

“TALKING THROUGH THE BALL GAG”:
WOMEN NAVIGATING EMPOWERMENT AND VULNERABILITY IN THE
PURSUIT OF SEXUAL PLEASURE

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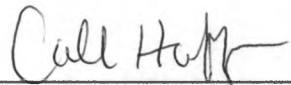
Master of Arts
In
Human Sexuality Studies

by
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San Francisco, California
May 2018

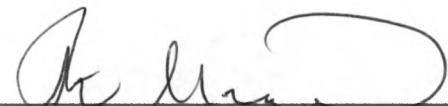
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read "Talking Through the Ball Gag": Women Navigating Empowerment and Vulnerability in the Pursuit of Sexual Pleasure by Siri Nybakk, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Human Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.



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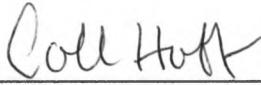
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**“TALKING THROUGH THE BALL GAG”:
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Women's sexual pleasure has been traditionally misunderstood and understudied, and studies of women's sexuality often relate to violence and danger, sexually transmitted infections, or unwanted pregnancies. By interviewing eight women, this qualitative interview study explores how women who have sex with men experience sexual pleasure. Two main themes emerged from their narratives: Women experience feelings of empowerment and women experience feelings of vulnerability connected to their pleasure. I found that a pleasure gap exists between the pleasure that the participants talk about and the actual sexual pleasure they are accessing. The women view themselves as sexually empowered and explore pleasure with sex toys, kink, and BDSM play, but do not always access pleasure or communicate their desires to a partner. To close the pleasure gap, my research suggests that women adopt a critical view of sexual empowerment and build ongoing partner communication.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Coll Huff
Chair, Thesis Committee

5/23/19

Date

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Introduction

"I clearly showed [that I wasn't feeling good] indirectly by talking a lot through my ball gag, even though we eventually took that off. But I don't think I was directly saying like I worry, this is a bad idea, I feel rushed, I am not feeling as good as I usually do. I did not say any of that." - Jennifer

Jennifer was engaging in BDSM play with a male partner but couldn't really get into the sex the way she normally would. She was feeling rushed and the anal sex was burning. When asked if she considered communicating her discomfort to her partner she responded what is cited above, both that she clearly communicated not feeling good, but also admitting to not saying "any of that". Her response is part of an interview study done with eight women and illustrates the complex thoughts and feelings women experience when navigating their sexual pleasure. So how do women end up in these complex situations when pursuing their sexuality?

Women's sexual pleasure has been traditionally misunderstood and understudied. When studies on women's sexual pleasure have been conducted, they have often been related to violence and danger, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancies (Fine and McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2012). Studies again and again prove that women who have sex with men are the ones who are less likely to achieve orgasm when having sex with a partner. Women also experience pain or discomfort in relation to sex. One

study found that 30 percent of women reported pain occurring during their most recent sexual experience (Herbenick et al., 2015). Studies also show that women often feel pressure to perform pleasure a certain way for their partners (Elliot & Umberson, 2008; Frith, 2013). At the same time, women are claiming agency of their bodies and becoming more educated. An emphasis on choice and empowerment has grown out of the second wave feminist movement and “third-wave feminism insists that each woman must decide for herself how to negotiate the often contradictory desires for both gender equality and sexual liberation” (Snyder-Hall, 2010).

Women are interested in different types of sex, watch porn, buy sex toys and talk about sex with their friends. Magazines for women are filled with sex advice and women are expected to take charge of their own pleasure (Frith, 2015). Women have to navigate the sexual body in ways that might sometimes compete with each other. The sexual body is at the same time an object of desire, a site of experience of emotion and sensation, and a vehicle through which the sexual is defined (McQueen, 2009).

The meeting between a female sexuality that has been silenced and medicalized and a modern empowered sexuality creates for challenges. Because of limited research on women’s lived experiences of pleasure, women are left on their own to figure their pleasures out in the midst in these contradictions. More research is needed to provide important data in this field.

So how do modern, sexual women experience sexual pleasure? How do they navigate their thoughts, emotions and ideas around their sexual experiences? What are

the main challenges for a sexual woman who has sex with men today? This interview study attempts to provide some answers.

The problems with women's sexual pleasure

Women's sexuality has historically been pathologized and controlled. Objectification and self-objectification removes women from their pleasure. At the same time, our modern society demands sexually healthy women who are autonomous and authentic in their pleasure. Numerous magazines, social media sites and TV shows promote an active female sexuality where women are in charge, explore their pleasure, and are centered in their bodies.

Objectification and self-objectification has been studied in relation to women's sexuality for decades. Researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson, who started their work in the late 1950s, warned about "the loss of sexual agency through viewing oneself as a sexual object" and that it "impedes sexual functioning because it distracts women from their own pleasure" (1970). Body objectification has a role in shaping girl's self-esteem and depressive symptoms over the course of adolescence. If a girl has fewer body objectification experiences she will have higher levels of self-esteem. While body objectification can be harmful, women and girls may learn how to resist through awareness and conversation (Impett et al., 2011). Studies show that women place emphasis upon physical sensations such as touch and that subjective embodiment was more related to pleasure than appearance and body objectification (Thorpe et al., 2015).

Another challenge for women are the heterosexual sexual scripts. Sexual script theory is a way of understanding the cultural scripts of how sexual norms create pressures for women to have sex with men a certain way: starting with foreplay, leading to intercourse, then orgasm. Through sexual script theory, women's embodied sexual selves are understood as reflexively constructed and reconstructed in sexual meetings (Simon & Gagnon, 1973; Simon, 1996; Jackson & Scott, 2007). Simon and Gagnon also describe it as apparent that in these scripts the man is defined as the subject, in control, and active while the woman is the object, passive, and receiving (1973). This creates for many expectations on women when they have sex with men. Women feel the pressure to feel pleasure, and about half of women report faking orgasms at some point (Opperman et al, 2014).

Women also want to experience agency and empowerment. The Western cultural norm views modern women as sexual actors with full agency in society and women are judged on their perceived control of their own sexuality. Research indicates that women aren't able to access a space of full agency. Lamb (Lamb, 2010; Lamb & Peterson, 2011) argues that empowerment is often defined as choice and that the idea of it being a choice is typically an illusion. Women may give the impression of being empowered and feeling like actors with their own agency, but they often imitate a sexuality that is commodified and shaped by porn culture. Consumerism comes with a promise that each person can take it upon themselves to fix what they are not satisfied with and "a discourse of empowerment anchored in competence and self-knowledge has ironically been shaped into the power to conform and perform" (Tolman, 2012).

Women today need to navigate several areas in relation to their sexual pleasure. In a sexualized society that objectifies women and trains women to self-objectify, pleasure might not always come easy. Heteronormative sexual scripts center male pleasure and make it even harder for women to find space for their pleasure. This makes sexual agency a complicated concept where women are being seen as sexual actors with full agency without it actually being the case in women's lives.

Background

By being made aware of the sexual scripts and the objectification/self-objectification processes women might be one step closer to their sexual pleasure. If women genuinely believe that sex is supposed to be a certain way, and that the desire they have that falls outside of these scripts isn't valid, then it's hard for women to develop a strong sense of a sexual self. This doesn't mean that women can't experience sexual pleasure by following the sexual scripts, but by being aware of the scripts, women can critique these constructs, especially when it doesn't come with pleasure.

Some studies indicate that education is related to women's pleasure; the higher the education level a woman has, the more likely she is to achieve orgasm with a partner (Tolman, 2002; Frith, 2013). Education is definitely part of allowing women to feel agency and empowerment in their sexuality. However, education is not the whole solution. Other studies show that education level, class, race and other identity markers might not change the level of agency, and that the feeling of being empowered and

having agency is an illusion. Being connected with oneself and one's desires is one start to gaining agency. Women narrating their own sexual experiences can be one way to assist women in identifying their desires, thereby giving them a voice and feelings of agency.

Studies have shown how women can struggle with their sexual pleasure in a culture of objectification and heterosexual sexual scripts (Yep et al., 2003). These scripts are changing and modern women are seeing themselves as sexual actors with agency more and more. However, there is limited research on women's pleasure and how they navigate their thoughts, feelings and bodies in relation to their pleasure does anyone say this then cite them....

This study is with women who have sex with men and their sexual pleasure. Some of the women in this study identify as heterosexual (62.5%) and some either identify as queer or bisexual (37.5%). There is no agreed upon definition of sexual pleasure and the idea of pleasure tends to be reduced to the physical sensations connected to sexual arousal and orgasm. However, sexual pleasure "has psychological, interpersonal and social components that are related to sexual health and sexual rights" (Castellanos et al., 2017). Because there is not one agreed upon definition of pleasure the definition of pleasure will be left open. Part of this study is focused on gaining more of an understanding about what sexual pleasure actually is to sexually active women. As such, every participant is asked what they think about when they hear the term sexual pleasure.

There is also not a clear agreement on how to define the concept of empowerment, but Lamb argues that “sexual empowerment might best be conceptualized as a continuous and multidimensional construct. This would allow for the recognition of sexual empowerment as a developmental process, and it would allow for the acknowledgement of ambivalent empowerment” (2009). In this study, narratives that recognize feelings of agency and empowerment in the participant's sexuality and sexual experiences will be highlighted along side feelings of vulnerability. This way the contradictions in the concept of the sexual agency that many modern sexual women strive for will emerge.

