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On 'good sex' and other dangerous ideas: women narrate their joyous and happy sexual encounters

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ABSTRACT

Existing studies of women's sexual happiness and pleasure most often centre on sexual satisfaction, orgasm, and sexual dysfunction, largely failing to allow women to narrate their own experiences. With the recent release of the first drug to 'treat' women's waning libidos a qualitative examination of women's notion of 'good sex' is more pressing and urgent than ever. We need to extend feminist critiques of power, control, patriarchy and agency to the study of women's sexuality and sexual happiness. Using semi-structured interviews with 20 women from a 2014 community sample collected in a large southwestern US city, we analyse women's descriptions of and definitions of 'good sex' (as defined by respondents), as well as their experiences of sexual encounters that felt joyous and happy. Analysis revealed four themes in women's descriptions of good, happy and joyous sex: (1) Physical pleasure, wanting and orgasm; (2) Emotional connection and relationship satisfaction; (3) Comfort and naturalness; (4) Control over sexual scripts. Ultimately, our findings suggest that women prioritized relational components of sexuality – particularly reciprocity, bonding, focus, attentiveness and flexibility of sexual scripts – over the more physical, orgasm-based, 'release' aspects of sexual encounters. We discuss the implications of the gendered study of happiness as framed within patriarchal and male-dominant definitions and in the clinical treatment of sexual dysfunction.

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The study of happiness as a gendered phenomenon, produced within gender regimes, draws from women's experiences of the body and sexuality in order to better understand concepts of power, control and agency. What makes women happy sexually – an oft-asked question even in Freudian times – connects to bigger stories about women's entitlement to, and relationship with, happiness as an emotional state of mind. Feminist theorists have long argued that women's social roles often shape and limit the opportunities and possibilities women envision for themselves, including views about their bodies (Bordo, 2004), gender identity (Butler, 1990), the sharing of domestic labour (England, 2010), educational opportunities (Luke & Gore, 2014), emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012), expressions of femininity (Bartky, 1997), discourses of love (Jaggar, 1989), and of course avenues to sexual pleasure (Fahs, 2011; McClelland, 2014).

In 1983, Carole Vance posited that women's sexuality was characterized by an interweaving of pleasure and danger, that is, the sense that danger shadowed pleasure and pleasure shadowed danger. This theoretical fusion of pleasure and danger, however impactful within women and gender studies,

sexuality studies and queer studies, did not translate into overt empirical evaluation of women's sexual pleasure. Consequently, existing studies of women's sexual happiness most often centre on studies of sexual satisfaction, orgasm and sexual dysfunction, all of which largely fail to allow women to narrate their own experiences (for critiques, see McClelland, 2010, 2014). With the recent release of the first drug to 'treat' women's waning libido (Flibanserin) – with sexual satisfaction and normality largely defined by pharmaceutical companies (Puppo & Puppo, 2015; Stastna, 2015) – a qualitative examination of women's notion of 'good sex' remains all the more pressing and urgent. In the existing literatures on women's sexual happiness and joy, little work has truly explored what women find pleasurable outside of pleasure's overtly clinical relationship to orgasm and sexual dysfunction (Meston & Trapnell, 2005). In particular, sexual happiness is often thought to be related to the *amount* of sex people have, or to the frequency of orgasm, or to individuals' subjective perceptions of sexual function for critiques (Fahs & Swank, 2011; McClelland, 2010). These externalized, measurable 'outcomes' of sex – how often, with whom, presence/absence of orgasm, self-reported sense of sexual satisfaction on a Likert scale – have squashed more nuanced and qualitative studies of what women enjoy sexually and what they find happy, joyous, and good in their (partnered) sex lives.

