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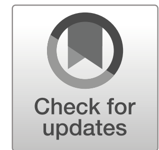

"I Just Go with It": Negotiating Sexual Desire Discrepancies for Women in Partnered Relationships

Breanne Fahs[1] · Eric Swank[2] · Ayanna Shambe[1]

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Abstract
Although some researchers have addressed differences in sexual desire between sexual partners, little attention has been paid to the subjective narratives of how women understand and reflect on discrepancies in sexual desire between themselves and their partners. In the present study we used a critical sexualities (Fahs and McClelland 2016) perspective to analyze semi-structured interviews with 20 women from a diverse community sample collected in a large Southwestern U.S. city in order to examine women's feelings about and reactions to instances where they and their partners have different levels of sexual desire. Results revealed five themes in how women negotiate sexual desire discrepancies: (a) Declining sex, (b) Having unwanted sex, (c) Experiencing pressure for sex (giving or receiving), (d) Feeling disappointed and staying silent, and (e) Discussion of sexual discrepancies. We highlight tensions about essentializing and naturalizing sexual desire, as well as how women imagine their right to ask for, or decline, sex. Implications for power, coercion, and sexual entitlement are also included along with practice implications for clinicians working with individuals and couples.

Keywords Sexual desire · Women's sexuality · Sexual negotiations · Sexual scripting · Desire · Sexual entitlement · Sexual health · Partners

The subject of wanting sex—that is, who gets to want sex, who feels entitled to sex, who experiences (or even feels allowed to experience) sexual desire—is a relatively understudied subject in critical feminist psychology (Fahs and McClelland 2016; Lamb and Peterson 2012; Morgan and Zurbriggen 2007). Although some researchers have studied the relationship between sexual entitlement and sexual satisfaction (McClelland 2010; Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2015) and others have looked at the links between sexual desire discrepancy (that is, when one partner wants more sex than the other partner) and satisfaction in quantitative studies (Bridges and Horne 2007; Mark 2012) little attention has been paid to the subjective narratives of how women negotiate discrepancies in sexual desire between themselves and their partners.

The research literature on sexual satisfaction has generally focused on who feels more (or less) satisfied (Byers 2005), methodological complexities of studying sexual satisfaction (Fahs and Swank 2011; McClelland 2011), and the demographic and personality characteristics that predict higher sexual satisfaction (Haavio-Mannila and Kontula 1997). These focuses have generally ignored the nuanced decision-making in which women engage when deciding whether to engage in sex when they feel tired, disinterested, or even repulsed by sex. Some research has looked into the gendered aspects of sexual compliance, with studies showing that women feel more obligated to comply with men's sexual demands than the reverse (Sanchez et al. 2012) and that sexual desire discrepancies are normative for women in long-term relationships (Herbenick et al. 2014). However, women's reports of having more desire than their partners, as well as how they negotiate these feelings, have been largely understudied, with only a few studies examining "hypersexuality" in women or the stigma of "excess" sexual desire for women (Fine and McClelland 2012; Leiblum and Nathan 2002).

✉ Breanne Fahs
breanne.fahs@asu.edu

[1] Women and Gender Studies Program, Arizona State University, 4701 W. Thunderbird Road, Glendale, AZ 85306, USA

[2] Social and Cultural Analysis Program, Arizona State University, Glendale, AZ, USA

In an effort to better understand the specifics of how women negotiate sexual desire discrepancies between themselves and their partners, we first reviewed the literature on wanting sex and sexual desire discrepancies, as well as literatures on women's sexual agency. In the present study, we then analyzed qualitative narratives from semi-structured interviews with 20 women from diverse backgrounds (age, race/ethnicity, current relationship status, parental status, class backgrounds, and sexual identities). Specifically, we examined subjective feelings about desire discrepancies and how women responded to their partners wanting more sex than they do or how they express wanting more sex than their partners as well as what these conversations and negotiations reveal about gender, power, agency, and sexual assertiveness.

Wanting and Desiring Sex

Sexual desire can be defined as thoughts or emotions that motivate individuals to initiate or be receptive to sexual stimulation (Spector et al. 1996). Who gets to want sex, or openly ask for sex, is a gendered process complicated by cultural expectations around women's sexual passivity (Kiefer and Sanchez 2007) and expectations that "good" wives and girlfriends say "yes" to sex (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008), along with men's entitlement to want and ask for sex (Martin et al. 2007). Despite increasingly popular attention to women's sexual agency and autonomy in recent years, researchers know far less about women's subjective accounts of more positive and desirous sexual experiences than about negative experiences with sex (Fahs 2014; Wood et al. 2006). In order to counter this trend, some feminist scholars have started to address concepts like "enthusiastic consent," which argues that mere yes/no consent insufficiently addresses the communication of consent and women's need for proactively wanting sex (Friedman and Valenti 2008).

Gender norms and cultural expectations around sexuality clearly influence women's understanding of their own desire. Even *having* desire is often treated as suspicious for women and girls, which can lead to the curbing of expression of sexual desire that begin in adolescence (Tolman 2009). Other researchers have also addressed a more nuanced account of wanting and not wanting, moving it away from a dichotomous understanding of sexual consent and instead framing wanting as a continuum influenced by social and relational factors (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007).