Review of literature

The study of women's sexual pleasure is an important aspect in understanding women's sexuality. Still, women's pleasures haven't often been centered in sexuality studies. Women's sexual pleasure has historically been misrepresented or ignored. Moreover, the woman as a subject is a construct depending on historical context, age, race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, and many other factors. When women's sexualities have been studied, the term “woman” has often ended up only acknowledging white, cis, heterosexual, middle class, and able-bodied women's experiences (Maines, 1999). Judith Butler described sexuality as an historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity in addition to troubling the

gender categories as set and biological (1990). Gender, sexuality and pleasure is in other words a site of difference between women.

Sexuality scholars have often focused on violence and danger, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancies when studying women's sexuality. Women's embodied sexual knowledge and their pleasures were pitted against physical, social, material and psychological dangers associated with their sexuality (Maines, 1999; Fine and McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2012).

The discourse of danger around women's sexual pleasure has created a social silence on girls' sexual desires. A social silence does not mean that the pleasure is not there, but that the sexual pleasures are just not talked about, valued, or acknowledged (Tolman, 2012). Foucault pointed out that "silence and secrecy are a shelter for power" (1990). Since heterosexual sexual scripts operate through repetition, sexual agency can be possible when that repetition is disrupted (Butler, 1990; Yep et al., 2003).

Gayle S. Rubin introduced The Charmed Circle, a diagram that shows the hierarchy of sexual value. It categorizes sexual pleasures into good, normal, natural, and blessed sexuality versus bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned sexuality (1984/1998). Foucault has described how society's view on sexuality changed when medicine made an impactful entry in everyday society, which resulted in carefully classifying all forms of pleasures as good or bad (1990). This shows the large value we put on the type of sexual pleasure people have.

Sexual script theory is a way of understanding the cultural scripts of how sexual norms create pressure for women to have sex with men in a certain way: starting with foreplay, leading to intercourse, then orgasm. Through sexual script theory, women's embodied sexual selves are understood as reflexively constructed and reconstructed in sexual meetings (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Jackson & Scott, 2007). Heteronormativity has also been seen as a site of violence against women's sexuality and "harmful to a range of people across the spectrum of sexualities, including those who live within its borders" (Yep et al., 2003). Compulsory heterosexuality keeps women linked to men sexually, and many might not even recognize their pain and the violence as actual violence (Yep et al., 2003). To be approved or accepted in the heteronormative structures women have to take up certain roles and positions. In other words, they have to define their sexual pleasure entirely according to heteronormative structures.

John P. Elia argues how a specific brand of heterosexual relationship is being sold to us by many different institutions as the best way of being in a relationship. Together they create a sexual hierarchy defined by heteronormative standards (Yep et al., 2003). This heterosexual matrix sets sexual desire as masculine and the desired object as feminine, leaving a lot of women objectified. Judith Butler refers to Lacan's metaphor of it all being a masquerade. Women have to participate in the masquerade for men's desires by giving up their own pleasures (Butler, 1990).

Researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson started their work in the late 1950s and did groundbreaking research on human sexual response. Johnson was one of the very first female sexuality researchers, and the team also spent time on women's

specific experiences of sexual pleasure. Still, their research tended to be led by diagnosis and treatment of sexual disorders more than being led by the goal of pleasure itself (Masters & Johnson, 1970).

In the literature that does exist on women's sexual pleasure we see that the orgasm became central to the definition of pleasure. Not having an orgasm has become classified, diagnosed and treated as a sexual disorder or dysfunction. Women's orgasms are pathologized and subject to intense scrutiny and surveillance (Maines, 1999; Opperman et al., 2014; Frith, 2013).

Masters and Johnson warned about "the loss of sexual agency through viewing oneself as a sexual object," and that it "impedes sexual functioning because it distracts women from their own pleasure" (1970). Research that accounts for women's relationship to their sexuality in relation to the images they see in the media states that girls and women feel dissatisfied with themselves. Consumerism comes with a promise that each person can take it upon themselves to fix what they are not satisfied with and "a discourse of empowerment anchored in competence and self-knowledge has ironically been shaped into the power to conform and perform" (Tolman, 2012).

Body objectification has a negative impact on multiple aspects of women's wellbeing including that of sexual functioning and pleasure (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Body objectification has a role in shaping girls' self-esteem and depressive symptoms over the course of adolescence. If a girl has lower levels of body objectification experiences she will have higher levels of self-esteem. While body

objectification can be harmful, women and girls may learn how to resist through awareness and conversation (Impett et al., 2011). Studies show that women place emphasis upon physical sensations such as touch and that subjective embodiment was more related to pleasure than appearance and body objectification (Thorpe et al., 2015).

While scholars have reported about women's loss of sexual agency, the Western cultural norm views modern women as sexual actors with full agency. Women are judged on their perceived control of their own sexuality (Anderson, 2015; Bay-Cheng, 2015). Research indicates that women aren't able to access a space of full agency. Studies also show that class and race affect sexuality. For instance, the higher education a woman has, the higher likeliness she has to achieve orgasm (Tolman, 2002; Frith, 2013). Race and class is influential in determining how female sexuality is discussed and non-white and lower-class women may be more vulnerable to dismissal and demonization (Tolman, 2000; Pheterson, 1998). L.H. Stallings states that we've created a system where sexual freedom is difficult and even impossible to gain as the system will always mark racialized people and their sexualities as the Other. The only way for people to truly be free and able to be themselves is to deconstruct and decolonize this knowledge about sex, gender, and agency (2015).

It is also argued that at the same time as there's a current discourse of empowerment connected to women's sexuality, the old slut/prude/virgin categories have become much more complex and more challenging for women to navigate (Tolman et al., 2015). Women have to negotiate often contradictory desires for gender equality and sexual liberation (Snyder-Hall, 2010). Some goes so far as to say that empowerment is

often defined as choice and that the idea of it being a choice is typically an illusion (Lamb, 2010; Lamb & Peterson, 2011).

Female participants in studies on women's sexual pleasure commonly describe not prioritizing their own needs in an effort to ensure their male partner's sexual satisfaction. Orgasm through intercourse is believed to be the most wanted sexual experience, but while men's orgasms are seen as essential to sex, women's orgasms are seen as more of a bonus. In contrast to men, women rarely describe their own orgasm as the primary benchmark for their own satisfaction. The orgasm is often being centered in sexual pleasure as the main goal and the lack of it is pathologized. This makes the authenticity of women's orgasm a site of cultural anxiety and contested gender politics (Frith, 2014).

Women feel the pressure to feel pleasure and about half of women report faking orgasms at some point (Opperman et al., 2014). Heterosexual women often fake orgasms to show love and nurturing for their partners (Opperman et al., 2014; McClelland, 2011; Frith, 2013). Women report faking for different reasons which are often related to being relationship-promoting and sexual pleasure enhancing. Women faking pleasure could also be because women lack a definite symbol of sexual climax equivalent to the male ejaculation (Cooper et al., 2014; Frith, 2014). Hannah Frith says that "the distinction between acting and experiencing, between feeling orgasm or faking it, is far from clear cut because both require an embodied performance of orgasm which may be indistinguishable" (2014).

In addition, women and girls often don't talk about their personal pleasures and leave out their own desire in the stories they do tell. When self-reporting their pleasure, findings demonstrated that girls and young women often reported on their partner's sexual satisfaction instead of their own (McClelland, 2011; Tolman, 2012). Other studies have shown how sex often is conceptualized as wanted and consensual or unwanted and nonconsensual. Even though wanting sex and consenting to sex are closely related, women sometimes consent to unwanted sex and do not consent to wanted sex (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2007).

What's seen as good sex and pleasure is different for men and women. In one study on heterosexual married couples, researchers found that participants measured good sex in quantity, the more sex the better the sex was seen. The study also showed that many men expect their wives to be spontaneous and authentic about sex and their pleasure, and because of that many wives try to change their feelings about sex by trying to increase their interest in sex (Elliot & Umberson, 2008). The same study found that men and women believe that men are more sexual than women. Another study found that 30 percent of women reported pain occurring during their most recent sexual experience (Herbenick et al., 2015).

Deborah Tolman found that how girls reflected around their own sexual pleasure was lacking. In her book, "Dilemmas of Desire," she interviews girls specifically about their sexual desire and agency. Tolman's extensive work is an important addition to the study of women's pleasure but her work is mainly focused on adolescent girls. Limited research still exists on adult women's narratives about their experiences of sexual

pleasure and desire. The ability of women to act in their own best interests in relation to their pleasure while existing within a culture of violence has rarely been researched. Studying how women themselves talk about their pleasure can be a way to further our understanding of pleasure.

Methods

By letting women describe their experiences in semi-structured interviews, this qualitative interview study is aiming to add to the knowledge of how women experience sexual pleasure. New data will help the understanding of what happens in the space between pressure to feel pleasure, empowerment, and sexual pleasure.

