

Methodological Mishaps and Slippery Subjects: Stories of First Sex, Oral Sex, and Sexual Trauma in Qualitative Sex Research

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Numerous assumptions—many rooted in privilege, educational status, and hegemonic power norms—are embedded in the process of collecting qualitative research on people’s sexualities, particularly surrounding meaning making, language, and sexual scripts. This paper interrogates 3 moments in qualitative sex research—what I call “margins of the interview”—where the researcher and participants’ meaning making around women’s sexuality diverged, raising complicated questions around coconstruction of sexual subjectivity in the research setting. Drawing from interview data with a diverse community sample of 20 women (interviewed in 2014, diverse age, race, class, and sexual identities) in a large southwestern metropolitan city, I outline in detail 3 places of methodological ambiguity (or “marginalia”) in the interviews. First, I examine how questions about “first sex” evoke complicated webs of stories that center on early sexual traumas, nonpenetrative sexual experiences, and virginity loss. Further, asking about women’s “experiences with oral sex” reveals how women construct themselves as performing sexual labor via giving rather than receiving oral sex, while asking about women’s worst sexual experiences either highlighted, or erased, sexual violence. Implications for the impact of how sex researchers—wedged between paradigms—choose to word questions, along with how women push and rewrite typical sexual scripts in qualitative research, are discussed. Ultimately, the slippage between the assumed and the experienced also moves us away from thinking about qualitative research in terms of validity and instead highlights the positive, puzzling, and difficult aspects of the “marginalia” instead.

Keywords: marginalia, qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews, women’s sexuality

The process of doing qualitative research—particularly as the researcher asks questions, listens, hears, converses, and, eventually, analyzes and makes meaning of the words—is fraught with the potential for methodological ambiguities. What we think we are asking is often not what our participants hear, just as our own beliefs about the world (and about sexuality) are nearly impossible to minimize or erase. Contradictions abound in qualitative sex research: the inductive nature of interviews and ethnographies can undermine the reliability of

qualitative sex research even as the open nature of interviews allows for a more accurate and detailed understanding of people’s sexual subjectivities. Numerous assumptions—many rooted in privilege, educational status, and hegemonic power norms—are embedded in the process of collecting qualitative research on people’s sexualities; often qualitative researchers fetishize such assumptions, while those who practice other methods largely ignore these assumptions. This underlies some of the unique characteristics of doing work while being “caught between paradigms,” a subject this study takes up in detail.

The literature on different modes of inquiry and methods to analyze sensitive sexual information is mixed, as some studies find little differences between qualitative and quantitative methods to study disclosures of sexual behaviors (Durant & Carey, 2000; Tourangeau & Smith, 1996), whereas other work argues that

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people's self-reported sexual behaviors are greatly influenced by normative gender expectations, particularly in methods where participants believe that lying can be detected (Alexander & Fisher, 2003). Face-to-face interviewing generates more elaborate and, some argue, "authentic" responses from women about their sexual experiences compared to quantitative and online methods (Gribble, Miller, Rogers, & Turner, 1999). Further, the choice of language (e.g., do we say fellatio, oral sex, blowjobs, or "going down on" when we refer to this action) represents one such choice that impacts the relationship between the researcher and participant (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), just as researchers must navigate tricky and complex words like "sex" and "satisfaction" with people who interpret those in vastly different ways (McClelland, 2014; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001).

This paper interrogates three moments in this one qualitative sex research study where the researcher and participants' meaning making around sexuality diverged, raising complicated questions about the coconstruction of sexual subjectivity. Drawing from interview data I collected with 20 women from diverse backgrounds, I outline three methodological mishaps, or, more accurately, moments when I asked a question that resulted in divergent (that is, departed from what I had expected, what I could effectively communicate, or what I could find) ways of hearing or responding to the question. I situate these as productive and compelling spaces that showcase the strengths and pitfalls of qualitative semistructured interview methods, as each of these examples showcases liminal spaces of aspects of sex that are, at once, highly visible and wholly invisible, easily accessible and yet elusive (e.g., the ubiquity of heterosexual anal sex in pornography embodies these qualities of being hidden in plain sight). Specifically, I first examine how questions about "first sex" evoke complicated webs of stories that center on early traumas, nonpenetrative and nonorgasm directed sexual experiences, and virginity loss. I then explore how asking about women's "experiences with oral sex" reveals how women construct themselves as performing sexual labor via giving rather than receiving oral sex, and I conclude by looking at women's worst sexual experiences as how those experiences either highlighted or

erased sexual violence. Ultimately, this study explores how the wording of questions, combined with underlying social and sexual scripts for both researcher and participant, can make qualitative sex research work particularly imbued with the potential to reveal new insights just as it can be fraught with moments of misunderstanding, redirection, and revision to previously held belief systems. When I refer to scripts, I mean both scripts in terms of how conversations unfold but also scripts of how norms are communicated and internalized through such conversations. The slippage between the assumed (i.e., what we think people do or feel) and the experienced (i.e., what people tell us that they have done or felt) also moves us away from thinking about qualitative research in terms of validity (something others have rightly criticized, see Fine, 2012 and Maracek, Fine, & Kidder, 1997) and instead highlights the positive, puzzling, and difficult aspects of the "marginalia" as it extends this larger critique of validity as omnipotent.

Literature Review

Asking, Listening, Hearing, Speaking

A large body of work has examined the complex discursive qualities of qualitative research, particularly from a feminist or critical perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Charmaz, 2014; Devault, 1990; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008). Notions of how researchers speak, or listen, are informed by their previously held assumptions about the world, just as the design of questions can draw from a variety of social and sexual scripts about the world (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Assessing whether research participants are "insiders" or "outsiders" to the researchers' social groups has also appeared as a significant determinant in how researchers build rapport with participants or analyze the data (Acker, 2000), just as the tension between asking private questions and publishing publicly accessible studies about those conversations can be challenging (Ribbens & Edwards, 1997; Stacey, 1988). For example, evidence that same gender and same race interviews yield more frankness about sexuality issues signals the importance of thinking about identity and subjectivity in the qualitative research process

(Broom, Hand, & Tovey, 2009; Gailey & Prohaska, 2011).