Notably, the vast majority of studies on negotiating sex feature the sexual lives of heterosexual U.S. college students in relatively short-term relationships (Davies et al. 1999; King and Allgeier 2000; Mark 2012; O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998; Sanchez et al. 2012; Wigderson and Katz 2015), rendering other demographics of women largely invisible (e.g., women beyond 30 years-old, married women, less educated women, women in longer-term relationships, lesbian women). This sampling bias also limits samples of women to certain developmental ages and ignores women across the lifespan (to counter this limitation, see Vares et al. 2007). Similarly, the overuse of college student samples (a full 67% of research participants in major psychology journals utilize undergraduate psychology majors; Giridharadas 2010) has created a selection bias that has flattened out class diversity (Goldrick-Rab 2016), has generally overlooked sexual minorities, and has emphasized the experiences only of upwardly mobile Students of Color (Byun et al. 2017) rather than a fuller range of race and class intersections. This overuse of U.S. college student samples in sex research continues despite numerous studies showing that college students are non-representative of the broader population; a recent review found that "generalizing from students to the general public can be problematic when personal and attitudinal variables are used" (Hanel and Vione 2016, page 8).

The literature on sexual refusals and sexual negotiations has also almost entirely looked at these patterns among cisgendered heterosexual populations, and the few studies which have explored these dynamics have been quantitative studies that have revealed that heterosexual women sometimes have more unwanted sex than lesbians (Fahs and Swank 2011). That said, there are no significant differences in sexual satisfaction or consent problems between lesbians and heterosexual women (Beres et al. 2004; Frost et al. 2017; Jozkowski et al. 2014).

To identify different sorts of sexual desire discrepancies, Bridges and Horne (2007) differentiated between problematic and non-problematic desire discrepancies in their research on women in same-sex relationships, finding that problematic desire discrepancy predicted sexual dissatisfaction and less sexual contact more than non-problematic desire discrepancy. For example, differentiating whether women even want to have sex is crucial to understand the meanings of sexual desire discrepancy (Hayfield and Clarke 2012).

Research on women's desire for sex also presents a complicated picture of women's relationships to sexual entitlement and gendered social roles. For example, a disproportional amount of the literature on sexual desire emphasizes women's lack of desire (Ling and Kasket 2016; McCabe and Goldhammer 2013; Rosen et al. 2009), particularly whether lack of desire constitutes a sexual dysfunction and whether low desire can or should be medicalized (Jaspers et al. 2016; Laumann et al. 1999). Many feminist scholars have challenged this medicalization of low desire because it ignores gender and power dynamics; feminist scholars have also argued that such claims lead to pharmaceutical intrusions and

pathologization of women's normal sexual functioning (Cacchioni 2015; Graham et al. 2017; Tiefer 2017).

Further, although some studies have examined men's perceptions of women wanting sex, particularly how men at times underestimated their partners' sexual desire (Muise et al. 2016) or sometimes faked their desire in order to not disappoint their female partners (Murray 2018), more attention has been paid to how women have withheld sex in a tactical sense, including worldwide sex strikes to assert collective political power (Agbedahin 2014; Shaw 2017) and heterosexual women framing sex as a tool for power and negotiation with male partners (Burkett and Hamilton 2012). Critical attention to women's sexual power and agency in a broader sense is also emerging in both scholarly and popular writings (Bay-Cheng 2015; Fetterolf and Sanchez 2015).

The Hazards of Sexual Desire Discrepancy

Larger social scripts connected to women's sexuality also suggest that power, sexual coercion, and consent all connect to whether women can or will express their sexual needs. If traditional gender roles demand that women in both short- and longer-term relationships please their partners (especially male partners), act as sexually giving, deny or minimize their own preferences, or mold their desires to fit their partners' sexual fantasies (Elliott and Umberson 2008; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010; Rosen et al. 2018; Vannier and O'Sullivan 2012), how can they meaningfully negotiate their sexual desires when their sexual acquiescence is expected?

For example, some cultural norms suggest that women should seek male attention and grant men's access to their bodies (Hill and Fischer 2001). In this framework, women's bodies are assumed to be available to men, which impacts women's ability to internally evaluate or negotiate their sexual desires. Similarly, women's silences about their own desires (McGowan 2009) and the acceptance of outright double standards of sexual conduct between men and women (Kennett et al. 2013) affects women's sexual choices and decision-making. Recent quantitative studies found, notably, that desire discrepancies impact couple's lives in multiple ways. One study of women struggling with sexual pain found that heterosexual women who put their husbands' needs before their own during painful sex often felt lower satisfaction and poorer sexual function than their partners (Muise et al. 2017). Another study found that desire discrepancy between partners (in this case, new parents) drove down sexual but not relationship satisfaction, particularly when women's desire was higher (Rosen et al. 2018).

Gendered scripts also inform whether, or how, women can decline sex. Some women worry that explicitly demanding sex can go against cultural prescriptions of women as other-directed, demure, and polite. At the same time, directly saying no to sex can be seen as callous, rude, harsh, or "un-lady-like," and researchers have shown that women often use words that soften or justify sexual refusal (for example, being unable to have sex, feeling sick, agreeing to sex later on) (Kitzinger and Frith 1999). Researchers have found that simply saying "no" violates normative communication patterns and that refusals are often indirect and incorporate apologies, compliments, justifications, and alternatives that soften the impact of rejection (Kitzinger and Frith 1999). The lack of women's direct verbal refusal often stems from pressures to engage in compulsory (hetero) sexuality and the normalization of women's acquiescence rather than a lack of assertiveness. Studies report that heterosexual women in relationships are less likely to say "no" or refuse unwanted sexual pressures than heterosexual men in such relationships (Jozkowski et al. 2014). Furthermore, they generally felt more ill-prepared and uneasy about refusing sexual advances than men (Wright et al. 2010), and women who think they should be dependent and deferential to men were especially reluctant to refuse unwanted sexual demands (Curtin et al. 2011; Wigderson and Katz 2015).

