlfriend] good enough and I can’t do it for you?’ I felt so guilty.”

Other women described faking orgasm as a validation of the labor their partners had invested in them, as they worried about their partner’s efforts “not going anywhere” (an interesting reference to sexual labor in itself) and wanted to validate their sexual skills. Cris, a 22-year-old white lesbian, mentioned that she faked orgasm both with her former male partners and with her current female partner: “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.” Angelica, a 32-year-old heterosexual Latina, used faking orgasm both to end the encounter and to encourage her sexually insecure 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.” This language of accomplishment, trying hard, and investing labor into orgasms represented a major theme for many women, as the notion of sexual energies “going nowhere” felt threatening, especially during heterosex. This also implies linkages between capitalism, labor, and sexuality, as women prize sexual efficiency, labor, production, and an orgasm-based economy over meandering non-productive pleasurable sex.

Women also faked orgasm to end sexual encounters altogether. Keisha, a 32–year-old African-American bisexual woman, admitted to faking orgasms when she reluctantly agreed to sex: “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.” Inga, a 24-year-old white bisexual woman, described faking it to end sex because she believed he would not otherwise take seriously her desires to be done with sex: “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.” Inga’s description combined faking orgasm with resistance, as she pushed away an unwanted male partner, while Keisha seemed to feel more trapped by the endurance of unsatisfying sex.

Theme 2: Tolerating Sexual Pain

In line with the "sexual compliance" literature (Impett and Peplau 2003), some women, particularly those in current or previous heterosexual long-term relationships and marriages, demonstrated their emotion work by tolerating physical sexual pain (nine women, or 45 percent), particularly as they hid their pain and feigned enjoyment for their partners. Though different sexual acts bring different levels of pain, this phenomenon arose primarily for women during anal intercourse, as women felt pressured to engage in anal sex despite their feelings of displeasure. Rhoda, a 57-year-old white heterosexual woman, recalled that she agreed to anal sex as a sexual "chore": "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." Similarly, Tania, a 25-year-old white heterosexual woman, recalled that she continued to have anal sex with her boyfriend even though she strongly disliked it: "Sometimes there's not enough lubrication and it really hurts. Once it hurts, it's painful and you don't feel anything. You don't feel aroused but you just keep going." (Note her use of "you" instead of "me/I" to distance herself from the experience.) The willingness to endure pain in favor of prioritizing men's fantasies about anal sex appeared repeatedly in women's narratives.

Three women also tolerated physical sexual pain during their vaginal sex experiences, often due to lack of sexual arousal and lubrication prior to their male partners wanting to begin PVI. April, a 27-year-old Latina lesbian, put up with PVI pain in order to "save" her previous heterosexual relationship while also normalizing traditional gender roles: "Penetration is uncomfortable. It just hurts, or it feels good for a while and then it's just like a strain or pressure. I tried to just get through it to save my relationship because he needed sex." Pain also arose in response to women agreeing to sexual acts with men they did not truly want to engage in, a repeated theme of heterosexual experience. Sylvia, a 23-year-old white heterosexual woman, agreed to act out pornographic scenes with her boyfriend, tolerating physical sexual pain to keep the peace: "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. . . . A lot of times it hurt, but as long as he was happy, then I would try whatever. I think it's a deep-seated thing that we just want to please our significant others. I just have to get used to it."

Theme 3: Defining Sexual Satisfaction Based on the Partner's Pleasure

When asking women about what satisfied them sexually, many women (seven women or 35 percent) mentioned that their partner's pleasure (specifically, their partner having an orgasm) mattered more in terms of emotional satisfaction than their own orgasm. Inga described herself as a "giver" and said explicitly that her partner's orgasms were 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."

Shantele, too, said that she felt satisfied primarily by her partner feeling pleasure rather than reveling in her own pleasure: "I actually don't get off with sex but I do enjoy watching a guy get off, knowing that he's satisfied. The sound of him coming, the look on their face—most men are really quiet when they're doing it, but then when they're about to come they're a little louder and their face is more expressive. It looks like it hurts but it doesn't." The experience of watching her partner's face during orgasm and not experiencing her own orgasm reveals the differences in how women define sexual satisfaction for themselves versus their partners and the emotion work women often engage in to help men achieve satisfaction.

Two women described conflicted feelings between their satisfaction about pleasing a male partner and their worry about feeling sexually used. Kelly, a 23-year-old white heterosexual woman, noted this conflict in her feelings about oral sex: "I have sometimes done things I didn't really want to do just to please someone else. I often feel like oral sex is a service. You're doing them a service a giving your power away. I feel like if you're not in a trusting relationship you're giving too much power away. You should only do things you don't like in a serious relationship and then it's okay because it makes them happy." She resolves this tension by seeing the behavior as exploitative while not in a committed relationship, but generous/giving while in a relationship, and highlights the costs of emotion work during sex.