In particular, methodological choices impact the way that researchers see themselves (e.g., as the “authority,” as in communication with the participants, as extracting data from the participants, as having a body with clearly marked identities, as a self-reflexive self, as a blank screen for projection, as interchangeable with their graduate students, and so on; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Fortune, Reid, & Miller, 2013). Similarly, methodological choices impact the way that participants see the researcher (e.g., as similar or different from them, as wanting a particular sort of answer, as an ally or as a threat, as a friend or as a professional, as open to many possible answers or as guiding the research more directly; Barbour, 2013; Golombisky, 2006). Ultimately, this “noisy” process of asking, listening, and interpreting has engendered numerous debates and tensions about best practices of qualitative research as well as tensions, errors, missteps, and mishaps to avoid, as researchers negotiate the actual conversations with participants, followed by their work on transcription, data analysis, and writing (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Fortune, Reid, & Miller, 2013; Poland, 1995).

Complicating Virginit

Research on women’s sexuality and its attendant complexities has started to unravel some of the complex ways that research participants construct narratives of the sexual self. In particular, the complicated work on virginity and virginity loss has showcased how girls and women construct virginity and premarital sex in diverse ways even though most studies have found that penile–vaginal intercourse continues to define “virginity loss” (Bersamin et al., 2007). Laura Carpenter (2001) found that women sometimes imagined virginity loss as related to other kinds of genital sex aside from vaginal intercourse, and that most believed virginity could not be lost through rape. Notions of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” ways to lose virginity appear throughout the research literatures on women’s virginity loss stories. Across racial groups, committed relationships predicted the most positive virginity loss stories (Higgins, Trussell, Moore, & Davidson, 2010). One study of Latina women found that virginity loss was

acceptable when connected to relationships defined by love and characterized by a mutual sentiment of caring (García, 2009), whereas another study found that high school freshman girls talked more positively about losing their own virginity than boys did when speaking about girls losing their virginity (Wilson, Smith, & Menn, 2013). When girls challenge these more conventional virginity narratives, they are often met with punishment and disdain; for example, reactions to women frankly selling their virginity, as in the case of Natalie Dylan (who offered to sell her virginity online to the highest bidder), were met with online hostilities and disdain (Dunn & Vik, 2014).

Cross-cultural differences have also appeared in studies of women’s virginity and narratives of virginity loss. A study of women in Singapore found that women defined virginity as penetrative intercourse but that they found virginity was mostly irrelevant unless they were assessing women’s sexual permissiveness (Ho & Sim, 2014), whereas women in Guatemala increasingly seek out hymen reconstruction because of the high value placed on women’s virginity (Roberts, 2006). In the Philippines, women constructed virginity loss as “giving in,” being “carried away,” expressing love or self-expression, or as frank coercion, revealing the ambivalence women often felt around virginity loss (Delgado-Infante & Ofreneo, 2014), whereas in China, women often described losing virginity as connected to some kind of coercion (Wang & Ho, 2011). Similarly, a study of British teens found that, for young men, first sex felt empowering and confirmed their agency and identity, whereas for young women first sex felt complicated, ambivalent, and required them to manage the “loss” (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2000). Swedish girls, too, reported complicated discourse around the hymen and what it meant to tell their parents about losing their virginity (Cinthio, 2015).

The differences between what counts as a “sexual partner,” “having sex,” and “losing virginity” have also revealed the slipperiness of these subjects and the methods used to study them. Researchers have found that individuals do not consistently define the concept of “having sex” (Sanders et al., 2010). One study found that undergraduates reported a much broader definition of what counted as a sexual partner than of what counted as “having sex,” whereas

definitions of virginity were the most narrow and restrictive (Trotter & Alderson, 2007). People also reported discrepancies between belief systems about virginity and actual behaviors that “counted” as virginity (Bersamin et al., 2007; Sawyer et al., 2007), thereby complicating how researchers ask about and define virginity. In terms of meaning making, some women constructed virginity as a “gift” they gave to a partner, whereas others conceptualized it as having stigma or as a process they went through with a partner (Carpenter, 2001; Humphreys, 2013). Some heterosexual women even endorsed “secondary virginity,” where they intentionally stopped having sex *after* losing their virginity (Carpenter, 2011). Studies of LGBT virginity loss, a far more understudied phenomenon, have found that there is a range of virginity definitions, little discussion of LGBT virginity, and that coming out was far more important as a rite of passage than losing virginity (Averett, Moore, & Price, 2014). Ultimately, virginity has a variety of definitions, meanings, and implications, suggesting that the task of doing qualitative research on virginity unearths competing social and sexual scripts about virginity and virginity loss.

Sexual Labor and Oral Sex

The emerging literature on emotional labor, emotion work, and sexual labor highlight the necessary role of qualitative research in assessing how people *feel* about sexual behaviors, and the emotions and decision-making they invest into their sexual stories. Arlie Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labor as labor that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (p. 7), as women manage and suppress their emotions and direct them according to corporate and workplace expectations (Hochschild, 1983). Many gendered scripts of sexuality demand that women direct attention away from their own needs and instead prioritize their partners’ needs, resulting in a variety of problematic symptoms of gendered inequalities: faking orgasm (Fahs, 2011; Fahs, 2014; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Wiederman, 1997), giving in to unwanted sex (Kaestle, 2009; Impett & Peplau, 2003; O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998), sexual extortion and violence (DeMaris, 1997), tolerating

sexual pain (Elmerstig, Wijma, & Berterö, 2008), and the prioritization of their partner’s pleasure over their own (McClelland, 2011; Nicolson & 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 both interpersonally, sexually, and socially (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007; McClelland, 2010; McClelland, 2011; Schick, Zucker, & Bay-Cheng, 2008; Yoder, Perry, & Saal, 2007).