Many women cannot or do not refuse sex outright and instead engage in sexual compliance and sexual acquiescence where they agree to unwanted sex because they feel they must do so, either to please a partner or because of societal expectations (Basile 1999; Conroy et al. 2015; Vannier and O'Sullivan 2012). Related to this point, women and girls in long-term relationships engage in a vast amount of emotion work, or the need to suppress their own feelings in order to prioritize the emotional needs of others, to manage and prioritize their partners' sexual needs and feelings (Fahs and Swank 2016; Elliott and Umberson 2008; Hochschild 1983). Such emotion work can undermine women's feelings of pleasure, autonomy, and satisfaction (Tolman 2009). Women may fake orgasms in order to please partners and increase their partners' satisfaction with sex (Fahs 2014; Thomas et al. 2017). Although one recent study found that some men fake orgasms as well, these men do so less often than their female counterparts (Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010).

Ultimately, if women lack a voice to decline unwanted sex, the idea of truly consensual sex is complicated; as such, desire discrepancies can also veer into explicit sexual violence. One study found that heterosexual women engage in sexual compliance and gave in to sexually coercive partners because it allowed them to bypass possible rape situations (Katz and Tirone 2010). Another study argued that male-female asymmetry in desire, avoidance of sexual violence, and relationship maintenance constituted motives for engaging in sexual compliance for cisgendered women in relationships with men (Impett and Peplau 2003). Perhaps even more alarmingly, another study suggested that because we live in a culture that

devalues women's sexual agency, partner pressure is not even necessary for a sexually coercive experience to occur because normative sexuality often has coercive dimensions for women (Conroy et al. 2015).

Research Questions

As shown in our literature review, tensions between wanting and not wanting sex, the complicated ways that sexual satisfaction is configured, and the ways that sexual desire discrepancies relate to power and gender all inform women's experiences of sexual desire with their partners. This previous research informed our construction of an interview guide that sought to address three research questions. First, how do women feel about sexual desire discrepancies and how does this connect to their feelings about sexual agency and entitlement? Second, how do sexual negotiations about desire mirror or resist traditional gender roles? Finally, how do women's narratives about sexual desire discrepancies connect to broader stories about power, consent, refusal, and sexual wanting?

Method

Recruitment and Participants

In the present study, we utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women ($M_{age} = 35.35$, $SD = 12.01$) 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. (For the benefits of using Craigslist to recruit participants see Worthen 2014.) Both outlets reached wide audiences and were freely available to community residents. The advertisements asked for women ages 18–52 years-old to participate in an interview study about their sexual behaviors, practices, and attitudes 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 46–52).

The present sample included 60% (12) White women and 40% (8) Women of Color, 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, 25% (5) bisexual women, and 15% (3) lesbian women. All participants identified as cisgender; no trans or non-binary participants were recruited. For marital status, five women were married, five women were single and cohabitating with a partner, five women were divorced and currently single/non-cohabitating, and five women were single (never married) and without a partner. All participants consented to have their interviews audiotaped and fully transcribed and all received USD $20.00 compensation. Identifying data was 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.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed in a sound-proofed office setting using a semi-structured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 1.5 to 2 h, where they responded to 32 questions about their sexual histories, sexual practices, and feelings and attitudes about their sexuality and their body. The questions about sexual desire discrepancies were a subsection of the larger study about women's feelings about sexuality and the body. The broader study included questions about menstrual health, body image, and sexual practices and histories. This study and the specific interview protocol were both approved by the Institutional Review Board. All participants were interviewed by the first author. Questions related to this study emphasized women's descriptions about how they negotiated desire discrepancies in longer-term partnered relationships. Women were asked one primary questions about desire discrepancies with a partner:

> Many women report that their desire to have sex and their actual sexual activity, the amount they have sex, sometimes differs. Some women report that they agree to have sex with a partner because their partner wants them to. Others say their own desire is much more intense than their partner's desire. Can you talk about your experience with this?

This question was designed to focus on partnered relationships and it offered examples of how either partner can have a desire discrepancy. These questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about related topics; follow-up questions, clarifications, and probes were free-flowing and conversational.

Thematic Analysis

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis that draws from feminist theory and gender theory (Braun and Clarke 2006). This inductive and data-driven type of analysis allowed for groupings of responses based on women's responses to the questions about sexual desire discrepancies (e.g., declining

sex, compromising). A team of two coders created the themes (the lead and third author). The lead and third author discussed a broad coding scheme before each person independently made an early list of tentative themes and appropriate quotes. After both authors finished this initial task, they met again and looked for similarities between their early codes. We agreed on most of these initial codings, and in the three instances that we did not, discrepancies were resolved through discussion between the coders. Once these initial codes were generated, both researchers both reread the transcripts to see if each coded the same passages in the same way (similar to the recommendations of Campbell et al. 2013). We also acknowledge that our own positions as researchers influenced the entire research process from design to interpretation. The team consisted of three co-authors in order: a White woman in her late 30s, a White man in his early 50s, and an African American woman in her early 20s.