Theme 4: Narrating "Bad Sex" as Acceptable

Eight women (40 percent) who described sexual encounters with their partners as "bad sex" indicated this was an acceptable and normal part of their lives. In particular, some women did not *expect* to have "good sex" and did not feel entitled to ask for what they wanted sexually. Leticia, a 41-year old bisexual Latina, described many of her (hetero)sexual experiences as disappointing but would never tell her male partners about her feelings:

> I often just lay there, and they're thinking they're doing the greatest thing on earth and it's not, so I had to fake my orgasms just to make him stop. I always want the guy to think that they did their part, just to make them feel good. I don't know. I should probably say something more but it's just like I don't see the point. There are not a lot of men that will sit there and listen to what you want. Or they'll listen but they won't do it, so there's no point. I would like for a man to pay attention to my breasts and some men don't really do

> that, or I'd like kissing on my neck, but I can't ask for that. I don't really have orgasms through the actual intercourse part.

This feeling of having no voice and feeling alienated from the sexual act while allowing a man to think his sexual moves are "the greatest thing on earth" reveals Leticia's expectation of emotion work during sex.

Four women (20 percent) also tolerated feeling emotionally distressed during their sexual encounters with men, even while sometimes covering it up. Patricia, a 28-year-old African-American heterosexual woman, recalled feeling fear, sadness, and intense vulnerability during most of her sexual exchanges: "I cry a lot when I have sex, or afterwards. I tell him I'm happy. I know you're not supposed to be thinking things like, 'If this person leaves me what am I going to do?' but those are some of the things that I actually consider when I'm having sex. I have abandonment issues. I'll be in a relationship and I may not really want to have sex but I'll be like 'okay' just to shut him up. I'll be mad but I'll agree anyway." Her inability to synchronize her inward and outward emotions—instead putting on a "happy face"—showed the depth of her emotion work.

Two divorced women discussed that they "put up with" bad sex in their former marriages. Abby, a 26-year-old white heterosexual woman, recounted the process of disclosing to her ex-husband after years of marriage that she had faked all of 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. Later, after we split up, I saw him one day and he asked me, 'Does [your new partner] give you orgasms?' Like that was all important to him all of a sudden. During our whole relationship he didn't care but now it was on his mind.

Likewise, Jean, a 57-year-old white heterosexual woman, talked about enduring bad sex as a normal condition of her sexual life: "Sometimes I just go blank. It happens mostly because you're doing it on somebody else's timeline and somebody else's demand. You're performing, and sometimes you can perform well. But you're still thinking, 'When is this going to be over so I can be who I really am?' I just endure it I guess." Jean's belief that, during bad sex, she cannot "be herself" and her explicit use of the word "performing" reflected the performative core of emotion work, where women suppressed emotions such as boredom, frustration, or fear in favor of the socially acceptable emotions they felt they could express.

Discussion

By combining sociological theories of emotional labor and emotion work with qualitative psychological narratives about sexuality, this study provided a fuller picture of the kinds of emotion work women performed during their sexual experiences, particularly during experiences in which they did not expect sex to be pleasurable. As such, these data raise the question of what it means to have sex outside of pleasure, and what is at stake in continuing to have unpleasurable sex. Though this study included a diverse sample of women from multiple sexual identities—heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian—women overwhelmingly described emotion work occurring in their relationships with men (current and past), though women differed about how this work manifested in these relationships. In fact, emotion work appeared in some form for nearly all women as part of their current or past sexual experiences, as women described frequently enduring unsatisfying sex and lack of orgasm in order to provide their (typically male) partners with feelings of power, sexual skillfulness, and dominance. That said, women in heterosexual, longer-term relationships seemed particularly prone to discuss emotion work and its consequences for their lives, implying that romantic long-term heterosexual relationships may be particularly demanding in ways that other relationships are not (e.g., quick college hookups, queer relationships, etc.). While emotion work did occur in same-sex dynamics, women spoke of that work with less intensity than when describing their experiences with men; that said, women having sex with women often felt pressured to perform sexual labor as *both* the "giver" and "receiver" of orgasm (for a longer discussion of this, see Fahs 2011a).