Research on oral sex has important implications for expectations about women’s emotional and sexual labor, as women’s experiences with oral sex overwhelmingly reveal inequities with regard to giving and receiving oral sex in heterosexual contexts. Studying oral sex in qualitative and quantitative research is complicated, as women are very likely to skip items that deal with embarrassing subjects like oral sex (Gribble et al., 1999). Further, both sexual scripts and impression management impact how women talk about their sexual lives. One study, for example, found that achievement orientation from school invaded girls’ experiences with fellatio, minimizing experiences of pleasure and mutuality at the expense of skill and achievement at giving oral sex (Burns, Futch, & Tolman, 2011). Existing studies suggest a number of facts about women’s experiences with oral sex. Women *gave* oral sex far more than they *received* oral sex (Chambers, 2007), and women felt overwhelmingly responsible to give oral sex to men but did not often receive it or feel deserving of it (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Further, only 20% of men and women believed that oral sex “counted” as sex (Hans, Gillen, & Akande, 2010), only 30% of youth said they were not virgins if they had oral sex (Bersamin et al., 2007), and most college students perceived oral sex as less intimate than intercourse (Vannier & Byers, 2013). Along these lines, U.S. college students reported that they expected cunnilingus in relationships but not in casual hookups, and women who wanted cunnilingus in hookups had to be assertive to get it (Backstrom, Armstrong, & Puentes, 2012). Thus, meaning making around something as complex as oral sex presents a particular challenge to qualitative sex researchers.

Some important differences have emerged with regard to which women receive oral sex

more often. Those in committed relationships felt more comfort engaging in oral sex (Chambers, 2007) and received it more often than those not in relationships (Backstrom, Armstrong, & Puentes, 2012). Women who received oral sex felt more agentic, assertive, skillful, and gratified than those who did not receive oral sex (Fava & Bay-Cheng, 2012). Similarly, young women's sexual assertiveness was linked to having more lifetime cunnilingus partners and more cunnilingus experiences in the past three months (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2011). Younger women and those who did not feel love for their partner reported more negative emotions about receiving oral sex (Malacad & Hess, 2010), just as women engaged in fellatio for emotional and insecurity motives whereas men engaged in cunnilingus for physical motives (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2012). Ultimately, oral sex narratives reveal the complicated terrain around deservingness, entitlement, and emotional/sexual labor for women.

Minimizing Sexual Violence

Studying women's experiences with sexual violence also opens up numerous conversations about the pervasiveness of rape, women's reactions to their experiences of sexual violence, and how researchers can appropriately measure, understand, and report on the many violences committed against women. Rape statistics typically underreport the actual incidences of rape, though studies suggest that between 21 and 25% of U.S. women have experienced rape (Campbell & Wasco, 2005; Koss, Heise, & Russo, 1994), with the U.S. having the highest rate of any industrialized nation (Roze, 2005). Nearly half of college women described a history of some type of sexual victimization (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987), most rape perpetrators were men women knew rather than strangers (Marx, Van Wie, & Gross, 1996), and the vast majority of nonconsensual sex acts remained underreported (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

These statistics often fail to account for women's refusal to label rape as *rape* and the pervasive cultural norms surrounding the underreporting of sexual violence, in part related to the culture of discrediting women when they speak out (Kelly, Lovett, & Regan, 2005) and in part related to the fundamental assumptions about

women and sexual (un)willingness that situates rape at the center of women's sexual lives (Gavey, 2005). An expansive body of previous research has examined the complexities of "finding rape"—that is, measuring, locating, and getting accurate data on the slippery subject of sexual violence. For example, Koss (1993; Koss, 1996) found that the specific questions asked, the context in which rape occurred, confidentiality of responses, the method of data collection, and sample integrity all greatly impacted women's reports of rape; despite this, most rape statistics are not collected with the same precision as other kinds of crimes.

Further, if women refuse to label coercive experiences as rape, this presents a serious challenge to researchers about how to "find" or locate these experiences, and how to describe or analyze traumatic and coercive sexual practices. Women may refuse to label rape because the cultural imaginary around "rape victim" continues to unravel in its precision and in the legal ramifications of different kinds of rape (Lamb, 1999). Nearly half of college women who described having experienced rape did not label it as rape (Bondurant, 2001). Further, the use of the term *rape* was contingent on qualities of both the perpetrator and the victim, as women who labeled their experience as *rape* more often experienced forceful assault by an acquaintance, awoke to someone performing a sexual act on them without consent, or experienced the assault as a child (Kahn, 2004). Women less often called their experiences *rape* if they submitted to a whining or begging partner, gave in to an emotionally needy man, were assaulted by a boyfriend, were severely impaired by alcohol or drugs, wanted the intercourse more, had experienced sexual violence during their youth, or were forced to engage in oral or manual sex (Kahn, 2004; McCloskey & Bailey, 2000; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2004). These complexities serve as a reminder that qualitative researchers can ask about *rape*, but this word may obscure the pervasiveness of sexual violence and coercion that women experience; similarly, coercion and sexual violence may appear in places where researchers do not necessarily expect it.

Women's tendencies to minimize rape also connect to a broader culture that minimizes violence against women and justifies sexual and physical violence against them (Gavey, 2005).

One study found that people constructed men's violence as effective and women's violence as ineffective (Anderson & Umberson, 2001) and that women tended to minimize physical and sexual violence if it was more severe (Dunham & Senn, 2000). Further, sexism and beliefs that supported rape went hand-in-hand (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, & White, 2004), just as rape myths connected to beliefs that women deserved rape (Haywood & Swank, 2008; Ryan, 2011).