To conduct the analysis, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly, and we then identified patterns for common themes posed by participants. This approach relied upon a critical realist framework to make sense of women's experiences. In doing so, we reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in their ways of describing how they dealt with differing desire between themselves and their partners (Braun and Clarke 2006). We selected and generated themes through the six-step process of identifying logical links and overlaps between participants (i.e., familiarize researcher with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define and name themes, produce the report).

Coding, which focused on both explicit and latent meanings, used an inductive and iterative process to examine how women defined, experienced, and behaviorally responded to sexual desire discrepancies. With open coding we looked at these topics but we also examined sexual agency, or what Fetterolf and Sanchez (2015) defined as the power to initiate sex and communicate one's sexual desires.

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion that the generation of themes does not follow a purely linear sequence because inductive techniques generally follow a more recursive process where they move back-and-forth throughout the phases. These patterns were then turned into broader themes that linked data excerpts from individual interviews into a broader discussion of how the whole dataset operated. Finally, we combined our inductive analysis back to the concepts of previous research that informed our interview guide and literature review. Data analysis was guided by a critical realist perspective (Braun and Clarke 2006; Ussher 2010). This approach highlights and situates informants' perspectives and subjectivities within larger power structures. In the case of the present study, we focused on how women made sense of their feelings and reactions to sexual desire discrepancies.

Results

When asked about sexual desire discrepancies, all participants had something to say about how they negotiated sexual desire discrepancies between themselves and their partners, and all acknowledged this as a somewhat routine part of their sexual lives. Notably, a majority of participants ($n = 13$) emphasized women feeling less desire than a partner (one with a same-sex partner; the rest with a different-sex partner), although four responses (1 with a same-sex partner; 3 with a different-sex partner) suggested that women felt more desire than one of their current or past partners. Regardless, all but one of the participants suggested that their or their partner's sexual desire discrepancies were what Bridges and Horne (2007) called "problematic." (One participant said that, because of her excellent communication with partners, this did not pose a problem.) Problematic desire discrepancies were defined by us, as an extension of Bridges and Horne, as that which caused conflict, distress, or negative affect, whereas non-problematic desire discrepancies caused none of these difficulties. All other participants acknowledged that desire discrepancies posed some difficulties for them.

During the analysis we identified five themes associated with how women negotiate such desire discrepancies: (a) Declining sex, (b) Having unwanted sex, (c) Experiencing pressure for sex (both giving and receiving pressure), (d) Feeling disappointed and staying silent, and (e) Discussion of sexual discrepancies. Table 1 provides additional information about the individual women quoted here, and Table 2 summaries the five themes, outlines their coding description, and reports example quotes. As evident in the following descriptions, some participants' responses overlapped between themes in that some participants' responses fit into multiple themes.

Theme 1: Declining Sex

As a first theme, three women talked about declining to have sex when they experienced desire discrepancies. For example, Rachel described that she tells her husband no when he initiates sex that she does not want:

> My husband and I communicate a lot so if I'm not feeling it, I just tell him, "Man, you know, how about later tonight or wake me up when you come to bed. Like, I don't want this to go away but right now is not good." (Rachel)

Similarly, Sofia said that she says no when not in the mood and then feels good when sex does occur:

> The one that starts everything is my husband. But, you know, I know that when I'm not in the mood I just say

Table 1 Participant's demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race-Ethnicity	Sexual Identity	Relationship	Parent	Income
Antonia	25	Mexican American	Lesbian	Single/Cohab	No	Lower
Bea	37	Asian American	Heterosexual	Single/Cohab	No	Lower
Corinne	21	White	Bisexual	Single/Cohab	Yes	Lower
Daphne	33	White	Heterosexual	Divorced	Yes	Lower
Emma	42	White	Heterosexual	Divorced	Yes	Lower
Felicity	20	White	Heterosexual	Single	No	Lowest
Gail	46	White	Bisexual	Married	Yes	Middle
Gretchen	52	White	Heterosexual	Single/Cohab	No	Lower
Iris	22	Mexican American	Lesbian	Single/Cohab	No	Lowest
Joyce	21	Asian American	Bisexual	Single	No	Lowest
Kathleen	49	White	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Higher
Lila	36	White	Heterosexual	Divorced	No	Middle
Martha	52	White	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Lowest
Naomi	18	White	Bisexual	Single	No	Lowest
Rachel	39	White	Bisexual	Married	Yes	Higher
Sofia	42	Mexican American	Heterosexual	Married	Yes	Middle
Trish	19	White	Lesbian	Single	No	Lower
Veronica	49	African American	Heterosexual	Single	No	Middle
Yvonne	41	Mexican American	Heterosexual	Divorced	Yes	Higher
Zari	43	African American	Heterosexual	Divorced	Yes	Higher

Cohab cohabitating. 2014 Income Quintiles according to US Census Lowest ($0–11 k) Lower ($12 k–31 k) Middle ($32 k–52 k) Higher ($53 k–83 k) Highest (84 k+)

> no. And whenever there is some kind of action, I know that I'm gonna have some, you know, good times. Some experience will happen so I just go with it. (Sofia)

Declining sex with a partner may also have different implications for female partners compared to male partners. Iris said that she felt she could refuse sex but also felt guilty with her girlfriend:

> With my current partner, I feel like she wants to have sex more. It's okay, sometimes. It does get hard sometimes too because I feel like I'm not really in the mood for it. But then I also feel guilty. But at the same time, she's trying to provoke me. And I'm like, "No, I'm not [in the mood]." I feel bad to say no because she is my partner and I don't want her to feel like I'm not attracted to her, but I'm not wanting it as much. So I guess I feel pressure to not make it seem like I'm not attracted to her. (Iris)

The clear ways that emotional labor operates here are visible in the management of her partner's feelings about being wanted. The layering on of feelings of guilt and shame with refusal of sex, as opposed to flatly declining sex because one is disinterested, reveals a range of gendered emotional labor. The ability (or even the right) to say no to sex when one is disinterested is complex here, with Iris feeling worried about her partner's feelings, Rachel describing it more as a negotiation, and Sofia arguing that saying no allows her to say yes later on and enjoy herself. Ultimately, the right to decline sex seems linked to feelings of entitlement to say no, which contrasts quite drastically with women who cannot say no to sex when it is unwanted.