The study includes interviews with 8 women between the ages of 21 and 35. Women were recruited through the online social media site Facebook. Interviews were conducted over 5 months in the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018. I conducted the interviews and identify as a white European cisgender woman. The interviews, which were about 1 hour long, were transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes related to the research questions. Whereas previous studies on women's sexual pleasure have focused on an adolescent demographic, this study is novel in exploring the sexual pleasure of adult women over the age of 18.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

- What are women who have sex with men's embodied experiences of sexual pleasure?
- How do women navigate their thoughts, feelings, ideas and experiences connected to sexual experiences?
- How does vulnerability and agency fit into women's experiences for sexual pleasure?

Sampling and recruiting

Purposive sampling was used in this study. The goal was to recruit a diverse set of women who have sex with men and who were over the age of 18. Because of the intimate nature of the topic, all interviews were done in person. This way the researcher had better access to reading the participants reactions and emotional state throughout the interview and adapt the interview guide accordingly.

Participants were recruited through a call for participants flyer being posted on social media with information about the study. The flyer called for women over the age of 18 that have sex with men who would like to volunteer 1.5 - 2 hours of their time to talk about their sexual pleasure with complete confidentiality. The flyer was posted several times on the researchers personal Facebook page and shared by several other people. The flyer was also posted in multiple public San Francisco related Facebook groups.

Women who were interested in participating contacted the researcher through email. A time and place was agreed upon to meet after confirming the women's eligibility for the study. At the time of the meeting, the participants were given information about the study and a chance to ask questions before they were asked to fill out an informed consent form. If the participant asked the researcher a personal question about the background for the study the researcher was open to answer and share her thoughts and personal story. Questions were mostly asked after the interview, as the participants seemed more comfortable asking those questions after sharing intimate details with the interviewer. Because of the intimate nature of the topic, it was highlighted that the participants could stop or pause the interview at any time or ask questions during the interview. Participants were told that they didn't have to answer all the questions if they didn't feel like it for whatever reason.

After introducing the interview structure, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire to collect demographic information. The interviews were audio recorded and all took between 46 minutes to 1 hours and 4 minutes, with most of them being about 1 hour long.

Setting

Interviews were conducted between October 2017 and February 2018. All interviews were conducted in person and there was no compensation for participants. The interviews took place in either private interview rooms at the Center for Research and

Education on Gender and Sexuality (CREGS) on 835 Market street in San Francisco or in reserved rooms in the library at San Francisco State University's main campus at 1600 Holloway Ave in San Francisco. These locations were selected to ensure the comfort and privacy of the participants.

The time and location of the interview were selected in agreement with the participant. Some interviews took place during the day and some during the evening. Some interviews were also conducted on the weekends. Participants were given informed consent forms at the beginning of the interview, and a chance to ask any questions before the recording started. After the recorded interview the participant was given a resource sheet of clinics, hotlines and similar resources to contact if they wished. Some examples from the resource list were the phone numbers to San Francisco Trauma Recovery/Rape Treatment Center at SF General Hospital, San Francisco Women Against Rape and Child Abuse Reporting. This whole process took approximately 1.5 hours, with the recorded interview itself lasting approximately 1 hour.

After the interview, participants had the opportunity discuss feelings that came up during the interview. Because of the intimate nature of the topic there was a possibility that intense memories or trauma could have been triggered by talking about their sexual experiences. Many of the participants were ultimately uplifted by discussing their sexuality and wanted to talk further about their experiences. For most interviews that meant chatting for about 5-15 minutes after the interview, but for one participant who had brought up stories of rape and sexual trauma the conversation lasted for over 1 hour.

Interview protocol

To answer the objectives of the study, an interview protocol was developed to ask the participants questions about their experience with sexual pleasure. The semi-structured form allowed for other stories, themes, and topics to surface. The definition of sexual pleasure was also left open, and for the women themselves to define. This ensured that the recording of women's experiences of sexual pleasure would be as inclusive as possible and not rely on preconceived notions.

The protocol was created around the participants talking about the last time they had sex and how that experience made them feel emotionally and physically both before, during and after the sexual experience. Because these were semi-structured interviews it allowed for unexpected topics and improvised follow up questions along the way. All participants covered the topics addressed by the guide, but more time was spent on some topics than others depending on what felt relevant to them. With all participants, unique topics came up and time was spent accordingly.

Eight main questions were created and each of them had potential follow ups to be used as needed. The interviews started with asking the participants what they think about when they hear the term sexual pleasure. After that they were asked to talk through the last time they had sex. Follow up questions to get the participant to talk more about their last sexual experience included "How did you feel that day?", "What did you do that day?", "How did your body feel?", "What did you think about during sex?" and "How

did you end up in a sexual situation?”. The amount of follow up questions used depended on what the participant said and how much they disclosed on their own initiative.

After talking through the last time the participant had sex they were asked to talk about a time their partner seemed to be enjoying the sex, but they themselves weren’t. Follow ups included “What happened?”, “How did you feel?”, and “Did you feel pressure to respond in a particular way?”

After this part of the interview protocol the participants were asked to talk about how they experience sex when they are alone. Follow up questions included “Do you masturbate?”, “How does it feel emotionally compared to sex with a partner?”, and “How does it feel physically compared to sex with a partner?” Sometimes the participant’s answers warranted follow up questions about the pleasure they had just described with a partner. Again, the semi-structured interview protocol allowed for the women to go wherever they wanted in their narratives on sexual pleasure.

Towards the end of the interview, the participants were asked: what advice they would give their younger selves about sex and pleasure, if there was anything they would like to add about the topic on sexual pleasure, what they thought was the most important thing that was touched on in the interview, and how it felt to talk about sexual pleasure in this setting. These open questions allowed the participants a final opportunity to add their views and definitions of pleasure. Having already talked about their pleasure for about an hour they would often add something different from what they responded in the opening question. The interviews ended when all of the topics in the interview protocol were

covered and when the participants seemed to feel like they didn't have anything more they wanted to add about sexual pleasure.

Participants

The 8 participants were between 21 and 35 years of age. 3 were between 21 and 25 (37.5 %), 1 participant was between 25 and 30 (12.5%), and 4 were between 31 and 35 (50%).

Half of the participants were women of color and the other half were white. Of the women of color 2 were Black/African American, 1 Hispanic/Latina and 1 Asian/Pacific Islander. Because the interview happened in person, all of the women lived in the San Francisco Bay Area at the time of the interview. Nationality was not specifically asked about but 2 of the participants mentioned having nationalities from countries other than United States during the interviews - one in East Africa and one in Europe.

All of the women had completed college or was currently in college. 4 women had completed college (50%), 3 had a master's degree (37.5 %) and 1 had some college education and was currently enrolled as a student (12.5%). All women reported having sex with men. 5 of the women were heterosexual (62.5%), 2 reported being queer (25%), and 1 bisexual (12.5%).

1 (12.5%) women reported being single while the other 7 (87.5%) reported being in relationships. 4 (50%) women said they were in long distance relationships, and 2

(25%) reported being in open relationships meaning they were also having sex with other partners in addition to their primary relationship.

Most of the women described themselves as very sexual and interested in sex during the interviews. 7 out of the 8 participants also described their sex drive as strong or very strong. On the questionnaire they were asked to answer how high they would rate their sex drive (libido). The question was taken from The Multidimensional Measure of Comfort With Sexuality Short Form in “Handbook of Sexuality-Related Measures” (Fisher 2011). The question was “How do you rate your sex drive (libido)?” and they had to pick on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 was “Very mild” and 6 was “Very strong”. 1 (12.5%) participant said 6 out of 6, 4 (50%) women rated it as 5 out of 6, 2 (25%) women rated it as 4 out of 6 and 1 (12.5%) rated it as 3 out of 6.

Ethical considerations

The main ethical consideration in this study was how to deal with emotions, discomfort, and trauma potentially being triggered when interviewing women about an intimate topic like sexual pleasure. This was addressed by having private interview rooms in public spaces, allowing time before and after the interview for questions and conversation, and by handing out a resource sheet of clinics, hotlines and similar resources for participants to contact if they wished.

There was also a risk of loss of privacy since the interviews were recorded and transcribed. To minimize the privacy risk, the researcher kept all recordings and

transcriptions on their password-locked computer. Only the researcher and advisers at San Francisco State University were allowed to access these data. To further protect privacy, the personally identifiable information of the participants was redacted or changed in the transcripts. Names were changed to pseudonyms.

Data analysis

The data analysis in this qualitative interview study started with the researcher taking notes after every interview with the research questions in mind. The stories, topics, questions or comments that really stood out were written down and then later reflected upon, alone, with advisers and colleagues in the Sexuality Studies master's program. For every interview these reflections and notes helped focus and develop the semi-structured interview process for the next interview in addition to keeping the interview protocol and follow up questions connected to the research questions.

The interviews were transcribed and to minimize the loss of privacy, names and other identifying information were changed. A thematic coding method was used to organize and categorize interview data into emergent themes with the aim of answering the research question.

The two following primary themes emerged during the data analysis:

- Experience of sexual pleasure as empowering
- Experience of sexual pleasure as vulnerability

The findings also cover two smaller themes that emerged:

- Participants wanting to please the researcher
- Race and culture in relation to sexual pleasure

All transcripts were coded using these primary codes and analyzed for nuances, consistencies and differences between participants. Demographic data were also included in the data analysis to identify possible demographic variables that might be at play. Quotes from the participants were then selected from the interviews to illustrate the findings and illuminate the topics discussed in the results.