Research Questions and Intentions

Ultimately, the literatures on first sex, oral sex, and sexual violence/rape all reveal the ways that hegemonic ideas serve as a lens through which researchers (and participants) understand, talk about, and frame their sexual experiences. McClelland and Fine (2008) call it "cellophane," noting,

Wrapped in a kind of collective discursive cellophane, we believe it may be difficult for [young women] to speak as their tongues are weighed down with dominant assumptions and [moral] panics; and similarly, our ears may be clogged with our own dominant (feminist) discourses for their desires. (p. 232)

Thus, by challenging hegemonic ideals, we can potentially uncover other/different/better ways of thinking about complex, highly charged issues like these.

As the gaps between the researcher's and participants' perspectives, realities, scripts, and norms may appear vividly in the context of sex research, this paper asks: What sorts of methodological mishaps, hidden meanings, or communication lapses are present in the process of asking women about their sexual experiences? How do women write and rewrite scripts, both in their lives and during a qualitative interview, about their "first sexual experiences"? How might emotional and sexual labor appear in surprising or unexpected ways? How can researchers *locate* sexual violence without overstating or understating its prevalence and meaning for participants? When studying slippery subjects—that is, topics that evade shared meaning or flip around the expected conversations or narratives—how can researchers ask, listen, hear, and speak in ways that honor the difficulty of creating stories about sexuality? Ultimately, this piece is meant to showcase the complexity of studying women's sexuality by highlighting areas where the asking and the

speaking diverge in interesting and compelling ways, creating previously unseen or understudied spaces where researchers can access the margins of women's sexual lives.

Method

This study utilized semistructured qualitative interview data from a sample of 20 adult women recruited in 2014 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. Both outlets reached wide audiences and were freely available to community residents. The advertisements asked for women ages 18 to 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 prescreening questions were asked. A purposive sample was selected to provide greater demographic diversity in the sample: sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were intentionally oversampled and a diverse range of ages was represented. This sample of women (mean age = 35, *SD* 12.01) was highly diverse and included 35% ages 18–31, 40% ages 32–45, and 25% ages 46–59, 60% white and 40% women of color, including two African American women, four Mexican American women, and two Asian American women, and 60% heterosexual, 20% bisexual, and 20% lesbian women. 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 when I asked about demographics at the end of the interview (again, these are categories filled with slippages and fluid boundaries that such demographic categories do not adequately capture).

Participants were interviewed by the author using a semistructured 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 sexuality. Questions were asked

in the same order each time, though follow-up and probing questions were more conversational and free-flowing. All participants were interviewed by the same interviewer in a room on campus that ensured privacy and confidentiality of responses. These open-ended questions included aspects of their best and worst sexual experiences, feelings about contemporary sexual culture and media, questions about their sexual practices and attitudes, and ideas about body image. Several of the prompts addressed issues relevant to this essay on communication gaps and lapses. For example, women were asked one primary question about their first sexual experiences: "Can you tell me about your first experiences with sexuality?" alongside one primary question about their experiences with oral sex: "Can you tell me about your experiences with oral sex?" They were also asked about their worst sexual experiences: "Can you talk about what you consider to be the worst sexual experience you've had in your life?" and, much later in the interview, a direct question about rape: "Have you ever been raped?" Each of these were followed by clarifying and follow-up questions as needed. These questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about related topics, as follow-up questions were free-flowing and conversational. Because the questions were broad and open-ended, participants could set the terms of how they would discuss their sexual experiences and what information they wanted to share.

Results and Discussion

As a methodological paper on unique linguistic turns and communication lapses during interviews, this analysis emphasized the notable divergences between what I asked them (as the researcher) and what they heard or interpreted or spoke about (as the participant). What we as researchers may imagine when designing certain questions enters an entirely different discursive framework when participants hear, interpret, and comment upon such questions. In other words, what we *intend* to ask and what participants *hear us asking* often differs in meaningful ways. I outline here three examples taken from data from my recent community sample of women where the distance between the researcher's intentions and the participants'

interpretations stood apart in a way that I was able to notice. As a productive space of thinking deeply about methods (and the inherent slipperiness of sex research in particular, especially around concepts as simple-yet-complex as "sex" and "sexuality," "satisfaction," "rape," "first time"), these three examples illuminate the interplay between language, sexual scripts, and meaning making of women's sexuality.

First Sex

When I designed the question about women's first experiences with sexuality, I had implicitly imagined that this question would elicit discussions about women's sense of "losing their virginity" or "having sex for the first time." I intentionally asked about "sexuality" instead of "sex" to open up possibilities for people to imagine themselves as "being sexual" for the first time. The question was designed to evaluate how women described their first consensual act that they defined as "having sex," as I wanted to see how women imagined the beginning of their sexual histories. Instead, this question evoked complicated webs of narratives that focused on five sorts of divergent and incompatible topics: early sexual traumas (clearly before the age of consenting or wanting or, in some cases, knowing what was truly happening to them), nonpenetrative sexual experiences (including many descriptions of dry humping, trying out masturbation, being fingered), non-orgasm-directed sexual experiences (e.g., getting naked in front of someone else for a brief moment, kissing, looking at magazines), and virginity loss (multiply defined). First sex, it seems, was a tangled and tricky terrain filled with such a wide range of sexual experiences that the question became impossible to code or analyze with any consistent lens. The answers were so diffuse and variable that chaotic patterns emerged across a wide range of experiences.

To start, I had not anticipated the extent to which women would describe their first sexual experiences as frankly traumatic. For example, Emma (42/White/Heterosexual) responded to this question by saying,

The actual sex act? That would be my ex-husband, the father of my children. It wasn't pleasant. I was only thirteen. He took my virginity and proceeded to show his whole family the blood-stained comforter and

sheets and all of our friends too. So yeah, it was never pleasurable with him, although we went on to have four kids together.