While some research has examined sexual satisfaction and the perception of emotional closeness (Rosen & Bachmann, 2008), no previous work has simply asked women to define 'good sex' or to describe specific incidents they would describe as happiness-inducing, pleasurable and good. In this study, we focused other sorts of sexual happiness, in an effort to move away from highly clinical interpretations focused on sexual functioning. We address this gap in the literature and emphasize the importance of qualitative interviews for assessing and exploring sexual pleasure and happiness. Here, we analyse qualitative narratives from semi-structured interviews with 20 US women from diverse backgrounds (race, age, current relationship status, parental status, class backgrounds and sexual identities) in order to examine women's constructions of 'good sex' in relation to sex they define as joyous and happy. These discussions illuminated four themes that appeared in women's responses while showcasing the powerful complexities of meaning-making around 'good sex.'

Sexual satisfaction as a sticky wicket

Understanding what sexual satisfaction means for different people has forced Western researchers to contend with a variety of different understandings of what constitutes 'good sex.' Sexual satisfaction is a diverse catchall for many aspects of sexuality, particularly across social identity lines, and the methods to study 'good sex' have often relied upon traditional research designs, Likert scales and single-item questions about how satisfied women are (Meston & Trapnell, 2005), often ignoring the possible biases or perspectives that could influence how researchers understand sexual satisfaction. For example, McClelland (2010, 2014) found that women often factor in their *partner's* satisfaction when imagining sexual satisfaction, caring more about whether they have satisfied another person than whether they have themselves felt physically satisfied. Nicolson & Burr's small study of English women (2003) also found that partner satisfaction mattered more than personal satisfaction when women described their sexual satisfaction. This signals a shift from the individual evaluating her satisfaction based on whether she 'felt good' and instead prioritizing a partner's pleasure.

Further, research on who 'expects' to be sexually satisfied also complicates what researchers know about sexual satisfaction, as those who feel entitled to pleasure often report more satisfaction (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003). US sexual minority youth in one study expected less sexually satisfying relationships than did heterosexual youth (Diamond & Lucas, 2004). Also, in part because women in general are expected to feel more passive and submissive than men, *all the women* in one US study had lower rates of sexual arousal, autonomy and enjoyment than men (Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006). What does it mean, then, if women's social roles prescribe them to be or feel less satisfied than men? Does this mean that they underreport their satisfaction, that they actually feel less satisfied, or that social and cultural barriers to satisfaction prevent them from truly considering what satisfaction means in the same way as men?

Recent research has framed sexual satisfaction as a combination of physical satisfaction, emotional satisfaction, frequency of orgasm and emotions about sex (Fahs & Swank, 2011). This way of looking at 'good sex' imagines both the emotional dimensions of satisfaction and also the physical dimensions of orgasm and pleasure. These varying ways of thinking about sexual satisfaction complicate both what we know about women's sexual lives and how we understand whether (or how much) women feel sexually satisfied.

The (de)centrality of orgasm

While orgasm was, for a time, the gold standard of 'good' sex, recent research has called into question some of the more contradictory and troubling dimensions of associating orgasms with good sex. For example, a large body of North American research has shown that women often have sex when they do not want to (Katz & Tirone, 2009; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010), in order to please a partner and meet a partner's demands or implied needs (Cacchioni, 2015). As a related phenomenon, women fake orgasms at high rates (Fahs, 2014; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010), revealing the limitations of the rhetoric of 'sexual empowerment' of orgasms. Many women reported having boring or unpleasurable sex, particularly younger women, women of colour, less educated women and women from lower socioeconomic statuses, suggesting that certain women have less access to 'good sex' than do other women (Braun et al., 2003; Fahs & Swank, 2011). Good, fun, pleasurable sex is a resource that may be another form of cultural capital, not equally distributed or available to all. Further, researchers found that women associated orgasm with a wide variety of meanings, including orgasm as the purpose and end of sex, orgasm as a feature of their partner's pleasure, as the ultimate sign of their own pleasure, as a simple physiological response, and as something to fake (Opperman, Braun, Clarke, & Rogers, 2014). This suggests multiple ways of interpreting and making meaning of orgasm and its role in 'good sex'.