Theme 2: Having Unwanted Sex

Four women also said that when they have desire discrepancies with their partners, they often engaged in unwanted sex. Antonia described sex in her past as a boring obligation that allowed her to feel normal, speaking in a despondent way about sex:

> I think that, for the most part, I have sex when myself and my partner want to have sex. But in the past that hasn't always been the case. I've had sex because my partner wants it more so than I did. In the past I saw sex as a chore, like that's what people did, and it would be weird not to do it. (Antonia)

Here, Antonia references sex as a "chore," something she has to do rather than something about which she feels enthusiastic.

Kathleen also agreed to have unwanted sex with several partners because she felt obligated to have sex:

Table 2 Themes, their description, and example quotes

Themes	Description	Example Quotes
Decline sex with partner	Explicitly rejects sex of any kind when not desiring sex. Depends on sense of entitlement to say no.	"Honey, I just went to bed at one and I'm still tired."
Have unwanted sex (Sexual compliance)	Have sex when sex is not wanted. Obliged to have undesired sex as part of female duty to prioritize partner's sex drive. Must appear at least somewhat interested in sex, but some male partners continue with sex when women appear distant and bored.	"I saw sex as a chore, like that's what people did, and it would weird not to do it."
Pressure to have wanted and unwanted sex	Women can be asked or ask others to have sex. Most women report than men pressure themselves more for sex than vice versa. Pressure with partners is often not coercive but sometimes it is coercive Mild or persistent pressure leads women into having unwanted sex somewhat frequently.	"I always felt this pressure to have sex."
Accepting disappointing sex	Permission for women to complain about bad sex is muted and most women are silent about their dull or alienating sex.	"It's just easier to go ahead and do it than to hear him whine and complain."
Discussion of sexual discrepancies	Women occasionally discuss sexual discrepancies with partner. When done in equitable and respectful manner, explicit conversations about needs can improve sexual satisfaction	"For me it's more intellectual, it's more communication based, and between that and the actual act, we are very much on the same page and don't have any miscommunication."

> I'm not easily coerced into things. With my second husband, I had sex with him to avoid a bunch of crap because I just wanted to go to sleep. I probably had a lot of sex I wasn't into, which is why I felt very unprotective of myself, which made me angry. If I have a partner that's way into it and I'm not really not, I would go there because I feel like I have to. (Kathleen)

Two women agreed to "let" their partners have sex with them even if not in the mood. For example, Lila noted that she felt able to directly tell her partner that she did not want sex but sometimes also had unwanted sex:

> I usually have never been the one to have to beg for sex. It's usually the other way around. I've oftentimes said straight up, "Look I'm not horny at all" but this is if we're in a long-term relationship. I mean I'm like, "I'm not horny and I'm not going to come, but you can still do your thing if you want." I mean, it's so unromantic. (Lila)

In these examples, the women who reluctantly had unwanted sex suggested that they wanted to please a partner because they felt it was their duty to engage in sex even if they were not personally interested in it, again showcasing the role of emotional labor in these sexual interactions. The combination of negative emotions (e.g., anger, feeling that they "have to," letting their partner "do your thing") and the sense that they cannot decline sex point to the relationship between power and entitlement that can occur during sexual negotiations. The ability or willingness to say no to sex versus agree to have unwanted sex (contrasting the first two themes) speaks to the relationships among power, gender, and agency in women's sexual lives. Looking at Theme 1 in contrast with Theme 2, it becomes more clear that the ability and entitlement to decline sex (even with guilty feelings) suggests a different power dynamic than for women who perceive that they *must* have unwanted or less wanted sex with their partners.

Theme 3: Experiencing Pressure for Sex (Giving and Receiving)

As the most common theme, six women described experiencing pressure around sex, either pressure that they received from a partner or pressure that they put on a partner. For example, Naomi detailed how she felt repulsed and angered by men pressuring her for sex:

> I can tell when the guy wants that right away and I don't like that. I don't like him just being sexual straight off the bat. That bugs me and annoys me. I feel kind of grossed out, like I probably would want to have sex with you if you acted chill about it, but now that you're being weird and creepy about it, I don't want to. (Naomi)

Martha felt that her husband wanted sex more than she did and the pressure felt overwhelming:

> Normally my husband wants it more than I do, and that's only because of our situations. I mean, when we were first together back in high school, what do I have to worry about? Go to school, come home, didn't have to work, didn't have any worries, don't have any financial

> problems. But now he wants it all the time, at least once a day, still. At this age! He can just tell if I'm kinda not in the mood, but he wants it more than I do now. (Martha)

Joyce described experiencing pressure for sex differently between her male and female partners:

> I found with guys [sex] is something they want right away, but with my experiences with girls I feel like there is no pressure at all. With men I always felt this pressure to have sex whereas with my girlfriend I never had that pressure. (Joyce)

These three different views raise questions about how gendered scripts play out with regard to women's sexual lives. Whereas Joyce argued for a clear difference between male and female partners—with men pressuring her for sex and women not pressuring her—Naomi and Martha talked more about the *emotional* implications of feeling pressured for sex. Still, even when Naomi felt "gross" and angry and Martha perceived her husband's desires for sex as unreasonable, neither described a way to negotiate these discrepancies. All three women held onto these feelings internally or seemed to view them as an inevitable part of gendered sexual relationships.