Two women interpreted this question by describing early instances of childhood molestation and sexual abuse. Naomi (18/White/Bisexual) talked about her father raping her:

My first experience with sexuality was when I was actually molested when I was younger. It was by my biological father and I was like seven or six. It happened for about a year. It was a really bad time for me because I trusted him. He was my dad.

Kathleen (49/White/Heterosexual) recalled her first sexual experiences as prior to her actual conscious memory by relaying what her mother told her:

Ugly as it is, my first experiences with sexuality were because of a molestation situation. I would say early but I don't even know how early, honestly. The earliest thing I know about is a story that I was told where my parents had found me. I had barricaded myself into the bedroom masturbating with a rolling pin. I was roughly two or three, which tells me something had been going on.

Here Kathleen recalls a story about trauma folded together with a story about early masturbation (and specifically, about being *told* about her early masturbation by her parents). First sex as violent, incestual, and painful showed up more often than I had expected.

Similarly, women defined their first sexual experiences as both nonpenetrative and non-orgasm-directed, thus provided a surprising twist on the more traditional notions of losing virginity. In fact, many women would ask me whether I specifically meant “*having sex sex*” or “something else,” as if I could define that for them (again revealing the “writing in the margins” that women had around the questions I asked versus the questions they heard). Corinne (21/White/Bisexual) posed the question, “Sexuality as in sex itself or anything at all?” Sofia (42/Mexican American/Heterosexual) similarly questioned me by saying, “With fully intercourse or just like not intercourse?” I responded, “Any. Whatever you consider that question to mean.” She replied,

You know my first one was not really, like, you know, the regular way, you know? It was sort of like rubbing each other, touching, and nothing major happened, you know? It was satisfying but not in the way it is when you actually have the intercourse, you know?

Other women also talked about nonpenetrative and nonorgasm directed sexuality as their first sexual experience. Rachel (39/White/Bisexual) said, “You mean, *ever*? I gotta think about that. I think my cousins and I, when we were six and seven, we were doing a whole doctor-like show-me-your-parts so I think that would count.” Zari (43/African American/Heterosexual) also had a first experience that signaled love, tenderness, and kissing: “My first experience would be probably heavy petting and a kiss, nothing too big, no bumpin’ and grinding yet, but like some kisses and I really liked him a lot. It was special, really cute.”

As if sensing the difficulty of answering the question, or separating their childhood sexualities from their teenage sexualities, nonpenetrative examples appeared over and over as an example of early sexual experimentation and exploration. Although a few women talked about kissing and very nonsexual sorts of experiences (e.g., Joyce [21/Filipina/Bisexual] said “I first kissed a guy when I was a sophomore in high school and it was literally just that one time and I didn’t kiss another person who was a girl until a year later”), others talked about more frankly sexual or erotic touching. Gretchen (52/White/Heterosexual) answered this question by vaguely referencing sleepovers with a friend:

I guess it was probably with a friend of mine. When we were young, a female friend of mine, we had sleepovers and stuff and we would kind of mess around. It was fun, something we never talked about outside of sleepovers at night but it was enjoyable. I don’t think either one of us regretted it.

As in the above example, different women fluctuated in their descriptions of “first sex” either as a behavior or as an emotional experience devoid of the specific actions they undertook; some women recalled first sex as a list of behaviors (“first we did this, and then we did that”) and other women described first sex as an emotional state (“I felt this, or I felt that”). As an example of the former, Daphne (33/White/Heterosexual) described her first experience in vividly behavioral terms:

Let’s see, I was probably sixteen and a half, almost seventeen and I went out with an individual to a movie. We watched the movie and picked up forties and went back to his mother’s house and we were drinking and it moved into having sex and then I remember things were progressing and I was like, ‘Hey, I’m a virgin,’ and he was like ‘No you’re not.’ He knew I was at the point where I really wanted to try it.

Here Daphne reveals how her virginity was narrated for her by someone else even though she did not generate that story herself; this is further complicated by the fact that Daphne removes her emotions from the experience and describes it as a play-by-play of sexual “events” and conversations. In contrast, some women described their first sexual experiences purely in emotional terms, leaving out any specific behavioral references, such as Antonia (25/Mexican American/Lesbian): “I was older, 19 at the time, and it was my first relationship where we acknowledged the term ‘girlfriend.’ It was new and positive for me.” Or, for Yvonne (41/Mexican American/Heterosexual), she felt disappointment about losing her virginity but did not describe the actions themselves: “I was fifteen and had a boyfriend. We didn’t know what we were doing. I was rather disappointed, kind of like, ‘Oh, this is it?’” At the most extreme end of this, Iris (22/Mexican American/Lesbian) described her first sex *only* in emotional language, “It was kind of like it made me nervous in a way, kind of like that burning feeling in the back of my throat.” This gap between what women *did* sexually, and how they *felt* about it highlighted some of the difficulties of understanding, assessing, measuring, and gathering data on women’s virginity loss stories. If some women described it only in feeling language and others described it as a step-by-step process, qualitative researchers then must create new language for grappling with both ways of describing “first sex.”

Women also had complicated ideas about virginity loss as well, with a few women describing various loopholes that would allow them to have sex without losing their virginity. For example, Felicity (20/White/Heterosexual) proclaimed that she still identified as a virgin despite having frequent anal sex:

I’m still a virgin in some ways. I’ve never had sex in the conventional form of the word. My boyfriend and I have done anal. I have a really strict set of Christian morals so I try to get around that. The big thing is the morals. It’s more of a respect and making sure we’re on the same page spiritually and emotionally type of thing. Sex is something I want to save.