The quest for orgasm as a symbolic product of 'good sex' reveals links between capitalism and sex, where orgasm becomes a measurable, observable 'product' that women should strive to have (Jackson & Scott, 2007) and suggests that women fake orgasms in part because this 'product' is always expected from sex (Fahs, 2014). Notably, heterosexual women faked orgasms three times more than heterosexual men (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010), often to please their partners, end the encounter, feel sexually normal, avoid negative or judgemental reactions from their partners and reinforce a male partner's sexual skills (Fahs, 2011; Frith, 2013). Heterosexual women in a US study described faking orgasm also to 'make their male partner happy' and to give him an 'ego boost' (Cooper, Fenigstein, & Fauber, 2014), while heterosexual men faked orgasm for their own benefit, such as wanting to sleep or feeling too drunk to get an erection (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010), suggesting that inequities extend deeply into women's ideas about 'good sex' they *should* be having, and the sex they *actually* have. These gender and power imbalances with orgasm suggest that women often cannot authentically 'have' orgasms; thus, measuring sexual satisfaction or good sex based on orgasm presents serious methodological and conceptual challenges to researchers.

External vs. internal definitions of 'good sex'

When looking at the way mainstream media depicts 'good sex,' a significantly different picture emerges when compared to actually *asking* women about good sex. While the media often depicts good sex to be 'of great importance,' necessary for personal happiness, somewhat rough, almost exclusively heterosexual, involving quick intercourse, largely about sexual objectification of women, and ending with men's orgasms (Brown, 2002; Krafka, Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1997; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; Wampold & Luebbert, 2014), qualitative studies of 'good sex' often paint a different picture. Poor body image, for example, can lead to impaired sexual satisfaction and function (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007), just as religious beliefs about 'forbidden' sexual acts and 'bad' desires can impact women's sexual satisfaction (Hunt & Jung, 2009). One recent study found that sexual satisfaction was connected to both individual experiences of sex (e.g. pleasure, arousal, sexual openness, and orgasm) and to relational dimensions

of sex (e.g. mutuality, romance, expression of feelings, creativity, acting out desires and frequency of sexual activity; Pascoal, Narciso, & Pereira, 2014). Lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women also reported having sex to express love and commitment and to feel pleasure (Wood, Milhausen, & Jeffrey, 2014). In a Swedish study, equality and mutuality mattered far more than other aspects of sexuality when determining women's sexual satisfaction (Elmerstig, Wijma, Sandell, & Berterö, 2012).

Further, women's experiences with sexuality can evoke multiple, often contradictory emotional responses, suggesting that 'good sex' may have complicated emotional resonances for women. Women described feeling happy, excited, fearful and indifferent to sex, with mixed reactions to sexual encounters as a common phenomenon (Vasilenko, Maas, & Lefkowitz, 2014). US men reported more pleasure and anxiety than did women for their first sexual encounters, while US women reported more guilt than men about having sex (Sprecher, Barbee, & Schwartz, 1995). Young US women also reported that they should not have sex unless they felt love for that person (Mehta, Sunner, Head, Crosby, & Shrier, 2011), while older women described feeling anxious about their waning sexual desire, stating that they *wanted to want sex* ('desiring desire'; Hayfield & Clarke, 2012). These complex emotions that women feel regarding 'good sex' (or sex they *want* to have or *should* have) reveal the ways in which external ideas about sex (e.g. media, social and sexual scripts) and internal ideas about sex (contradictory emotions, desire for connection) can differ greatly.

Research questions

Given the relative lack of studies examining women's narratives about good sex and sex they consider to be good, joyous and happy, this study drew from several research questions to guide analysis: First, what do women say about good sex and how does this nuance discussions of sexual satisfaction? How does orgasm (or lack thereof) fit into women's discussions of good, joyous and happy sex? How might women's overall narratives about good sex differ from specific incidences of happy or joyous sex, and what do women say about this? Finally, how do women's ideas about good sex connect to bigger stories around gender, power, patriarchy, agency and sexual scripts?