Results

The following themes emerged during the data analysis: “Experience of sexual pleasure as empowering” and “Experience of sexual pleasure as vulnerability”. The results also cover two smaller themes that emerged: “Participants wanting to please the researcher” and “Race and culture in relation to sexual pleasure”.

These are the participants interviewed (names are pseudonyms):

- Anna: 22, White, completed college, heterosexual, in 4 year long distance relationship, 5 libido level out of 6
- Louise: 33, Asian/Pacific Islander, master’s degree, queer, in 3 year long open relationship, 5 libido level out of 6

- Rebecca: 31, White, completed college, heterosexual, in on and off long distance relationship, 5 libido level out of 6
- Ada: 33, Black/African American, master's degree, heterosexual, single, 6 libido level out of 6
- Samantha: 25, White, completed college, heterosexual, in 8 months long relationship, 4 libido level out of 6
- Emma, 35, White, master's degree, bisexual, in 3 year long distance relationship, 5 libido level out of 6
- Brianna: 21, Black/African American, some college, queer/bisexual, 6 months relationship, 3 libido level out of 6
- Daniela: 27, Hispanic/Latina, completed college, heterosexual, 1.5 years relationship, 4 libido level out of 6

Women's definition of sexual pleasure

"There's so many pieces of the puzzle you could still get pleasure from even if you don't have an orgasm" - Emma

The data revealed that most women don't define sexual pleasure purely as a physical sensation, but also as sensations related to emotional intimacy and trust. Seven out of eight women mentioned emotional closeness in some way. For example, when asked what they think about when they think about sexual pleasure, Anna said: "It's like what I enjoy during sex, everything around sex from like not just the act but before and

after, the whole picture I guess". Rebecca said: "I think pleasure for me very much is intertwined with emotional connection". Louise said, "I think physical intimacy and emotional intimacy both because I think both are important for sexual pleasure for me". Emma's first thought is that her pleasure comes through orgasm, but then adds that she also experiences sexual pleasure without the orgasm: "The pleasure of just being intimate with someone or the pleasure of giving pleasure to someone else and giving them an orgasm". Later, after talking about how she doesn't always have an orgasm when having sex with her current boyfriend, she says: "There's so much about this push that the only way that sex can be pleasurable is if there's orgasm. For so many experiences and for so many different people, that might not be the pinnacle of why there's pleasure there. There's so many pieces of the puzzle you could still get pleasure from even if you don't have an orgasm".

Brianna was the only participant who didn't bring up emotional connection as important to her pleasure, instead discussing masturbation: "I guess I think about masturbation first because that's the most pleasurable experience I've had. I'm 21 and I didn't start having sex until I was 19 but I have been masturbating since way before it. When I started having sex with people, I guess that's where some of the frustration came in because it wasn't as easy".

Most women in the study agreed that sexual pleasure is a wide group of feelings connected to both physical sensations and emotional intimacy agreeing that it's much more than having an orgasm.

Experience of sexual pleasure as empowering

“I felt like I had a gun” - Ada

All participants report multiple feelings of agency and empowerment regarding their sexual pleasure. Seven out of 8 rated their sex drive as very high, with many describing themselves as very interested in sex or as an above average sexual woman. Sexual pleasure is a positive force in their lives which makes them feel empowered and alive. Being able to communicate their sexual pleasure is crucial to their wellbeing. What specifically made each woman feel empowered varied from person to person, however some main categories of empowerment and agency emerged. The main themes included the ability to communicate, self-esteem and body image, equality, and having the choice to not prioritize sexual pleasure with a partner.

The ability to communicate

All participants, at some point in their interviews, highlighted the importance of good communication for sexual pleasure to be possible. Some define communication as verbally speaking about what they want while others mention the way their partners react to how they communicate with both their words and bodies.

Daniela connects telling her partner what she wants with what makes her feel good sexually: “The past couple of days it’s felt really good to be connected with my

partner and know that it's just us two getting to know each other again and again and again. I tell him what I want out of it and what I need out of our sexual moment together." Her responses, connected to agency, were linked to her past with sexual trauma and how she had a lively and vibrant sex life even through struggles with flashbacks and trauma. She talked about the importance of communicating with her boyfriend about her past, her likes and dislikes and being able to stop sex when needed: "I just go in this freeze mode which happens to victims of sexual assault. I feel that [it can] cause more trauma (...) It helps to really know about your body, know how you feel pleasure in different instances that you shouldn't feel ashamed about having sex."

Rebecca said that being able to identify and speak up about what she wants sexually is crucial to her pleasure, and that more recently this is something she has been able to do. She said: "It is when I'm having sex or I'm masturbating or I'm experiencing sexual pleasure it's some of when I feel most alive (...) I feel in touch with my body. And I'm usually a person who's very in my head."

Louise lit up when she talked about exploring her sexual pleasure and finding new things that she likes with partners: "I recently found that I really like pegging or topping guys. The porn that I'm searching for is women with strap-ons who are pegging guys. That's the stuff I really like and I like it a lot, especially if it's a bunch of women and they're demeaning this guy verbally and physically." Louise has also been involved in kink communities, sometimes goes to sex parties, and gets excited about trying new things. She is currently in an open relationship because she realized that she had a hard time feeling sexually satisfied when only having one sex partner. She talked about the

importance of being able to communicate her needs to her partner and negotiate the terms of the open relationship.

Samantha said: “I really only like having sex now with people that I’m like very comfortable with and comfortable enough to communicate everything with. And comfortable enough that I don’t really care, I’m not going to warn you if I haven’t shaved.” If Samantha feels like she needs to hide parts of her body or thoughts, it’s harder for her to get to a place to feel pleasure.

Self-esteem and body image

Rebecca said, “As someone that is sometimes caught up in not feeling like I am enough or worrying if other people really like me, I think that sex with a partner kind of is a really good antidote to that. And sex with myself, I am able to sort of break through some of that and just love myself. In the metaphorical and literal sense”. She specifically shows feelings of agency when describing one of her favorite sexual memories with her current partner. They normally engage in BDSM with planned out scenes, but this time was a rare occasion when sex spontaneously happened. Rebecca had a vibrator with her. She explained: “I was like let me control it because I know exactly where to put it that will feel the best and then I turned it up and he was like oh my god it is vibrating your whole pussy. And I was like oh yeah you can feel that? And I was like oh yeah, and it was cool. He is really experienced and I really like when I get to surprise him.”

Emma also reported that getting feedback that she is good at sex is part of her pleasure. “I was in a kink, well that I'm not really active in the kink community right now, but I was very active in the kink community over my life. I think claiming that submissive nature that you're just giving pleasure to your dominant or your top, was something that I really enjoyed doing. I got a lot of pleasure out of that. I still do. I think also, I've been told over the years, it's something that I'm good at. I like that feedback.”

Ada talked about how she felt body shamed growing up and how it affected her that the outside world kept describing her body in negative ways. Sexual pleasure then became a way to reclaim her own body: “That's when the self-pleasure became something that was more needed and that's when I started discovering that by touching myself (...) The sensitive part of my body gave me the strength and the confidence to be able to accept a man in, in my life and, and have a battle in the bed that gives me a lot of confidence in me. Yeah. Actually, that's true. That gave me really a lot of confidence in every relationship, any intercourse, any pleasure, like instinct, pleasure, I've always wanted to have it for me first.” Ada felt as if her sexual pleasure gave her a greater understanding of her body making her relationship to her body more positive. When talking about taking control of her own pleasure, she said: “I felt more a woman, more responsible and more naughty. I felt like I had a gun. In like, I was protected by my body because I'm capable of having that, I'm capable of speaking a different language. I'm capable of flirting because I know that I can get that, that ecstasy.” Ada also acknowledged that some of the agency comes from having something that she learned society applauded, and that also gave her a sense of power. “I knew that I had like a, um,

like a moisturized, like a very moisturized wet pussy, you know, all those kinds of things that people talk about on the video, on the raps and hip-hop and everything that I had that. And that I can have it for myself and I can control, it's really messed up, but I can control men with it."

Equality

Three of the eight women also mentioned the feeling of being equal to their partner as one of the good parts of having sex. When Anna talked about the last time she had sex and how it made her feel in that moment, she responded: "I feel sexy like empowered and desired and good about myself and my body. (...) I think that the feeling of empowerment comes from the feeling of being desired as a woman. I don't know it feels like rewarding that your man desires you, that he is into you physically. At that point I feel equal with him. Because of our age difference and other aspects I don't always feel like 50-50 in the relationship but at that point I do because I feel like we are equal and he is just as into me as I am into him."

The idea of feeling like an equal is also brought up by Rebecca when describing passionate, spontaneous sex with a partner: "I think that neither of us is in control and we're sort of meeting like equals." Ada, too, mentions enjoying the feeling of equality: "I've embraced my sexuality to become a battlefield and I am as equal as my partner, you know."