Much of women's emotion work centered on performance around desire for sex ("wanting sex") and satisfaction during sex ("feeling satisfied"). These two forms of emotion work—telling a partner that they want to have sex, feel desirous of them, and feel excited for sex—alongside women's shallow acting performance (that is, performances where women are aware of acting, as contrasted to deep acting, where women no longer recognize that they are acting) of satisfaction during or after sex (e.g., orgasm, moaning, or the "YAAAAAY" expressed by Angelica) portrayed the varying demands that women perceived in their sexual lives. In particular, the strong emphasis on orgasm, despite women often needing to fake orgasm, suggests that orgasm signified a key form of emotion work for women (hearkening Hochschild's description of flight attendants' fake smiles). Women's multiple reasons for faking orgasms—to stop the encounter, support a partner's ego, validate the partner's sexual labor, and not hurt their partner's feelings—indicated that women's emotion work around fake orgasm met multiple goals. Moreover, rather than viewing men as generous for seeking to bring them to orgasm (a gift to the woman), women typically viewed men as demanding women's orgasms as validation of the men's sexual prowess (a gift to the man). This distinction, and the hazards of framing orgasm as a sexual goal, has been discussed in feminist work on orgasm reciprocity and who gets the "fair deal" (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003). To add to this complexity, studies on masculinity and "sovereign selfhood" suggest that heterosexual masculinity often configures women around their own needs, desires, and self-images rather than imagining women as having needs of their own (Waldby 1995).

Women's tendencies toward faking orgasm—a strikingly common occurrence in this sample—also fit with women's inclinations to define sexual satisfaction based on their partners' pleasure rather than their own. These narratives suggest that heterosexual sexual reciprocity is less about mutual enjoyment and more about women feeling they must confirm men's masculinity through heterosexual prowess (e.g., "I made my partner orgasm") (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003). Constructions of women as "givers" or as wanting their partner's orgasm more than their own (or seeing their own orgasm as a physical impossibility) shows a clear gender and power difference in who *expects* to orgasm, who *does* orgasm, and interpretations of *meaning* surrounding orgasm. Shantele's especially poignant description of watching with delight the facial expressions of her male partner during orgasm, all while giving up on the possibility of her own orgasm, symbolized much larger themes in women's sexual lives: they witnessed, watched, or felt joy in seeing another's pleasure, but did not expect (authentic) reciprocity for themselves. This again suggests that women's so-called "sexual liberation" has quite a long way to go in order for men and women to truly experience sex on a similar plane (Bell 2013; Fahs 2011a).

This study also suggests that there are real costs to women for the emotion work they engage in. For example, the various performances of satisfaction may extend not only into their physical performance of moaning or fake orgasms, but also into their arousal patterns themselves (as emotion work potentially could lead to a fusion between shallow acting and deep acting and thus becomes internalized as "what is" rather than as a performance, though this is only a theoretical claim rather than a claim based on our data). Thus, multiple layers of emotion work—shallow and deep—permeate women's sexual lives. Trying to assess how women feel exploited (or whether exploitation seems like "the way it is" and thus does not even feel exploitative any longer), or the ways that women feel properly "compensated" for emotion work in sex (Money? Security? Relationship stability? Emotional satisfaction? Pleasing the other? Pleasing the self?) present complicated challenges to feminist sex researchers. Further, assessing how women manage their own, and others', emotional experiences, and how that impacts their relationships, will require a series of studies.

These narratives also provided a starkly different image of masculinity compared to most popular-culture depictions of male sexuality. Rather than living up to masculine ideals of men as hard, tough, secure, self-sufficient, and sexually skilled, women described acting toward men in their sexual lives (particularly longer-term sexual partners) in ways that suggested a view of those men as low in sexual self-esteem and quite needy. Research into men's *actual* emotional needs in sex is an urgently needed next step to have a fuller picture, particularly given how much emotion work women do on behalf of those purported needs. Abby's description of "breaking the news" presented a particularly poignant and interesting construction of power imbalances, as she endured non-orgasmic sex for years and then used that information to ultimately demonstrate power over her (ex-) husband. Women's narratives of tolerating sexual pain, particularly during (unwanted) anal sex with men, further entrenched this rather negative portrayal of men as self-centered, inattentive, and even cruel. Sylvia's "acting out" of her boyfriend's pornographic fantasies also suggests that women sometimes felt pressured to engage in painful sexual actions of another's choosing rather than to assert their own preferences. Overall, women seemed more invested in devoting emotion work to their longer-term romantic relationships than to shorter "hookup" or casual sex relationships, implying that the emotion work might be more "worth it" for sustained relationships. (Similar dynamics appear in the literature on oral sex, as people construct cunnilingus as more appealing in longer-term relationships and less appealing in shorter-term ones; see Chambers 2007.)