Methods

This study utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women (mean age = 35.35, SD = 12.01) recruited in 2014 in a large metropolitan southwestern US city. Participants were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings distributed free to the community as well as the volunteers section of the local online section of Craigslist. The advertisements asked for women aged 18–59 to participate in an interview study about their sexual behaviours, practices and attitudes. Participants were selected only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity and age; no other pre-screening questions were asked. A purposive sample was selected to provide greater demographic diversity in the sample: sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were intentionally oversampled and a diverse range of ages was represented (35% or 7 ages 18–31; 40% or 8 ages 32–45; and 25% or 5 ages 46–59). The sample included 60% (12) white women and 40% (8) women of colour, including two African–American women, four Mexican–American women, and two Asian–American women. For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 60% (12) heterosexual women, 20% (4) bisexual women, and 20% (4) 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 reported a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, employment histories, and parental and relationship statuses. For the purposes of this study, women were asked two questions: 'What do you consider to be good sex?' and 'Can you first tell me about a time when you felt joyous or happy in a sexual encounter?' These questions were scripted, but lead to other conversations and dialogue about related topics, as follow-up questions were free-flowing and conversational. Responses were analysed using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic

analysis that draws from feminist theory and gender theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis allowed for groupings of responses based on women's attitudes and feelings (e.g. the importance of relationship satisfaction; feeling relaxed and comfortable).

Results

All participants were able to describe 'good sex' during the interviews, and all could relate a sexual experience that felt happy or joyous. This study identified four themes associated with women's attitudes about good sex and their characterizations of sex that felt happy and joyous: (1) Physical pleasure, wanting and orgasm; (2) Emotional connection and relationship satisfaction; (3) Comfort and naturalness; (4) Control over sexual scripts. As is evident in their descriptions, some participants' responses straddled multiple themes.

Theme 1: physical pleasure, wanting and orgasm

Seven women mentioned the physically pleasurable aspects of sex as the defining feature of good sex, often emphasizing orgasm(s), different sexual positions that felt good, or some technical aspects of sex. For example, Iris (22/Mexican–American/Lesbian) defined good sex simply as 'being really aroused and reaching a big orgasm.' Rachel (39/White/Bisexual) defined good sex as a fun and physical experience: 'Good sex is when you're sweaty, exhausted, multiple orgasms on all parties involved, and you want to eat something but you're too exhausted to get out of bed to go to the kitchen. That's good sex.' Similarly, Sofia (42/Mexican–American/Heterosexual) defined good sex as being aroused and having lots of foreplay: 'When there's like a lot of, you know, messing around before having actual intercourse, that's what I think is best. When you do foreplay it makes it more satisfying and I enjoy it when I'm finally done.' This characterization of good sex as playful, exhausting, fun, and full of foreplay frames good sex as primarily about physical satisfaction rather than emotional feelings *per se*. While emotions may contribute to women's ability to feel physical arousal, they did not frame emotions as the source of sexual happiness.

Three women described good sex in highly technical terms, describing very specific criteria by which they defined good sex. Bea (37/Filipina/Heterosexual) described good sex as related to trying different positions and having long-lasting sex: 'I like it to last, and for him to not be—what's that saying?—a "one minute man." I like when there's movement and you're trying different positions too.' Yvonne (41/Mexican–American/Heterosexual) defined good sex in simple terms: 'Clean hygiene. That's a must! You can't enjoy it if it's not clean.' Daphne (33/White/Heterosexual) identified good sex as a series of highly specific events that led to a good sexual experience for her:

I think good sex is sex that starts before you're actually having sex, where there's just kind of that unspoken sexual energy that you play with through touch or conversation. I do like talking during sex. I do like some kind of dialogue, whether it be like 'How is that? Do you like this, you know what I mean? I think good sex happens with the lights on. Having the lights on and just seeing the person means I can actually look at you. I find that the actual best part of sex and getting off is when I'm on top. I like being in that position. Other positions it's okay and it's fine and it's dandy but there's a level of letting go that I really don't get to otherwise.

These respondents defined good sex more in physical, technical terms rather than internal and emotional terms, suggesting that conformity to standard women's sexual scripts for 'good sex' contributes most to these women's feelings of sexual happiness.