Choosing not to prioritize pleasure with a partner

Emma reported the least experiences of pleasure with a partner connected to feeling empowered or having agency. Her descriptions of pleasure and sex were often linked to safety and love. Emma also reported not having a lot of sex because of being in a monogamous relationship with a partner living in a different city who has a lower sex drive than her. Recently, she went 6 months without having sex which had been a challenge for her, “I think the summer was a really rough patch where I was at my wit's end because it's been six months and I've never gone that long in a committed relationship. It was very, very trying for me, I think.” But because of the emotional intimacy and the prospect of starting a family, she was still enjoying her partnership: “We are mutually very compatible. We also saw eye to eye on life goals. For instance, most of the guys I dated in my life didn't want children. That was a big, this person actually wants to have children and potentially with me. That's been a nice thing to experience with someone.” She explains that although sex is important to her, there's other things that might be equally as important. “I'm super happy, so that makes up for the fact that I'm not having sex every week or whatever it is, that I would ideally like,” she said. Feelings of empowerment are more evident with Emma when she talks about masturbation: “I think it's even almost a little more important to me to be able to give that to myself because I may not always orgasm with a partner (...) When he was going through a really rough patch where he was not feeling very sexual due to just life stressors and things, I definitely became resorted to buying a new sex toy and be like, I haven't pulled up porn in a while, but I'm going to do that.”

Ada feels like sexual pleasure defines her as a woman: "I think it's very important because it's something that, it's like, it's like having breakfast. It's as important as taking care of yourself. (...) But I think it's really important because it's a, it defines me as a, as a woman and it reminds me of my, the treasure that I'm holding as a, as a woman." Ada talks about her sexuality and pleasure as a power and a way to "win" over men in the "battle in bed". She also says that she currently is not as sexually active because her life is up in the air because of housing and job changes and that she needs to feel like her life is a bit more established to be able to prioritize her pleasure.

Experience of sexual pleasure as vulnerability

"It's unfortunate to be in a position where you feel so uncomfortable that you have to lie about your sexual pleasure." - Samantha

All participants reported experiences of vulnerability or loss of agency when speaking about their sexual pleasure. For some women these feelings mostly came up while talking through their most recent sexual experience, for others it mostly came up during other parts of the interview. Categories of vulnerability and loss of agency emerged in the data analysis process included social norms and expectations, pain and discomfort, sexual violence, and pressure to please.

Social norms and expectations

Several participants brought up general norms and expectations of society and men when talking about their sexual pleasure. Anna showed frustration over gender stereotypes: “Women are kind of overlooked or there are like stereotypes about what female sexuality and sexual pleasure is (...) the biggest one is that like women aren't like as into sex as like men.” This is something that Anna struggled with, especially when meeting her current boyfriend who she said has a lower sex drive than she does. “It made me feel weird and it made me feel like not satisfied completely like I should be naturally, like I shouldn't have to want more than I'm getting you know?”

Louise grew up in a Catholic family and talked about how sex was both ignored and misrepresented. “There's so much guilt and no talk about sex. Sex is just like, I don't know. It just doesn't exist, or it is something that is grossly misinterpreted. I feel like a lot of my shame comes from that. It is just my upbringing so trying to undo those tapes in my head of what is normal or who cares if it's normal, and those things.”

Samantha felt a strong frustration when she started having sex at 16, “We're like very socialized into everything that we do and all of a sudden you're supposed to get into this very intimate setting where all of those boundaries kind of go out the window. And you kind of go based on of what you seen in movies and it's very mechanical and you're so nervous about how everything looks and how everything is supposed to feel and it's also so new so that for me there is no possible way that I was going to have an orgasm.

And I really didn't want to have sex because I was like I really don't like doing this and I'm really self-conscious the whole time."

Ada, who has worked closely with women in her career, was frustrated over seeing women in general struggle with their sexualities. "In working a lot with women, seeing that some women (...) don't have the same luxury that I have. They can be deprived from the that, that, that right they have to be expressing their sexuality too or, or exploring their sexuality." She also added: "Sexuality is something that, that, that belongs to us as people. But, but the society had made it their own that we enslaved ourselves of our bodies sometimes."

Brianna defined herself as queer and a sex nerd who had educated herself about sex and sexuality from a young age. Her first sexual partner also identified as queer, "I thought because they're queer and I was queer, I was pretty sex-positive, they seemed relatively sex-positive but they still pressured me to do stuff, and just really weird and just ew. " Brianna knew about gender norms and heteronormativity and thought that this knowledge would protect her from bad sexual experiences when she started being sexually active. "I had this idea that everything that went wrong with sex had to do with straight people, like heterosexual sex in a relationship, and I was going to be this radical queer like femme who knew all about emotions and queer sex and that it was not going to be that way. My first time was everything that I did not want it to be." She added, "Don't think just because you're in a queer relationship or like doing queer things that it's less of a risk of being harmful".

Pain and discomfort

Feeling pain and discomfort is something that most of the participants touch on while talking about their sexual pleasure. During Rebecca's last sexual encounter, her partner wanted to have anal sex but because she felt the anal sex was rushed, she didn't feel much pleasure from it. "I was feeling pressured to be in the moment and I was feeling pressured to keep an eye on the time. And then frankly the sex, and the anal sex was rushed and it wasn't as pleasurable as it usually has been. (...) Trying to rush anal sex, that sensation wasn't really the best. (...) It burned a little. And it was more a thing I was doing than a thing that felt good." When asked if she communicated any of this to her partner, she said: "I clearly showed it indirectly by talking a lot through my ball gag, even though we eventually took that off, but I don't think I was directly saying like I worry, this is a bad idea, I feel rushed, I am not feeling as good as I usually do. I did not say any of that."

Samantha had a recent sexual experience with a Tinder date that she thought was awful: "We went on like five Tinder dates and then we like slept together. And the whole thing was awful, to me, I think he liked it. It was very mechanical. And it was just like kind of like, and the lights were on, it was quiet and I just felt so uncomfortable I didn't think that I could possibly say anything. And it went on for a really long time and I think eventually I just said I want you to come and, and then he came. Yeah. I think he might have said like oh did you come? I don't remember if I told him, I have faked an orgasm

before, unfortunately. You are not supposed to do that, but I have." She explains that she especially faked orgasms and performed pleasure when she was younger. "I have faked a fair share of orgasms. (...) It's unfortunate to be in a position where you feel so uncomfortable that you have to lie about your sexual pleasure. So I think that like my goal with my sexual pleasure is to not feel so uncomfortable that I'm lying about what is feeling good or when it's feeling good. Because that's not really connecting."

Discomfort when trying to access sexual pleasure is familiar to Brianna. She talked about the last time she had sex with her boyfriend and they tried a new position. After sex, the boyfriend told her that she was moving in a way that made his penis hit her vaginal wall differently, "He said this stuff that made me feel like he knew my body better than I did. That felt kind of shitty. (...) It feels weird personally for someone else to tell me about my body." Brianna has also had to work on feelings of discomfort connected to oral sex, explaining that it has been a gradual development for her getting to a place where she can perform oral sex on people without a condom: "I was low-key a sex nerd so I surrounded myself with materials that were very pro-condoms and pro-barriers and stuff. Then when I started having sex with people who were not as worried about that, that prevented me from doing a lot of things. (...) The first time I'd ever put a penis in my mouth he wore a condom so I was happy but he did not like it. That really broke my spirit and then eventually I just got around to going down on him without a condom." With her current partner, blowjobs can still feel uncomfortable, "A couple of time where I was like, "All right. I want to keep going so that he can feel good" even though I felt like my face is about to fall off. Then the very first time we did penetration,

I felt like he was into it but it was very just new and painful for me. I tried to hold it out for a little bit and then I was finally like, "All right, can we take a break? I don't want to do this anymore." The last time she had sex, her boyfriend was on top of her in a way that made her legs hurt. "He seemed like he was having a good ass time so I was like, "All right, I'll ride it out for a couple of minutes." Then finally I was like, "Okay. This hurts a little bit"."

When Daniela talked about the last time she had sex with her boyfriend, she said she didn't come through penetrative sex. Her boyfriend came and she asked him if he was OK with her making herself come. "I tried to get him at first joining me. Him fingering me and then I was like, "No. I'm done. I'll just finish myself off." When asked if she wanted him to join her in making her come she replied: "I did. Because that's like, "Okay, I haven't done this in a while where I've asked him," and usually, I just finish myself. I was like, "Well, I want to try to see if I may feel comfortable with it." At some point, I just felt like, "Eh, I don't feel as comfortable." I'd rather just focus on myself. I could tell he was tired. I was like, "Okay. I'll just let you be in and you can go do your own thing." Daniela also said that she doesn't feel as comfortable with having her boyfriend finger her because of past experiences when she was a teenager. An older boyfriend would finger her when she was 13 and she didn't like the sensations, "I felt for a long time fingering was just really disgusting because of those flashbacks. If I start to get that I'll shut it off." If Daniela comes during penetration, continued sex can feel uncomfortable. "I try to time it where it would be when he orgasms so I'm not orgasmic before him because I feel, for me personally if I orgasm and then he's still penetrating I feel some

discomfort. (...) I try to time it where I'm orgasmic with him or it's like after he gets done so I'm not feeling discomfort after an orgasm."

Louise said she is comfortable speaking up if something feels painful or uncomfortable during sex, saying that sometimes she can get triggered in a way where it's harder to speak up. One time she had sex with a guy who talked a lot about himself and didn't ask her questions. At one point he wanted her to give him a hand job and while she was touching him he was talking about something that was really uncomfortable for Louise. She became quiet and stiff, but the guy kept going and eventually got on top of her and started penetrative vaginal sex. "He's on me and was just ravaging me sexually, and I'm like this. I'm stiff, and my arms, I feel like my fists are clenched, and I'm shaking, and eventually, I just burst out sobbing. He gets off of me, and I'm ugly crying because there's snot running down me."