A few of the women who had had same-sex partners also described uncertainty about whether those would “count” as a sexual experience. Trish (19/White/Lesbian) wanted to clarify my intentions with the question: “My

first experiences? Okay. With a man or a woman?” I replied, “Any.” She said, “Any?” These clarifying questions are far from conversation or lacking in meaning, as they reflect the shared meaning making between them and me alongside clearly demarcated heterosexist scripts about “what counts” as sex (and women wanting to respond “correctly” or truthfully without being judged). Such clarifying questions also serve as a clear reminder that *both* interviewer and participant are mired in the inescapability of sexual scripts and bogged down in the contradictory process of communicating about sexuality via the interview script (the so-called “data”) and negotiating that same script (the “marginalia”). Ultimately, these distinctions between “real data” and “marginalia” comments become harder to make when we consider marginalia as itself a form of “real data.”

Oral Sex

Questions about oral sex reveal how researchers can get a patterned response that diverges from the anticipated responses to questions about women’s sexuality. When I designed this seemingly straightforward question about women’s experiences with oral sex, I had imagined that women would interpret the question by talking about their experiences with *receiving* oral sex. Instead, the question, “Can you tell me about your experiences with oral sex?” resulted, for the *majority* of women, in their discussion of *giving* oral sex and performing sexual labor for their partners. For example, Bea (37/Filipina/Heterosexual) described giving oral sex as expected (and notably left out any descriptions of receiving oral sex): “I’ve never been able to get anyone off with oral sex. It’s always just been something we do before actual intercourse, like foreplay that’s expected. It’s something I’ve gotta do.” Yvonne (41/Mexican American/Heterosexual) also interpreted the question as about *giving* oral sex and described her displeasure about lengthy blow-jobs:

I’m not that into giving oral sex. There’s always this little salty taste to it and I don’t feel comfortable. He wants it though. I don’t mind for a little bit, quickly, and then he’s ready to get to other business, but if there’s a guy that wants me down there for like five, ten minutes, no, not that into it.

When women did not assume I meant *giving* oral sex, they mostly expressed confusion and a desire to clarify my meaning (similar to the “first sex” narratives). Naomi (18/White/Bisexual) said, “Um, like, to myself or on other people?” while Kathleen (49/White/Heterosexual) said, “Sure, as far as what?” I would always reply, “Both giving and receiving oral sex” to these inquiries, which resulted in numerous descriptions of both actions (with *giving* typically taking top billing). The tone and enthusiasm surrounding descriptions of oral sex also varied when women switched between talking about giving and receiving oral sex. For example, Rachel (39/White/Bisexual) talked energetically about giving oral sex:

I like oral sex. Oral sex is fun! It’s a way to engage in safe sex practices. I love using female condoms when I give oral sex to a female and it makes her feel comfortable. Oral sex with men, I have this whole routine of mouthwash first, baby wipes, you know, to wipe it, get in there.

When I asked her about receiving oral sex, she replied less enthusiastically,

It’s strange though. It’s hard to explain but I feel like I have to really know the person to feel relaxed enough to enjoy it. I usually maintain a 20-1 ratio that if I receive oral sex once every twenty times I give, I’m totally happy.

Corinne (21/White/Bisexual) also had vivid enthusiasm for giving oral sex but not for receiving it:

I like oral sex. I’m really good at it, like *really* good at it, like I’ve had guys come in like a minute or two. I just know what I’m doing and I pay attention to them and their body and what they’re feeling.

I replied, “And what about receiving it?” Corinne said, flatly, “Eh,” and shrugged her shoulders.

Within these descriptions of oral sex, I often had to ask them about receiving oral sex or about reciprocity with oral sex, prompting interesting discussions about how women framed themselves as “givers.” This conversation about “giving” and “receiving” oral sex also reinforces the point that marginalia (that is, talking about the questions or intended meanings of questions) is always present in semistructured interviews and can serve a central role in understanding the concepts researchers are asking about. Researchers should draw from participants’ “marginalia” not only later on when an-

alyzing data, but in the moment of the interview itself. In the case of talking about oral sex, the distinction between “giver” and “receiver” was crucial. For example, Gail (46/White/Bisexual) talked about her expectations to give but not to receive oral sex:

I don’t even expect them to go down on me. It’s nice when you can have both, but I have come to realize, you know, there are so many different sexual interactions that you don’t have to have all of them in one interaction. I don’t really get the luxury of having long encounters so I don’t require it and I don’t expect it.

Notably, here, a long encounter would include receiving oral sex but a shorter encounter would include giving oral sex. Corinne (21/White/Bisexual) also reported a skewed ratio of giving to receiving once I asked her about this:

My ratio is like 100 to 1 probably. I don’t expect it back. I figure if I do it, it’s ‘cause I want to. I’m not expecting anything back from it. And if they do it it’s ‘cause they want to . . . I’ve just never had anyone really be good at it.

(This is yet another example of how women do not necessarily *expect* men to be skilled at sex; consequently, they do not talk about *wanting* sex as much, see Conley, 2011). As another example, when I asked Antonia (25/Mexican American/Lesbian) about receiving oral sex, she emphatically emphasized her enjoyment of *giving* oral sex instead: “I *like* giving it. I don’t really care for receiving it that much. I’m predominantly the giver, which is okay, except for when it feels like quote-unquote ‘her turn.’” Lila (36/White/Heterosexual) also strongly preferred giving to receiving oral sex, framing receiving oral sex as undesirable and anxiety-inducing:

I was always more inclined to give oral sex than to receive it. I always felt very self-conscious with a guy being that close to my vagina and seeing it that close. I always steer them away into not having to do it to me.

At times, women’s descriptions of oral sex evoked clear descriptions of sexual labor. Martha (52/White/Heterosexual) gagged when I mentioned it, assumed I meant *giving* oral sex, and said,

I gave him a blowjob once, back in my high school before his track meet, and he came and I spit it out. I’ll lick it, but I can’t put the whole thing in my mouth even though that’s the expectation.

Gail (46/White/Bisexual) tied her enjoyment of giving oral sex to her role as a woman:

I love giving more, because that's how I am in my entire life. I'm a nurturer. My daughter says, 'Mom, you don't have to do everything for everybody,' but that's who I am, so I can't really separate that in my sexual viewpoints any more than I can try to separate it in my regular life.