Three women also described good sex as defined by their feelings of *wanting* sex, feeling aroused, and being in the mood. Sofia (42/Mexican–American/Heterosexual) described happy and joyous sex as related to her level of desire: 'The only way I can say I felt really joyous and happy is when I'm really in the mood, like when we just "mmmm," let go, and when I feel really horny.' Lila (36/White/Heterosexual) described joyous and happy sex as the absence of boredom and the presence of wanting:

I just want to be in it and continue wanting it, like wanting to prolong it and want and want and want, to keep going and not hurry up. I don't want to feel bored, to fake it. I want to keep going and to come and to control it and to play and to just slow everything down and want it.

This connection between good sex and physical desire showcased the wanting itself – the desire – rather than orgasm *per se*. Respondents bypassed a direct admission that emotions mattered, suggesting instead that physical desire and 'horniness' drove their sexual joy.

Theme 2: emotional connection and relationship satisfaction

In contrast to the highly physical descriptions of good sex described above, more women (ten in total, or half the sample) defined good sex and joyous or happy sexual experiences as involving emotional connection with a partner. For example, Emma (42/White/Heterosexual) described good sex as the opposite of a quick and casual encounter:

It's loving, intimate, not quick. It's an all-night affair. It works because of the connection. Everyone can handle a one night, wham-bam thing and that's fine, but good sex is a connection between the two of you when it goes on and on and you're both enjoying it and you want it to continue and you don't want to stop.

Naomi (18/White/Bisexual) also described happy and joyous sex in terms of wanting the other person to feel good:

There *has to be* a connection. It's when you're both wanting to make each other feel good. The happiest I've been is when it's not just like fucking but actual, real emotions ... like you both care. I think that's what makes me really happy.

Similarly, Bea (37/Filipina/Heterosexual) remembered her happiest sex as a time when she could see her partner's joy:

Once in the hot tub I felt like sex brought us closer together, so that made me happy because I felt like we connected even more than we had before. My boyfriend just had this smile on his face that is so contagious and I knew if I could just see that smile on his face, that [made] me pretty happy too.

These narratives prioritise the emotional experience of sex, either through women's own feelings or through their sense of pleasing others, ultimately leading to sexual joy. Caring, intimacy, positive feedback and emotional intensity all contributed to women's feelings of sexual happiness.

Two women described good sex as having nothing to do with anything physical and much more to do with the reciprocity of emotions. For example, Gretchen (52/White/Heterosexual) defined good sex as dialogue:

When partners are responsive to the other person. I guess it's kind of like a good conversation. There are times when you have conversations and one person really needs to talk and you do most of the listening, and there are other times where it's much more of a dialogue. As long as it balances out, then I'd say that would be good sex.

Felicity (20/White/Heterosexual) believed that good sex centres on the feelings afterwards: 'Good sex is where everyone walks away from the interaction feeling understood and loved and hopefully having gotten off. I mean, you can have good sex without getting off but that's always a little plus.' In these examples, good sex relates mostly to a feeling women have (being heard or listened to, feeling understood) rather than to a specific physical gratification.

Related to emotional connection, six women described good sex in relation to the start, finish or renewal of specific relationships. Gail (46/White/Bisexual) described her first sexual experience as one of her happiest:

I was new to sex and unsure. I felt joyful because I felt sure that my future husband was taking care of me and was looking after me, so the whole package kind of still rolled up as a good experience, a joyful experience. It took our relationship to a deeper level. At that time in my life, I wasn't experiencing the orgasms that I experience today, so I can't say that it was the pleasure of an orgasm that made it joyful. It was more or less the relationship that made it joyful.

Similarly, Antonia (25/Mexican–American/Lesbian) described her first sexual experience as filled with joy and happiness:

I was happy. I would say I loved my girlfriend at the time so it just made me feel happy to be with her and be able to share in that moment with her. It was a different experience. It was new.

These examples of newness and firsts relate more to emotional experiences rather than merely to physical sensations of new sexual activities. In general, these statements emphasize the importance of the relational dimensions of sexual happiness, and the ways in which some women thrive sexually when they get their emotional needs met.