Sexual violence

Two participants reported experiencing sexual violence. Ada experienced being touched by her uncle when she was younger, "I managed to, to, uh, to tell him, to tell him calmly without being aggressive for offending him, keeping respecting him and then making sure that nothing happens. I told him like, yeah, you love me, but like your daughter because I have the same age as your son, your youngest son. And I said, uncle, I'm not comfortable for you touching my body like that. And then so I decided from that

moment that (...) my body it's me who has to control it first, feel it first before communicating with another person."

Daniela talked about several experiences with rape and sexual assault. "I've had sexual trauma with somebody laying on my side and then my back being against them. Sometimes, being in that position will trigger. Sometimes blowjobs do as well because I had another sexual trauma where someone forced me to give him a blowjob and there's that. Sometimes having doggy style and being in that position will sometimes trigger because I had another emotional trauma." Daniela will sometimes stop sex because of flashbacks and has told her boyfriend about some of her traumatic experiences, but she is also working on being in the moment and getting past the trauma: "I try not to dwell on that. I try not to dwell on the emotional past like pain". Sometimes she pushes herself to keep going, "I think at times I feel I want to push myself per se to let him fully enjoy himself. It's not really pressure from him, it's pressure from internally (...) Obviously, if I'd say, if I say no, he's okay with it. It's just like I don't want to because I don't want him to feel like, as a woman, we want to get pleasure from our men being satisfied. If I feel he's not being satisfied by me and has to go to masturbation and we're having sex and I felt like I'm doing it to service our relationship because I'm not living in that moment when I should be in." When Daniela works on these issues during sex she doesn't always feel very supported. Her boyfriend knows about the trauma, but Daniela indicates that she would want more emotional support, especially after sex: "He doesn't pressure me but he'll just go automatically until finishing himself off then. There's not really a physical

support, he won't hold me afterwards or try to comfort me in a physical way. He'll ask me if I'm okay but I guess there's no cuddling afterwards to make me feel better."

Pressure to please

One re-occurring theme of vulnerability and sexual pleasure was feeling pressure to please their partners. Anna said, "You know for me if I'm not having, if I'm not enjoying the sex I will still make him finish you know, you know finish the act." She continued explaining why she wouldn't want to stop sex she wasn't completely enjoying: "I try to never stop. I might have done that once ever, maybe twice (...) So you are not on the same page and that sucks but I feel like it is quite selfish to do that abruptly".

Rebecca felt pressure to please her partner during her last sexual encounter. They were spending a weekend together in a friend's apartment and Rebecca was flying home the same day and because of the time constraint they were going back and forth on if they would have time for sex and what sex they would have. "I was very worried, I was the one who had to get on a plane and I'm worried about time management. (...) And also my perfectionism and my fear that if I chose wrong he would be upset (...) I was so worried about getting it right, and making sure he was happy, but also knowing what I wanted, so I was really caught up in that in my head." Since they engage in BDSM her partner decided to just make a move and put a harness on her and make her do laundry. Rebecca was enjoying the pain-pleasure from the harness and the power play and trying not to worry about the time. "We had gone to a sex toy shop on that trip together and bought a

ball gag so he put that on me. And it was funny, we sort of remarked, I think because, just again I wasn't fully present and I was worried and the back of my brain was worrying I ended up kind of talk through the ball gag and he was sort of making fun of me that I was like talking more with that in than I normally did". Rebecca and her partner then have penetrative sex, anal and vaginal. "It was very overwhelming and we rushed and both of us I think were like internally nervous". Rebecca didn't tell her partner any of this, "because we've kind of made the decision to go for it and get what, get done what we could in the time that we had. And I kind of felt like I made that bed and I had to lie in it." Rebecca also talks about a man she used to have sex with a few years ago. She never really enjoyed sleeping with him, but hoped it would get better. She never talked to him about it because she felt like he didn't want to go there so, during sex, she felt pressure from within herself to "at least act like I was enjoying it and not like shame him in the moment."

Describing her last sexual encounter with a guy, Ada shared that she felt she wasn't getting wet because the guy didn't want to kiss and listen to what she wanted: "I was like, yeah, but if you don't kiss me I'm not gonna get wet, you're not going to get whatever you want. And then he stopped a little bit and said, hey Ada, why are you always selfish?" She decided to just go along with the sex and explains she did it as a duty: "Like I don't feel like I have all the pleasure with you with that today, but just come. That's it. And then when he finished, he cuddled me." She said: "When he doesn't come, I feel like insecure. Not insecure, but I feel like I didn't win the battle. So when he came I just felt that I'm released."

This feeling of pressure and release is something Ada has also experienced in another recent sexual encounter with a man. One afternoon, she decided to go over to a guy's place to watch a movie and she already knew going over that she didn't want to have sex with him "but he really insisted and they started moving my clothes because, you know, he was flirty and he was pushy, so I was giving myself in and that really play a, really played with the fire because I know that my pussy didn't want it, but because I felt like vulnerable and that was just like removing my clothes at the end." She starts giving him a blowjob and explains: "I just wanted to give him head in a way that he won't be able to fuck me. You know? (...) And then he came like, like it was gross. I even had a fight with him, not fight but I was like you're gross. Like, how do you come just without warning me, like I almost swallowed your sperms." After that meeting Ada doesn't text him and doesn't want to see him again. "I was not ashamed. I was not ashamed or didn't feel anything about doing the blow job. I really didn't feel anything. It was just like let me give your freedom and you give me mine."

When Brianna tried a new position with her boyfriend, it was partly because of her own desire and mostly because she thought he wanted to. He asked her after the sex why she wanted to try something new. "I said, "It's because I thought you would like it and I thought this is what you wanted to do." I thought that's what you wanted to do because in the past, he sort of mentioned that he wanted to keep progressing in our relationship instead of doing the same things because I didn't want to do other things. When I finally did those other things, I did it because I thought he would like it and mildly because of my own curiosity." In another part of the interview she said: "I feel

like I've conditioned myself to want to pleasure my partner." Brianna also feels pressured to have an orgasm in a certain amount of time and rarely has any orgasms with partners. "I feel bad that it's taking so long because it usually takes a while if they're trying to make me orgasm or make me feel close to that. Then, I feel concerned about like, "Oh my God. It's taking too long." That keeps me from just feeling whatever pleasure might be there," she said and then later in the interview "I feel pressured to not be the one to just lay there even though that's what I would enjoy the most (...) I try to give more and force myself to, that's extreme language but encourage myself to find the joy in that too."

Masturbation does make Brianna come. She uses vibrators when masturbating but has not really incorporated the vibrator into her sex life with her boyfriend. She would like to, but the times she has tried she has gotten the impression that he doesn't want it: "There were a couple of times where I was masturbating and we were in bed together just chilling out. I was like, "I'm just going to start masturbating." he said, "That's fine." After a while, he'll feel left out. I feel bad about that (...) I brought it up when we were talking once. I was like, "Would you be okay with mutual masturbation or if we're masturbating and laying together, then we can still be together and be sexual." I think he said something like, "Why would I masturbate when you're there and you can just do stuff?" Then, one time I was humping his leg and he was like, "I feel like you're just using me." [laughs] I felt a little bad. Those are the times that he communicated that."

Samantha had a sexual experience that didn't feel good, but decided not to stop it and just let the guy finish: "I think that what really sucks about being open and saying like I'm probably not going to come, is that guys just feel disappointed, and it doesn't

have to do, sometimes it seems like it doesn't really have as much to do with you as it has to do with their success. Like it doesn't have to do with how you feel, it has to do with how they feel about the fact that they couldn't do something. (...) Yeah, sometimes like it's really hard to say that I don't want to do this anymore. And I have definitely been in situations where I didn't say it. And it's unfortunate."

Emma recalls a time when she didn't feel physically connected to a man she was having sex with. She knew it wasn't going to be good for her but she decided to go through with the sex and pretend he was someone else to try to get herself more into it. When asked if she considered just stopping the sex and telling him it wasn't feeling good, she responded: "I couldn't do that to somebody. You're internal pressure to go along with it and just be like, "Okay. Yes. That was nice. Thanks." I don't know. It's hard in the moment to really deflate a person specially with male sexuality. I don't want to be like, "This is not working." In the middle of sex. It's just more difficult to do, for me anyways."

Self-esteem and body image

Self-esteem and body image are also brought up when participants express experiences of sexual pleasure as vulnerability. When talking to Rebecca about why she enjoys her partner wanting spontaneous sex, she said: "I think I just have a lot of doubt that anyone actually wants me, and even with him who is like naked and in the room and wanting to get with me all weekend is like just that voice that's saying that any minute

now he is going to realize you are not actually that hot or desirable and he's going to be like what am I doing here." Sometimes Rebecca masturbates because she feels lonely and misses someone wanting her. "Every once in a while I get really lonely, I think because I really want a companion and a partner and a regular romantic intimacy and I don't have that. I've been kind of single for a very long time except for like these on and off partners but who are never going to stick around or be like a regular, uhm, a regular partner."