A few women also expressed enjoyment at watching their partner feel pleasure from receiving oral sex even when they did not feel pleasure when they received oral sex, such as Gretchen (52/White/Heterosexual): "I am much more willing to give a man a blowjob than to have him go down on me. Bringing somebody else such pleasure is what I like. They lose control and it can be so intense." This methodological messiness about giving and receiving oral sex, from the more overt omissions to the more subtle differences in tone or enthusiasm or claims of women as "givers," reveals that studying oral sex may require sex researchers to overtly *ask* about women's experiences with receiving oral sex and to imagine differently what "giving oral sex" might entail for women. If researchers do not directly ask about women receiving oral sex, these experiences may become hidden, invisible, obscured, or otherwise overlaid with conversations about giving oral sex to others. This serves as a reminder that, for qualitative interviewers, *asking* certain questions to avoid silences can work hand-in-hand with *avoiding* certain questions that *create* silences (as in the next section).

Worst Sex

Getting access to women's stories of sexual coercion presents qualitative researchers with a tricky dilemma. If researchers ask directly about rape, this can result in women minimizing their rape experiences as "not really rape." If we ask about women's worst sexual experiences, this can obscure rape and sexual assault as "not really about sex as rape is, by definition, *violence* (in the same categorical family as punching, cutting, assaulting, mugging, killing). In my recent study, I chose to ask women both about their worst sexual experiences and, later on in the interview, about rape ("Have you ever been raped?"). These two questions both revealed sexual coercion, sexual violence, and rape as slippery subjects that often disappear from view during a qualitative interview.

When asking women about their "worst sexual experiences," the presence of sexual trauma

and coercion either appeared, for some women, as the overt narrative that they instantly accessed, or, in other cases, women's experiences of rape and trauma became obscured, hidden, or minimized. When I asked about worst sexual experiences, some women, for example, immediately discussed trauma and accessed their narratives about rape, such as Emma (42/White/Heterosexual):

My worst was when my ex-husband held me down for his friends to have me. The only thing that got me through it was that I knew I was already pregnant, for one. I blocked it for many years. It's only been in the past probably six years that I've been able to talk about it.

Zari (43/African American/Heterosexual) also described a rape experience and labeled it frankly as rape:

I unfortunately had an experience with being raped and not really knowing it. It was a really close friend of mine, so he took advantage of me when I was really drunk and not in my right mind. And he happened to tell me about it the next day and it just repulsed me. It makes me want to throw up even thinking about it. It puts a huge lump in my throat.

Corinne (21/White/Bisexual) also immediately talked about a violent attempted rape and how she fought back from it with full force:

I go to his house and he opens the door and the first thing that happens when I walk in the door is he clocks me in the head with his motorcycle helmet, and I was on the ground and he dragged me into his bedroom. He threw me down on the bed and told me he was going to rape me if I didn't just give it to him, and I was like, 'Well, I'm not giving it to you. I'm gonna kick your ass.' He was trying and I picked up the lamp that was on the nightstand and just whacked him over the head with it.

All three of these examples show women labeling rape during the "worst sexual experiences" question and constructing themselves not as deserving of blame but as dealing with violent and presumptive men. It also shows that each of these women defined rape as a kind of sex.

For some women, however, the question of their "worst sexual experiences" elicited stories where they minimized rape, blamed themselves, or otherwise justified the coercion and sexual violence they had endured. For example, Rachel (39/White/Bisexual) described an experience she did not label as rape:

I had one bad experience due to lack of experience, lack of communication, and a lot of misunderstand-

ings. My ex-husband's friend came over to our place and I was in the shower and he came in. I said, 'Just a minute!' and I jumped out of the shower. I had a towel and a robe on and he took that as an invitation. I do not want to say I feel like I was raped. I want to say more that I would have said no but I didn't say anything. I was in such shock that he pushed me onto the couch and the next thing I knew we were having sex. So I do not know, there are a lot of definitions of rape but for me it was just that I was stunned. It was happening with someone I never said yes to. And I'm very sexually adventurous and he sees me get out of the shower and he said, 'Could not stop myself.'

The tendency to minimize these events or see them as "not rape" appeared frequently in women's stories of coercion and worst sex, suggesting that if researchers only ask women the question of "Have you ever been raped?" they will *miss events women label as "not really rape."* Lila (36/White/Heterosexual) described an experience at a frat party where she felt coerced but did not label it as rape or sexual violence:

I was at a frat party and this guy and me were dancing and then he wanted to go outside and talk. He started putting his hands down my pants and I was trying to stop him but he kept going. I guess I wasn't raped because my friends happened to walk by just at the right time. I felt violated and cheap, like I was teasing him in a way. I felt like some of it had to do with me, just with my body language.

This self-blame appeared frequently when women talked about negative sexual experiences or rape events, suggesting that when researchers ask questions about "rape" and "sexual violence," some women may omit these stories because they feel culpable for what happened to them. Instead, asking about "worst sexual experiences"—thus evoking the general concept of displeasure—can sometimes open up stories that may otherwise disappear from view.

Sometimes, however, "worst sexual experiences" questions can hide or erase rape altogether, in part because women who have been raped do not consider rape to be a sexual experience at all. For example, Veronica (49/African American/Heterosexual) talked about an experience where she felt used during her worst sexual experience narrative (notably omitting a discussion of a rape event that occurred elsewhere in her sexual history):

My worst experience was probably when I slept with a co-worker of mine on a business trip to Atlanta. He made me feel used. He just came to my room in a horny mood talking about how he missed his wife and all, and I gave in but later felt disgusted with myself.