Three other women reported that they pressured their partners for sex, often for a diverse variety of reasons. In these examples, women felt more desire than their partners. Corinne said that she had more sexual desire than her boyfriend and that she sometimes demanded sex from him: "I have a little more desire I feel like. I sometimes say, 'Babe, I need you right now!' and he's like, 'I really don't feel it.' 'Babe, please? Babe, BABE please?' 'Oh okay.' That's basically how we work it out." Zari also felt that she had a higher sex drive than her partner and that she needed to pressure him about sex: "I just try to motivate him more often, you know what I mean? I like to have sex three or four times a week, but if we're living together, at least every night. Once a day." These examples suggest a different subjective perspective than being on the receiving end of partner pressure for sex. When *placing* that pressure on a partner, women described it as a simple, perhaps light-hearted, exchange.

Overall, in this theme we can see the ways that the back-and-forth of sexual negotiation happens when women want less sex and when they want more sex than a partner. Pressure for sex and the push/pull of asking for sex was a near constant for many women. Ultimately, the movement between sexual negotiations as simple and lighthearted (e.g., women requesting sex) versus emotionally weighty and difficult (e.g., partners requesting sex from them) points to the ways that sexual negotiations might reinforce, or resist, traditional gender roles. Making space for the idea that women want sex more than men pushes back against traditional notions of men as "needing" and "wanting" sex more than women, although some of these narratives did reinforce those traditional roles as well.

Theme 4: Feeling Disappointed and Staying Silent

As a fourth theme, four women handled their sexual desire discrepancies by feeling disappointed or frustrated rather than directly communicating or negotiating with partners to resolve them. Some women framed their frustrations as a product of them having more desire than their partners, who might be putting their sexual energy elsewhere. Daphne described feeling frustrated and annoyed when she wanted to have sex but her partners were more engaged with pornography than with having sex with her:

> I've always found that I'm more sexually active than my partners, that I want it more than they do. It's been so frustrating because men that watch porn, they're in there saying they're taking a shit but they're sitting on the toilet watching a video and jacking off. It's not fair, and that affects their sexual activity. They still get their release. When it comes down to it, I'm not getting any! What's going on here? (Daphne)

Trish described the frustration of feeling more desire than her partners: "Mine is usually more intense than my partners. I have this overactive sexual drive. Even if I have multiple partners, with multiple people at the same time, I have this insatiable drive. It's hard to feel satisfied."

Others described their disappointment about their partners not initiating sex with them and admitted to feeling rejected as a result. Bea said that she stopped initiating sex with her partner even though she has high desire:

> It's extremely frustrating because right now I desire it more than he does. I don't need it. I just need to know he wants to have sex. I want him to have sex with me which is why I don't engage. I think once he's ready to have sex again then he'll make the move. (Bea)

Gretchen described feeling rejected by her boyfriend after gaining weight:

> I think there was a time when I had put on some weight and he didn't find me attractive and so we did not have sex for a while and I would initiate and he's like, "I really don't want to" which is, you know, "I really don't find you attractive right now." He didn't say it that way of course. (Gretchen)

These examples suggest that some women feel resigned about a lack of sexual satisfaction, perhaps connected to gender roles that require silence about dissatisfaction. The notable range of

reasons for women to feel frustrated and disappointed about sex—from resenting porn or seeing sex as a symbol of their attractiveness to feeling an insatiable sexual appetites or wanting to be wanted by a partner—suggests that women's disappointment is located in numerous parts of their sexual lives. Women seem to look to sex to fill many different needs—being desired, feeling prioritized by a partner, or validating their libidos or their self-perceived imperfect bodies. This suggests that negotiations for sex are saddled with extra "baggage" than merely a desire for sex.

Theme 5: Discussion of Sexual Discrepancies

Three women discussed how, in response to desire discrepancies, they directly spoke about sexual desire discrepancies with partners. Emma described an explicit negotiation about sex with her partner:

> I can't say we were always on the same page. That would be a lie. But yeah I've been in those situations where he wanted to and I didn't, or I wanted to and he didn't. Sometimes there was a negotiation. There was a compromise. Not all the time, because some of the times we would end up just going to sleep. (Emma)

Yvonne, too, negotiated sex by agreeing to have sex when her partner put more effort into sex and improved his sexual skills:

> That's probably where it kind of feels like, "Oh, this is gonna be a chore." I try to probably just get him to want it more and put more effort into it, like "If you rub my back" or something, you know. Like "Get me more in the mood! Rub my feet or something! Put a little effort into it!" (Yvonne)

Along similar lines, Gail described negotiating with her husband to allow him to have more sexual partners as a way of handling sexual desire discrepancies:

> I remember working really hard and having young kids and telling my husband, "Yes, I know you want sex all the time, and I don't want to disappoint you, so I'll have sex with you this time but …" and then giving him approval or the permission to seek sex elsewhere. It didn't bother me because I just wanted his happiness. I knew that it would make me happy if he sought it elsewhere sometimes because it would take the pressure off me. There are times now where I've had to negotiate the reverse. My husband's not as able and so for a while I think it really hurt him and made him jealous if I talked about wanting to have sex outside of our encounters together…I personally don't believe monogamy is a workable solution for people overall. I think that that is a big problem in our society—being able to negotiate those differences in our sexual drives. (Gail)

In these three examples, women describe directly negotiating with their partners even while sometimes navigating emotional landmines. Whether through encouraging partners to put more effort into seduction or giving a partner permission to have sex outside the relationship, women described these negotiations as a way to have clarity with partners about what they wanted both sexually and emotionally. The mutuality of these descriptions—although not perfectly balanced between women and their partners—suggested that women can share power with their partners more easily than when they stay silent or internalize frustration and anger.

Discussion

Sex researchers rarely address the ways that women emotionally and psychologically respond to the conditions of wanting more or less sex than their partners. The few studies on these processes mostly focus on samples of college students (Davies et al. 1999; O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998), and studies of older women are often limited to married women in mixed-sex relationships (Elliott and Umberson 2008; Rosen et al. 2018) or have samples with data at least two decades old (Kitzinger and Frith 1999: Leiblum and Nathan 2002). The present paper draws from recent interviews with married and single women (18 to 52 years-old) from both mixed- and same-sex partnerships about their desire discrepancies, and it thus is unique in doing so. Further, given the overwhelmingly heterosexual frameworks for studying sexual desire (of the dozens of studies cited in this literature review, for example, only a handful included sexual minority women; see Conroy et al. 2015; Kiefer and Sanchez 2007; McClelland 2011; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007; and Tolman 2009), our study featured women who identified as heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual and who engaged in sexual behavior beyond heteronormative practices.

The results of our study illuminated some of the key tensions related to who feels entitled to ask for sex, who can decline unwanted sex, and how women negotiate sexual desire discrepancies. We consider the larger question of whether women have truly consensual sex given that how they negotiate sex with partners seems deeply connected to feelings of entitlement (or lack thereof) to decline unwanted sex or ask for the sex they do want. It is possible to see how some of the women's experiences are linked to underlying gender norms that women encounter when imagining how to cope with their partners wanting sex when they did not, or them wanting sex with their partners do not. Most often, women had to negotiate a partner wanting more sex than they did, and they did so in a number of key ways: refusing sex altogether, having

unwanted sex and going along with their partners' urgings, feeling pressured for sex, experiencing an emotional response of disappointment and frustration, or, least often, overtly discussing sexual problems and finding alternative solutions to better sex.

The picture painted here in these options seems somewhat bleak given that women have supposedly entered a period of "empowerment" and "liberation" with regard to their sexual lives. Rather than a portrait of women happily asserting their sexual preferences and desires, these data suggest a more complicated and varied picture. Some women reluctantly "go along with" their (male) partners' desire for sex and/or internalize feelings of disappointment (Conroy et al. 2015; Fahs and Swank 2016; Herbenick et al. 2014; Sanchez et al. 2012; Vannier and O'Sullivan 2012), whereas other groups of women refused sex or found a mutually agreeable compromise when they were asked to have unwanted sex.

These data build on some of our earlier work that examined women's responses to their partners wanting different types of sex that they might not necessarily want (e.g., unwanted anal sex; see Fahs and Gonzalez 2014) by instead looking at what partners do when they disagree about the amount of sex they want. In the present study, women's acute sense of having limited options with regard to managing sexual desire discrepancies seems paramount because many options seem less-than-ideal: giving in to unwanted sex, managing frustration, feeling guilty, hearing a partner beg for sex, or compromising to allow a partner to have sex with others. We found it notable that there were only a few women who claimed to have more desire than a partner, and even fewer who claimed that the felt happy with how they and their partners resolved desire discrepancies when they arose. Instead, this subject evoked a variety of emotional responses that ranged from more frankly negative affect (e.g., sadness, shame, guilt, frustration, disappointment, anger) to feelings of despondency and apathy (e.g., "whatever"), along with a few clear statements of how couples talked and negotiated this effectively. This revelation relates back to our original research question of asking how sexual desire discrepancies connected to women's feelings about sexual agency and entitlement.

In the background of these interviews also lies a clear investment in the emotional labor (Elliott and Umberson 2008; Fahs and Swank 2016; Thomas et al. 2017) required to manage a sexual and romantic relationship. Women had to engage in "surface acting" of wanting sex—or even of not wanting sex—in order to meet the expectations of a good sexual partner/wife/girlfriend. For example, women saying no to sex without hurting a partners' feelings or women managing their own sense of frustration without letting their partners know were two examples of this point. And, even for partners who seemed to openly negotiate this and talk it through (e.g., Gail), they still reported that their partners were jealous, frustrated, or saddened by the negotiations. In essence, managing one's own need to feel sexually desired, as well as one's partner's need for feeling desired, was enormously complex and required a vast amount of emotional attunement and emotion work to care for oneself and one's partner in the process. This analysis maps onto recent work that traces women's need to engage in sexual emotional labor throughout the lifespan, even if they are ill later in life (McClelland 2017).