In a related way, women also described sexual happiness and joy when they talked about having 'break-up sex,' reuniting with a lover, or finding love later in life. Corinne (21/White/Bisexual) described good sex as emotional, even if the emotions included pain and sadness:

Emotional sex is always good sex even if the emotions are bad! Like breakup sex, for example. When I've had some serious partners and we break up and I know it's going to be the last time, even though I'm sad, it's still good because there's a very strong emotional connection there and I'm definitely feeling something and it's my mind and my heart and my body that just syncs into one.

Zari (43/African–American/Heterosexual) described good sex in relation to a lover who returned from war after a prolonged absence:

When my son's father went away to enlist in the service, he was gone for like three months, and when he came back I was so happy to see him. We were having sex like rabbits, every five seconds, like I walk into the room and there he is. That was a fun experience. I felt like he really missed me and I really missed him too. My family was back together.

Yvonne (41/Mexican–American/Heterosexual) also felt emotional connection when she found love as an adult:

I hadn't been with anybody for a very long time 'cause I'm a single mom. I devoted my time to my son and didn't go dating, so when I met somebody after like seven or eight years and started to fall in love, we finally had sex and that to me was joyous. It felt so good. I had waited a long, long time.

Each of these examples reveals that the emotional elements of 'happy' sex have foundations that extend well beyond physical sensation of orgasm or stimulation.

Theme 3: comfort and naturalness

Seven women highlighted feelings of comfort, particularly feeling 'natural' with a partner and feeling focused and relaxed, as key components to good sex and sexual joy. Gail (46/White/Bisexual) identified comfort as most important to good sex: 'Good sex is something that is desired by both partners, something that takes into account each other's feelings. It's not just the sexual feelings but your overall comfort, your overall care and concern for me now.' Daphne (33/White/Heterosexual) also felt that comfort and ease with a partner mattered most:

With my husband and ex-boyfriend, we were together for a long time so I got more comfortable with them. Feeling joyous and happy was just a mood with them, like waking up and laying around in the bed, being in really good moods, feeling comfortable.

Kathleen (49/White/Heterosexual) described comfort and intuition as crucial to her sexual joy and happiness:

Skin-to-skin contact with a person. It was such a loving, delicate, thoughtful experience we had. It was completely naked, loving. There was no penetration. It was just very intimate and loving and I felt very respected and cared for. I felt comfortable. It was amazing.

This emphasis on feeling natural, calm, relaxed and comfortable suggests that the power imbalances and patriarchal dynamics of 'bodice-ripping sex' do not always appear in women's sexual happiness stories.

Feeling natural with a partner, as well as feeling focused and attentive, is part of women's descriptions of good, happy and joyous sex. For example, Antonia (25/Mexican–American/Lesbian) described both feeling natural and feeling focused as crucial to good sex:

Good sex is where the individuals are focused, not so much that they're *trying* to be focused, just that it comes naturally and you're in the zone. You kind of lose yourself in this world of just being in the moment and having sex, then and there, not thinking about anything else in the world.

Martha (52/White/Heterosexual) also felt that good sex meant that it felt natural: 'You're just enjoying your evening and you go to bed and you kiss and it goes on from there. It's just like, *natural*. My husband knows what he's doing.' These descriptions of flow, naturalness and focus suggest that a sense of comfort may take precedence (at times) over orgasms or feelings of more overtly physical release.

Theme 4: control over sexual scripts

As a final theme, six women described good and happy sex as related to their feelings of control over the sexual scripts of their experiences. Sometimes this control manifested more literally, such as when Joyce (21/Filipina/Bisexual) described good sex as *not* feeling pressured to engage in sex:

I consider good sex to be where both people in a good mindset and you can't have good sex if one person pressured the other person into it, because even if it's good physically the person is going to really think about it afterwards and have regrets.

Control also appeared when women felt positively about a sexual event that they could narrate in any way they wanted to. Joyce described her first kiss with a woman and telling her friends about it:

You can tell a story afterwards and it's even more romantic. I could tell my friends afterward, 'Oh I did this thing and she did this and then she kissed me' and if it had just been a moment like, 'Oh yeah, we kissed for the first time,' then it's not really a story. The most joyous part is when I can tell a story about it.