Only later in the interview when I asked her directly, "Have you ever been raped?" did she describe a rape event from her childhood. She explained this omission by saying, "I don't really think of rape as about sex because I was too young to have sex then. That's why I want rapists to go to jail!" This again reveals the sorts of difficulty researchers have when studying sexual violence. If we ask too directly about rape, we risk our participants minimizing their experiences; if we ask in more vague and open-ended ways about their sexual histories/practices more broadly, we risk that some women do not label rape as a *sexual* experience per se. Further, qualitative sex researchers may uncover a variety of actions, events, and feelings that would count as "pseudo-rape" or partially non-consenting or "maybe rape" events, opening up more complexity than our current categories for sexual violence allow for.

General Conclusions

This study highlights the many methodological complexities of studying women's sexuality, particularly as researchers try to access information about slippery and elusive subjects that evade shared meaning making. How sex researchers word questions, and the use of open-ended formats for asking questions, have great importance to how participants respond and conceptualize their experiences. In the case of "first sex," women's narratives showcase how some women fold early traumas into their descriptions of virginity loss (e.g., molestation, rape, and incest), while others emphasize the strictest definition of penile-vaginal intercourse. Many women highlighted nonpenetrative and non-orgasm-directed early sexual exploration and experimentation, whereas others questioned what "counted" as first sex or losing virginity (e.g., anal sex as "not really sex"). This suggests that when researchers ask questions about "losing virginity" or the "the first time you had sex" or "first sex," they elicit a variety of different types of stories, often so divergent from each other that it becomes difficult to locate meaningful commonalities or analyze these stories. Lumping together a story of kissing a girl at a sleepover with early incest and sexual violence with consensual teenage sex with a boyfriend is so wide-ranging that it questions the utility of terms like "virginity" and "first sex." It also

suggests that, despite our culture's strong emphasis on virginity loss as the definitional experience of women's early sexual lives, women themselves *resist* this characterization by instead emphasizing other sorts of sexual experiences that felt impactful or meaningful to them. Perhaps, for example, women care less about penetrative intercourse than sex researchers have typically believed in the past. Researchers must ask questions that elicit these multiple stories of early sexual exploration in order to understand formative sexual experiences and the sexual lives of girls.

Similarly, asking questions about oral sex seemed to elicit stories about *giving* oral sex and performing oral sex as a kind of emotional and sexual labor. This suggests that researchers who want to understand women's experiences *receiving* oral sex must directly ask about oral sex using the language of *giving* and *receiving* (ideally, asking about both). Otherwise, women may be likely to interpret questions about oral sex as about their role as the "giver" or the "laborer" rather than the receiver of oral sex. This also suggests that there can be significant gaps between what sex researchers *mean* or *intend* and what the participants hear or interpret. In this case, I had naively imagined it would be obvious that I mean *receiving* oral sex but participants overwhelmingly heard this question as about *giving* oral sex. These moments of methodological slipperiness showcase the assumptions and social scripts researchers have when thinking about what we know (and want to know) about women's sexuality. It also reveals the potential strength of qualitative research methods as researchers can assess how their initial assumptions were off-base and adjust their questions accordingly for future studies. Learning what researchers may have missed, obscured, overlooked, hidden, or driven underground is a key part of critical feminist qualitative sex research (Acker, 2000; McClelland, 2014).

Sex researchers also grapple with the hidden or obscured spaces of women's sexuality, particularly around the interplay between "things that happened to me" and "how I understand or make meaning around those things." Sexual violence is a perfect example of how women can at times hide or obscure certain experiences that make it hard to study or accurately measure women's sexual lives. For example, some

women do not believe that rape or sexual violence is a *sexual* experience at all (as Veronica stated); they only mentioned these experiences when I asked directly about rape and sexual violence. More likely, however, is the tendency for women to minimize or justify or blame themselves for the coercive and sexually violent experiences they had endured, making it difficult to simply ask them about rape. This belief system commonly underlies women's conceptualizations of their sexuality and "deservingness" in general (e.g., rape myths). If the researcher simply says, "Have you ever been raped?" many women will respond flatly with "No." Asking instead about women's "worst sexual experiences" has, in my many years of doing this work, resulted in complex, nuanced, vivid, and detailed narratives of how women imagine violent, coercive, unpleasurable, disappointing, or shameful sex that they have had (Fahs, 2011). Getting access to these experiences, particularly in women's own words via qualitative work, is essential to understanding and making sense of women's sexual lives. It also showcases why rape statistics continue to be elusive, difficult to quantify, and nearly impossible to believe (e.g., underreporting continues to be the norm).

This study also showcases the value of recognizing our own slippages as researchers, that is, the spaces where researchers may aim to study one thing and end of navigating something entirely different, or the spaces where interdisciplinarity is showcased and foregrounded in interesting ways. For example, this study arose not as an intentional study of methodological complexities, but as the byproduct of the "slippages" seen in some of the questions I asked to women during a study of sexuality and the body. In this sense, such slippages point not just to a lack of clarification or difficulty communicating about sexuality, but about the importance of investigating and being curious about the moments where listening/talking/hearing break down. It is crucial that researchers recognize the ways they may work simultaneously within and between disciplines, methods, and modes of analysis; in this case, delving into certain methodological choices helped to illuminate not only issues of measurement, but issues of meaning-making, politics, and gendered ideas about sexuality and relationships.

Ultimately, qualitative feminist work on women's sexuality has the potential to open up new conversations about the hidden spaces or missing discourses of women's sexual lives, just as it can and should push researchers to reimagine how they ask about, listen, hear, tell stories about, make sense of, code, analyze, and publish about these complex topics. We as researchers need to not only hear what women say (and make sense of it), but also we must hear what they *do not* say, or what they minimize. We should be curious about how the questions we ask twist and flip and flop and circulate differently than we intended, and, ideally, we should see this as a productive site of shared meaning making and knowledge production within qualitative research. On the margins of these conversations lies an immense wealth of data that we have only just begun to take seriously and truly understand and appreciate. Part of our work must emphasize the power of writing and rewriting scripts, both in the culture at large and in the intimate exchanges between researchers and participants.

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