Additionally, these data reveal much about the relationship between gender and power, another key component of our research questions. Who can refuse sex outright, who can ask for sex from a partner, who "gives in" and "lets" a partner have sex with them (and so on) all have deeply gendered root structures. For example, women saying that they were "grossed out" by sex or that they let their husband "do your thing" when they were not interested suggests a portrait of sexuality where women may feel that they must endure it or that they have no real ability to say no. This interpretation extends the literature we already know about sexual violence and assault and implies that removing women's sense of sexual voice ("enthusiastic consent" in particular) is a normative part of their sexual lives (Basile 1999; Conroy et al. 2015; Vannier and O'Sullivan 2012). Women accommodate others' desires far more often than their partners seem to accommodate their desires. This fits with what we know about gender, agency, power, and sexual assertiveness (Fetterolf and Sanchez 2015). Further, there may be different stakes for different groups of women given the long history of racializing sexual "excess"; in short, having strong sexual desire may not feel like an option for Women of Color because the penalties for this map onto broader cultural anxieties about sexuality and race. Exploring such racial/ethnic diversity is a worthy area for future research.

Looking more optimistically at our data, we note that many women reported feeling strong sexual desire and that some did have a way to share this desire with a partner. Going against the most traditional scripts of sexuality, women reporting that they wanted more sex than their partners (especially their male partners) constitutes a new area for researchers to explore, particularly as these data work against essentializing notions of "men as desirers" and "women as non-desirers." Further, we found it notable that none of the women mentioned having extramarital affairs because of sexual dissatisfaction (other studies have found that women have affairs more for lack of intimacy than lack of sexual pleasure, see Glass and Wright 1992), although we did not specifically ask about this point. The fact that many women did not seem to expect to feel satisfied is another potential area of future research and one that has been explored in recent work by McClelland (2010). Our data also point to the importance of capturing queer and bisexual women's negotiations with their female partners and how this may or may not reflect more traditional gendered scripts. And, of course, our data do not merely suggest a "disempowered" view of sexuality; rather, they portray

women's sexual desire negotiations as inherently complex, multifaceted, emotionally nuanced, and highly diverse.

At a macro level, our data point to broader tensions within the feminist movement as a whole, particularly how women feel "stuck" in gender norms and power dynamics that do not necessarily serve them even when they express awareness of the damage of these norms. In other words, women continue to endure sex that they do not feel enthusiastic about, or "put up with" sex that feels boring or not very mutual, even when they are making gains in other aspects of their lives. England's (2010) work has suggested that women have made far more gains in the public sphere than in the private/domestic sphere, and our data would support her claims. Sex continues to be an area where women's lack of power seems vivid, even when they at times push back against this disempowerment. The domestic/sexual realms of women's lives harbor and shelter inequality differently than their work/public lives do so that exploring sexual desire discrepancies is a key area that is worthy of additional research and inquiry.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Certain research decisions may have affected our study's results. For example, our choice for wording for our interview questions may have captured some, but certainly not all, of the facets of how women negotiate their sexual desire discrepancies with a partner. The order of questions or the specific wording of questions could have run the risk of influencing participants in unexpected ways. Future research could ask a variety of other questions. For example, future research could directly ask about women having more desire than a partner, or less desire than a partner, to target the different narratives women create about such differences. Further, future studies could look specifically at sexual minority women to further nuance the findings about how women negotiate sex with other women. Researchers may also want to examine communication patterns along gendered lines because previous research has shown that women often try to soften refusals (Kitzinger and Frith 1999). Finally, because we drew upon a sample far too small to make specific conclusions about race, class, and sexual identity, quantitative studies could look more closely at the relationships among emotional reactions to sex, refusals, partner pressure, and negotiations on a larger scale so that demographic heterogeneity could be more fully examined.

Practice Implications

The results of our study point toward numerous implications for clinicians working with clients struggling with sexual desire discrepancies with their partners. The lead author of our study is a practicing clinical psychologist who regularly sees couples where sexual desire discrepancies constitute a major challenge of their marriage/partnership. Our results suggest that clinicians should work more closely with couples to (a) understand that sexual desire discrepancy is common and normative; (b) communicate more effectively about sexual expectations and/or manage disappointment and frustration about these discrepancies; (c) speak more openly about how to negotiate sexual desire discrepancies in a healthy and fruitful way, particularly attending to the strongly gendered qualities of who feels entitled to sex (and why); and (d) imagine ways to better directly communicate about sexual "needs" and wants (see also the clinical suggestions of Girard and Woolley 2017).

Clinicians may also want to work with couples to think more critically about desire as a whole, particularly what individuals see as the role of sex in their lives, what "wanting" and "desire" mean both individually and in their couple relationship(s), and the social contexts around sexual desire. Feminist sex therapists have been challenging us to do this probing for many years, but our data suggest that when people do not openly communicate about these aspects of sexuality, women are unduly burdened with the toll of emotional (and sexual) labor.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the results of our study suggest that negotiation of sexual desire discrepancies is a fruitful terrain in which to examine bigger stories of gender, power, and inequality. Who gets to refuse sex or ask for sex and how emotions are managed and carefully (and delicately) contained present a fascinating array of gendered scripts. Attention to what it means when women "let" men have sex with them, or "give in" to partner pressure, or silently feel frustrated is also needed for those interested in studying issues of consent, sexual acquiescence, and sexual compliance. Similarly, looking at who feels entitled to both feel sexual desire and ask for sex provides a window into how women internalize discourses of sexual entitlement and sexual wanting. Sexual desire discrepancies provide a messy tangle of themes that intentionally complicate (rather than flatten) women's varied sexual lives.

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