Perhaps most interestingly, nine women (40 percent) described tolerating "bad sex" to meet their partner's needs and standards for sex. This extends the previous three themes even further, as women's expectations for what sex *can be* also rapidly diminished (and this mental acrobatics clearly illustrates how deep these emotional rules go). Jean's resignation around "not being herself" during sex, Leticia's frank giving up on hopes that a partner would listen to her, or Patricia's crying over the fear of her partner leaving her all suggest, in different ways, that women sometimes no longer expected sex to feel pleasurable. This kind of emotion work seemed especially dangerous as women had uninspiring and laborious sex without hope that the social contract of sex would, in turn, provide them with sexual pleasure as well. As ten of the twenty women in the sample clearly struggled to prioritize their own needs during sex, often instead directing their priorities outward toward others, this is something practitioners, researchers, and scholars should bear in mind when measuring and studying the "self" in self-reports of sexual satisfaction (McClelland 2011).

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 emotion work during sex. Future research could ask more direct questions about emotion work, as women may construct their emotion work differently than we have in this study. For example, this study left out narratives about women managing their bodily fluids, dealing with birth control, acting out a partner's sexual fantasies, and internalizing the need to alter their bodies—all of which could be addressed in future studies. Further, emotion work, though clearly having gendered dimensions, is certainly not a one-sided occurrence; thus, studies of women's partners—male and female—and coupled experiences of emotion work may prove especially useful or interesting. Along these lines, a more focused analysis on same-sex sexual labor could provide a useful framework for analyzing how emotion work in those relationships both mimics and diverges from heterosex. More analysis of connections between emotional pain (that is, feeling damaged, hurt, exasperated, resentful, and so on) as it connects to physical pain would also be compelling, as would explorations of different aspects of emotion work such as managing anxieties around penis size and body image for male partners (something we imagined we would find but did not). A larger sample size would also make it easier to outline the ways that emotion work intersects with social identities like race, class, and sexual identity. Though our sample included a diverse group of women, generalizations about patterns found along social identity lines would be inappropriate with a sample of this size. Further, research that better distinguishes past experiences with emotion work ("retrospective") versus current experiences could prove interesting, as women may recall labor differently for relationships that ended (especially ones that soured).

Future research could also look at this other "third shift"—that is, the emotion work women devoted to their sexual relationships—in relation to the emotion work devoted to the workplace and to the family (Elliott and Umberson 2008). More work on emotions in both the psychological and sociological literatures is crucial to understanding women's experiences of sexuality. Intersections between the types of emotion work women exert have only recently been examined (Wharton and Erickson 1995), so adding sexual emotion work to these intersectional studies could provide more detail about the taxing and draining qualities of emotion work across different facets of life. Clearly, research shows that many women devote an overwhelming amount of emotion work to their jobs, partners, children, and (now) sexual lives; researchers need to determine how to minimize the negative consequences of this labor while amplifying its positive consequences and/or lessening the emotion work altogether. More research on intersections between feminist identity and emotion work could help to further explore the protective benefits of challenging traditional gender roles (Yoder, Perry, and Saal 2007). Additionally, teasing apart how much pressure women receive from their (male) partners to have orgasms, tolerate sexual pain, and deprioritize their own orgasms, and how much pressure they receive from cultural norms in the media for these things (e.g., magazine articles highlighting the importance of constant desire) also seems crucial to better understanding women's sexuality.

Ultimately, this study suggests that Paula England's (2010) claims about the "stalled" gender revolution may also extend into women's sexual lives. While women have made progress in many areas—destigmatizing sex before marriage and same-sex relationships, exploring new avenues to sexual pleasure, working to negotiate power in their relationships, and socializing their friends/daughters/partners about how to better address their needs (Bell 2013; Maxwell 2012)—they also struggle in these areas, particularly as men's sexual needs and entitlement to orgasm and pleasure often seem more powerful than their own. Perhaps the sexual revolution inadvertently "freed men first" from the constraints of traditional gender and sexuality roles (English 1983), or allowed women to *be desired* rather than *have desire* (evoking "cathexis," or the gendered characteristics of sexual desire [see Connell 2005]), leading to some complicated quagmires of how to effectively sexually liberate women in today's culture. While this study focused on emotion work in longer-term romantic relationships, women's emotional/sexual labor has also extended into "hookup" experiences and casual sex as well (particularly faking orgasms) (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; Kitroeff 2013), giving renewed salience to the feminist analysis of such labor.

This study also raises questions about contemporary claims to empowerment and agency broadly defined, as even those women with more socially inscribed sexual "power" reported a vast amount of emotional/sexual labor they devoted in their heterosexual and heterogendered sexual experiences. Providing emotion work in their sexual relationships thus makes sense as a strategy for enduring relationships with lopsided power dynamics, but it also invites interrogation of how we will envision sexual empowerment and agency in light of these emotion work tactics (Gill 2007). That said, helping women to feel more entitled to reciprocity, authentic orgasms, assertions of their own needs, and sexual power are important goals for partners, practitioners, parents, and scholars, just as working with men to feel more secure about their (imperfect) sexual selves will hopefully result in less emotion work, greater authenticity, and more positive sexual experiences for all.

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