Control over sexual scripts also suggests that women bring socialized expectations to sexual encounters about their own power and agency; when those expectations are met, women reported feeling sexually happy.

In a related way, good sex also means that women can define seemingly 'taboo' or 'forbidden' sexual acts – sex with a stranger, getting a woman to perform oral sex – as positive for them. Trish (19/White/Lesbian) remembered her satisfaction at getting a woman she liked to go down on her:

She had a thing where she refused to go down on a woman until they were together. I was extremely frustrated because I had done this to her and she was not gonna return the favor. Finally, I got her to do it! I felt so accomplished!

Kathleen (49/White/Heterosexual) enjoyed feeling in control of two different satisfying experiences:

Good sex depends on what frame of mind I'm in at the time. I had a fabulous sexual experience one time with a person who was a stranger. Sometimes the intimate emotional connection with a partner is what makes it good. Sometimes it just needs to be, if it gets right down to it, orgasms that make you rock your world with a stranger.

As a final example, Corinne (21/White/Bisexual) described going home with a guy she met at a bar and having wild sex she enjoyed:

I was 19 and I used to get into bars because my uncle worked there. There was a really cute, funny guy who was there all the time and he sang karaoke. One day I had a bad day, drank quite a bit, and we had a cigarette together and I thought, 'I'm gonna sleep with him tonight!' I ended up taking him home and we just went kind of wild. It was a lot of fun. He was hysterical. He was cracking jokes and making fun of my curtains and we were just having sex and laughing. He would tickle me so it was light and funny. I wasn't worried about, 'Do my thighs jiggle?' I was just laughing and happy and smiling and blushing and just all that kind of stuff.

These three narratives show how good sex also relates to women's ability to choose and define sexual scripts for themselves, to refuse traditional scripts of sexual repression or slut shaming, and to feel gratified on their own terms.

Discussion and conclusion

This study is framed within larger discussions of happiness and pleasure – and their attendant opposites of unhappiness and displeasure – to take up the broader question of how happiness is produced, regulated and controlled within gender regimes. The gendering of happiness – an emotional state – and specifically *sexual* happiness – both an emotional state and, at times, a physical reaction, reveal much about power, agency and control. In the broadest sense, this article suggests that sexual happiness is far more than simply a state of mind or a personal emotional outcome, but rather, a state that is

produced (and at times demanded) within highly patriarchal structures that engender clear power imbalances and different entitlements between men and women. To feel sexually happy, then, is to engage with sexual scripts that often prioritise women's attention to others over themselves, and that often replicate norms in the broader culture around the necessity of women caring for others and nurturing emotional connections.

This study makes a unique contribution to the existing literature by examining women's feelings about good sex and sex that feels happy or joyous to them. Unlike most of the previous literatures that have examined good sex as synonymous with sexual satisfaction or sexual 'function' (read: orgasm), this study more frankly asked women to narrate their own ideas about good, joyous and happy sex, ultimately leading some complicated, sometimes unexpected results. Most notably, we had anticipated that more women would talk about orgasm as a defining feature of good sex, particularly given that the media presents the almighty orgasm as having paramount importance in defining good sex. Although orgasm appeared in their narratives, it played far less of a role than women's emotional connections with others, their general comfort, and their control over sexual scripts. In fact, the physical aspects of good sex appeared in a relatively minor role compared to these other facets of good sex, suggesting that the (highly clinical) emphasis on women's sexual 'achievement' or goal-directed outcomes of orgasm and arousal is frankly misguided, and that larger narratives around women's social roles bled into their feelings about good sex.

Most succinctly, good sex for women seems related directly to their ability to resist expectations dictated by traditional gender roles and pornographed sexual scripts. For example, women felt sexually happy and joyous when they had reciprocity, equality and connection, *not* when they felt passive, dominated or 'done to.' Similarly, women experienced good sex when they connected to a partner emotionally or felt comfortable and natural, *not* when they enacted wild fantasies, tried 'spicing it up,' or attempted sexual acrobatics. Women described good sex as sex where scripts felt flexible (e.g. Kathleen's description of having sex in the context of a loving partner or with a random stranger) and self-determined, *not* when they submitted or agreed to other-directed sex. In short, sexual happiness in many ways resisted traditionalism, conservatism, and some of the more overt aspects of patriarchy; rather, good sex seems fairly ... feminist.