Louise has a similar way of thinking. Her last sexual encounter was with a guy who made her nervous because he didn't touch her initially, and touch is very important to her. She explains: "I think it eases a lot of insecurity about somebody liking me (...) If someone is excited to touch me then I'm really happy and I feel more secure (...) That's why physical contact is important to me because it signals, "You like me." This is like comforting and assuring." Louise suggested using a butt plug on her during penetrative vaginal sex. She told him what she wanted but still felt nervous: "I remember this, I feel super anxious because I'm like, "Oh, my God. This is a new experience with this person." I feel like he's judging me because anything related to anal is taboo, or it's dirty. There are these thoughts in my head. One is like, "I'm super horny, and I want him to fuck me." The other was, "Oh, my God. I feel kind of ashamed." After the butt plug is in they have sex, then take a break, then keep having sex several more times. Louise can communicate certain wants, but not all. "The other thing I'm also thinking-- so that's another thing that I'm ashamed around depending on whether or not I've had an explicit conversation with that partner which is like, "Hey, can I call you Daddy when we're having sex?" I feel there is particular headspace that comes with saying that word that makes it 100% better

for me because it also connotes feeling secure and comfortable with the person." Because of the shame Louise never brings up her interest and kept thinking "Oh my God, don't say Daddy. Don't say Daddy" during sex. They end up having sex four times that evening but by the time he leaves she has not had an orgasm. "I was a little sad because I feel like, "Man, I wish he could have fucked me three more times (...) The key thing here is that when I have sex most of the time with my male partners, I usually don't orgasm. I had never orgasmed from PIV [sic: penis in vagina] sex (...) He also went down on me but when he left, and this is usually the case, I usually masturbate with my vibrator, and then I go to bed." The guy going down on her didn't feel good so she stopped it. "It was just more like, "I don't really need to come," or, "You don't really need to focus on me. We can do the fucking." When Louise is asked if she would consider bringing the vibrator into sex with partner to try to have an orgasm, she says that she has on occasions, but it depends how comfortable she is with the partner. "I have this thought that I'm wasting someone's time, or I take too much time to come, and I don't want to burden someone (...) I'm scared that I am wasting their time, or that they're getting tired of it, or they're bored because I need specific things to be able to come."

Participants' wanting to please the researcher

"I don't know it's like hard because you never like put these things into words" - Anna

Several participants showed signs of wanting to give the correct answers to the questions they were asked, or to respond in a way that they felt were expected. After

saying that one of her answers wasn't a good one and then hesitating on what to say next, Samantha asked "Do people get graphic in these interviews?" After being reassured that some do and that she can be as graphic as she is comfortable with, she proceeded to describe her last sexual encounter. Later she hesitates again and asks, "Is that an okay answer or should I keep talking?" and then comments "I think it is that I want my answers to be like the perfect answer or something."

Anna asked things like "I don't know if we're getting sidetracked or I'm like talking too much?", "Maybe I'm like a really complicated case?", and "Are these good examples?" Towards the end of the interview when asked how she felt about talking about sexual pleasure she summarized: "I don't know it's like hard because you never like put these things into words (...) When we do talk about it on rare occasions with friends, I feel like it's so like, it's not natural and it's filtered and you're thinking "oh what can I say, what can I not say, what should I say, what should I not say" and I'm unsure what to share."

Some of the participants also reflected on what it's like to speak about sexual pleasure, in general. Brianna said, "Ironically, when I was not having sex, that's when I talked to other people the most about having sex. When I started having sex, I talked about it a little bit with my friends but when I did talk about sex, and this is still true now, I rarely talk about it relating to myself. I talk about sex away from me." When asked how she felt about then talking about pleasure in the interview setting she responded, "It felt pretty cool. Yes, I feel like I've read and listened to a lot people talk about this but I've

never been the one to say the things. I feel like I'm in the other world now and that feels cool."

Daniela was on a similar page as Brianna: "It's good to push your boundaries on what you think you can't talk about because you surprise yourself. I don't know. People should just be more open to it." Anna said, "So I just knew that I would like learn a lot about myself, just about stepping back and talk about it. So that was like really really awesome and important and I think that a lot of people would benefit from that if they had that opportunity (...) It felt good, it felt good being able to talk about it and not be judged. Yea, and just like talk about it openly, probably wishing that it happened more in general life."

Race and culture in relation to sexual pleasure

"I think squirting at same time is a very beautiful thing, but at the same time it's, it's a very patriarchic, egocentric practice." - Ada

Race and culture are not explicitly mentioned much during these interviews but is brought up a few times. Louise described the partner that she experienced being triggered with as a "white cis het male", otherwise the race of partners isn't mentioned.

Cultural differences were brought up a few times in the interview with Ada. She is from an East African country and talked about having her vaginal lips pulled and stretched by female relatives growing up because it is believed that larger lips were meant

to “hug” the penis better and “close” the vagina when not having sex. Ada commented: “I felt like a little bit offended or like attacked but she was, my big sister so for me she was doing something good”. She later talks to someone about it and the pulling stops. When discussing when she started having sex she said”: “My vagina was deformed because of that pulling”.

Ada also brings up squirting: “It's something that is very important in my country, (...) they call it sacred water. And it's, I don't think, when I squirt, I don't think that I have an orgasm. It's like I squirt and I love it because I know that it's killing, not killing but it's making the, the men my, I am dominating him. Like for a fact the this you, you're not going anywhere because you need that water.” She also adds: “It's believed that it's the, the man in a patriarchic country of course, the men has done his job to, to give the women pleasure. And the woman has expressed her pleasure like with that moaning. Ah, it's like a clear and factual pleasure. And which makes the men even more manly. You know what I mean? Because they're not. Yeah, I got you because I know how, I know how to give you pleasure. That's, I think squirting at same time is a very beautiful thing, but at the same time it's, it's a very patriarchic, egocentric practice.”

Discussion

Historically, women have been left on their own in search of sexual pleasure. Women's sexuality has been pathologized, ignored, and often only studied through an androcentric lens. Today a discourse of empowerment and agency is connected to

women's sexuality. Women see themselves as individuals with agency in the pursuit of pleasure. At the same time, studies still show that women who have sex with men are the ones who are less likely to achieve orgasm when having sex with a partner. Women also often fake and perform pleasure for their partners.

More research is needed to understand the myriad complexities connected to women's pleasure. This interview study aims to explore how sexually active women experience sexual pleasure, how they navigate their thoughts, emotions and ideas around their sexual experiences, and what the main challenges for a sexual woman who have sex with men today are. By interviewing 8 women about their sexual pleasure, this study describes women's experiences with sexual pleasure through their own narratives.

Through the two emerging themes in this study, experience of sexual pleasure as empowering and experience of sexual pleasure as vulnerability, a pleasure gap becomes apparent. The way women talk about themselves as sexually empowered women in search of pleasure does not always match with the experiences of sexual pleasure they are having.

Women's definition of sexual pleasure

It is easy to make the mistake to center the orgasm when talking about pleasure, which is something that a lot of studies on sexual pleasure have done. But since 7 out of the 8 women mentioned emotional closeness in one form another as important to their sexual pleasure, it is crucial to keep the definition of pleasure open and let the women

themselves shape the definitions. Sexual pleasure means different sensations and emotions for different people.

When talking about their most recent sexual experiences most of the participants would bring up things like emotional connection, feeling loved, feeling adventurous, and other emotions not specifically connected to the physical sensations of sexual pleasure. It's clear that when women define pleasure it is a complex and dynamic experience that changes based on mood, situation, partner, and feelings in the body.

Pleasure is volatile; something can feel good one time and not another. This shift can also occur suddenly, over the course of a single sexual encounter. Something can start off as feeling fantastic and then suddenly flip over to being uncomfortable or even painful. As a result, defining what sexual pleasure is becomes less of a priority, and instead defining what is needed for sexual pleasure to thrive emerges as important.

Experience of sexual pleasure as empowering

The ability to communicate

All of the participants in this study at some point expressed thoughts and feelings of empowerment and agency when talking about their sexual pleasure. One of the ways that they experienced agency was through the ability to communicate about their pleasure. The communication could either be with friends, themselves, or with their sexual partners. It was equally important for the women to feel space to communicate openly

about their pleasure and also that their thoughts were genuinely listened to and appreciated by their partners. One important thing for the women in terms of communication is that they themselves can articulate it. The feeling of empowerment and agency in women is very much rooted in their ability to know and articulate what they want, what feels good and what doesn't feel good. Samantha, who was one of the participants who reported the least pain, discomfort and trauma throughout her interview when talking about her sexual pleasure said: "I really only like having sex now with people that I'm like very comfortable with and comfortable enough to communicate everything with." Communication seems to be an important factor in women's ability to feel empowered and to both experience positive sexual pleasure and eliminate experiences of vulnerability.

Another important aspect of communication is the way their partners respond when they speak up, in addition to their partners ability to locate and communicate their own needs and the mutual needs for the sex to be good. Participants expressed a wish to know what feels good for their partner and what makes their partner able to relax more in the sexual experience.

The feelings of empowerment didn't mean that the sex needed to be void of pain or discomfort; it is more that the way the discomfort was dealt with had to be in a way that made the participants feel seen. In a way, they wished to be comfortable in their discomfort. For instance, Daniela was the one who talked the most about sexual trauma like rape and abuse during her interview. In her relationship with her current boyfriend, she had accepted that trauma would be triggered at times during sex. It was the way her

boyfriend reacted to her flashbacks that mattered and decided her comfort level, not as much that they happened at all.