Our findings also suggest far more complicated ways to think about concepts like 'emotional connection.' While that can mean the emotional connection between happy and satisfied sexual partners, it can also refer to more complicated connections such as those during first sex, reunion sex, break-up sex or personal reawakening. Emotional connection does not reference only feelings like *love* (another word that rarely appeared during good sex narratives), but also feelings like comfort, focus, security, recognition, dialogue, communication, seeing, hearing and touching. In this sense, orgasm becomes a by-product of *those* aspects of emotional connection rather than the defining feature of good sex *per se*. This finding stands firmly against recent pharmaceutical trends of medicating women's sexual desire and activating women's libido via brain chemical manipulation (see Puppo & Puppo, 2015). Contemporary definitions of 'sexual function' are out of sync with how women experience sexual happiness, particularly as they describe complicated stories about the emotional conditions they require for sexual joy and happiness.

That said, some of the women characterized good sex and sexual happiness in ways that were imbued with narratives and scripts that harken back to women's traditional status as caretakers of others. Women described both their own states of mind but also a chronic attention to the feelings of their partners, their satisfaction linked to their partner's satisfaction. This aligns with studies that have shown that women often define sexual satisfaction based on their partner's satisfaction instead of their own (McClelland, 2014; Nicolson & Burr, 2003). Sexual happiness – and perhaps happiness more broadly – is about power and the relative lack of power in some cases. Desire and pleasure are hegemonically constructed around structural patriarchal frameworks that permit, sanction or focus on the pleasure of some and not others – in this case, women attending to others over themselves. What would stories of sexual happiness sound like if women vividly described powerful orgasms (of their own) rather than relational dynamics? What would a non-phallogentric and non-male-dominant

understanding of sexual pleasure look like, sound like, or feel like? These data are not ‘depressing’ necessarily – women are experiencing happy and good sex after all – but they also reflect the ways in which sexuality and affective connections like happiness and joy are framed within larger, socially constructed structures that limit, shape and mould women to direct attention towards (male) partners and towards traditionally ‘feminine’ ideals.

Some research decisions may have affected this study’s results, as the choice of wording for interview questions may have captured some, but certainly not all, facets of women’s ideas about good sex, sexual joy and happiness. Future studies could more precisely tease apart the specific differences between different emotion words like ‘fun,’ ‘empowerment,’ ‘creative,’ ‘happy,’ ‘pleasure,’ and ‘satisfied.’ Sexual satisfaction and sociology of emotions researchers could also look more closely at the differences between women feeling *satisfied* (in a ‘resolution’ or conclusion state of mind) and women feeling that they had engaged in *good sex* (a more global state of happiness that acknowledges context, bodies, feelings and process). Researchers may also want to more closely analyse women’s constructions of bad or unsatisfying sex in order to define good and satisfying sex, as this may yield more vivid narratives about the kinds of sex women want to avoid.

Researchers with global samples and populations beyond Western Europe and North America could use these findings as a starting place, employing cultural-level variables to explore these concepts in multiple populations. Finally, a larger sample size of women might also yield new themes while more quantitative research questions could identify patterns across gender, race, class and sexual identity.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the exploration of gendered happiness by imagining sexual joy and good sex as vital parts of how women connect to themselves and their social worlds. What women expect (of course, limited by what they’re told to expect or what they believe they are entitled to expect) matters if we want to understand gender and power. Similarly, what women *want*, or how they imagine good sex, sheds light on the all-too-distant points between the kind of sex they are having and the kind of sex they *want* to be having. The study of women’s sexual happiness has implications for sex education, clinical treatment of so-called ‘sexual dysfunction,’ relationship satisfaction and personal growth; clearly, the stakes are high.

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