The communication with oneself is also important. Exploring one's own body and fantasies was a way that some of the women expressed feelings of empowerment. For instance, Louise lit up when she talked about exploring her sexual pleasure and having recently figured out that she likes pegging.

Overall, communication has to happen on several levels for the participants to most likely feel sexual pleasure. First, they need to communicate with their own bodies and know what they like and want in any given moment. Second, they need the ability to speak up about their needs, especially when needs change in the moment. Third, they need a partner that is able to communicate their wants and needs. And lastly, their partner needs to be able to be a good listener and understand their partner's wants both through verbal language and body language.

Self-esteem and body image

Sexual pleasure is also connected to self-esteem and body image. This relationship appears to be circular; women feel better about themselves and their bodies when they have good sexual pleasure, and women have a better chance at accessing sexual pleasure if they feel good about themselves and their bodies. This can be related to the aforementioned ability to communicate. When feeling good about yourself, it might be easier to speak up about your needs.

The two women who said they rarely experience orgasms during sex with a partner, but who easily could orgasm when masturbating, both said things that showed signs of having trouble communicating their pleasure. Brianna said that she would be thinking "Oh my God. It's taking too long" when a partner would try to make her come. So instead of communicating what would assist in her pleasure she decides that it's not needed and that sex with a partner is good enough without the orgasm. Louise showed similar signs when saying "I have this thought that I'm wasting someone's time, or I take too much time to come, and I don't want to burden someone" when explaining why she doesn't communicate more with her partner about the things that might make her experience an orgasm.

Self-esteem and body image can also be connected to feelings of adventure, exploration, and trying new things. Some of the women lit up and told their most positive and passionate stories about pleasure when talking about exploring sex and finding out what they like. Figuring out something new that gave them sexual pleasure made them feel good about themselves and empowered. Some of the women engaged in kink, BDSM or sex parties and some of the women were in open relationships where the ability to explore sexually outside their primary relationship was part of it. The empowerment of exploration seemed to come from two main factors: The rush of learning something new about oneself and the pleasure that comes with it, and the rush of seeing how the partner got pleasure from it. Feeling like a sexually adventurous woman with high sex drive seemed important to several of the participants.

In addition, giving pleasure to the partner seems to be an important factor in what made these women feel empowered. Feeling “good at sex” and able to give pleasure made many of them feel good about themselves. How the pleasure from giving pleasure was expressed differed among the participants. Some said it made them feel like they were good at sex, while others felt like they were more of a woman, and some described it as winning a war in bed. Overall, it was common that giving pleasure gave pleasure. Only one didn’t express much pleasure when talking about her boyfriend’s pleasure. For her it seemed more about the expectations of what sex is supposed to be and being nice that was her motivation to giving pleasure.

Equality

Three of the participants described feelings of equality related to sexual pleasure. This could be because they don’t experience being equal to men in their regular lives, but when meeting a man on an intimate level and feeling wanted that equality is experienced as leveled out. Anna mentioned that her partner is a bit older and that the age difference and other aspects makes her not always feel equal to him. However, in bed, she feels like they are equal. Women in a patriarchal society aren’t equal to men in a lot of ways, but sexuality might be an arena where those inequalities could feel leveled out.

Choosing not to prioritize pleasure with a partner

Some of the women give examples of choosing not to prioritize their pleasure, either with a specific partner or in their current lives more generally. While they appreciate sexual pleasure, have had experiences of it and know what they like, they decide that in the current relationship or situation they're in it's not something they want to pursue. It could be either because they know pleasure will come later and it's just not the right time, place or person, or because there are other non-sexual pleasures that are more important.

Ada talked about how she is at a place in her life where sex and sexuality isn't a priority. Her job and living situation was up in the air and she felt she had to fix those things to be able to prioritize her sexual pleasure. Emma, on the other hand, has things sorted out and is in a great long-term relationship; however, her partner doesn't want to have sex as often as she does. This isn't something she would choose, but because the relationship otherwise gave her a lot of good things, like commitment, plans of starting a family, and emotional connection, she seemed OK with sexual pleasure with a partner not being a big part of her life. For both of them the lack of sexual pleasure was a choice and something they had reflected upon. This shows that even though women view themselves as highly sexual, interested in sex and sexually empowered, sexual pleasure doesn't need to be a big part of their lives. Sometimes other pleasures or circumstances are more important to them than the sexual pleasure.

*Experience of sexual pleasure as vulnerability*Social norms and expectations

Of the eight participants, six talked about sexual pleasure as problematic for women in general because of social norms and stereotypes. One thing that several of the participants mentioned was their frustration with the stereotype that women don't have as strong of a sexual drive as men do. This is interesting for a couple of reasons and a challenging stereotype on many levels. Firstly, seven out of the eight women described themselves as having a high sex drive and a few of them also mentioned that they thought their sex drive was above average. However, if women experience a stereotype of women in general having less sexual desire than men, then even modestly sexually active woman might experience themselves as someone with a high sex drive. Perhaps there are many women out there who have same sex drives as men, but because of this stereotype think that they are different or above average. Or perhaps men more often describe their sex drives as low or average because they perceive a stereotype that men have really high sex drives. These results indicate that it's difficult to measure someone's sex drive, especially based on their own description. How high or low sex drives we have is very subjective.

Second, several of the women complained about having male partners currently or in the past with lower sex drives than them. The issue seemed to be mostly because it didn't let them have sex as often as they would want, but Anna also said: "It made me feel weird and it made me feel like not satisfied completely like I should be naturally, like I shouldn't have to want more than I'm getting you know?". So even though Anna is

aware of the stereotype of gendered sex drive, she still believes she should be sexually satisfied more by her boyfriend “naturally”. This indicates that knowing about the stereotype doesn’t necessarily take away your own expectations produced by societal norms.

How sex is talked about overall is also something that several women brought up. Louise mentioned that there wasn’t a lot of talk about sex in her religious upbringing, and when it did come up it was often connected with guilt. Samantha said that because of the lack of communication you kind of go off what you have seen in movies when you start having sex. The lack of talking about sex seemed like a frustration for several of the women, and it seemed like they believed that verbally communicating about sex more generally would help them and other women have access to better sexual pleasure. It definitely seems to help women feel empowered and like they have agency when they are allowed to talk about their pleasures. Just answering questions from the researcher seemed to give them energy and agency when talking about their personal experiences.

The results also indicate that it is important to have caution about viewing communication as enough to guarantee good sexual pleasure. Brianna’s experiences with being queer, being very educated on sex and social norms, and talking a lot about sex with her friends before being sexually active, was not a good one. She said: “Don’t think just because you’re in a queer relationship or like doing queer things that it’s less of a risk of being harmful.” She talked about how she believed she would be saved from the sexual issues and norms she had read about since she doesn’t identify as straight. This indicates that even though talking, reading and educating yourself a lot about sex can be a

way to increase the sexual pleasure, it is not the only thing that is needed. This education focus and discourse of empowerment might give an illusion of ‘good sex guaranteed,’ seeing as these women are finding themselves in sexual experiences that are still run by gendered social norms.

Pain and discomfort

Pain and discomfort are feelings that come up when the women discuss their sexual pleasure. It seems that pleasure and pain sometimes go hand in hand, and that it is difficult for the women to know what they can expect when they enter a sexual situation.

The way the women report their experiences of discomfort and pain indicate that they need to feel like they have the space from their partners to freely communicate throughout the sexual experience. When they feel like their partners aren’t reading them correctly, or maybe not even caring at all about their well-being at all, it might be easier to just “go along” with the sex than to speak up. By speaking up they would not only have to be vulnerable about their wants, they would also have to be ones to do all the work of trying to create that space and connection to renegotiate the sexual meeting. This shows that the pain and discomfort sometimes feel less uncomfortable to deal with than the possibility of their partner being upset, disappointed, not agree, not willing to give what they want etc. This also can be related to past studies that found that girls and young women often reported on their partner’s sexual satisfaction instead of their own (McClelland, 2011; Tolman, 2012). The pain and discomfort can be overlooked if they

see pleasure being had by their partners, in a way living their sexual pleasure through their partners.

Sexual violence

Two of the participants talked about sexual violence during their interviews. One based her sexual self being defined in the moment when she was touched by a relative: "And then so I decided from that moment that (...) my body it's me who has to control it first, feel it first before communicating with another person." The other talked about getting flashbacks during current sex from old sexual trauma.

It's clear that sexual violence lingered with both of them and was part of their ability to access sexual pleasure. It also seems like they both had spent time processing their experiences and had a pretty defined view of what had happened, how it made them feel, and how they dealt with it today. There was both empowerment and vulnerability in these stories: Vulnerability because of the pain that the violence caused in the past and also currently from time to time. And empowerment in the sense that they knew that what had happened was wrong and that they had figured out how to deal with it in their current sex lives. Violence hadn't taken away their ability for sexual pleasure, but does it make the way they talk about it different?

The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network state that one out of every six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime ("Scope of the problem", 2018). The interview questions didn't specifically address

sexual violence and some participants with experience of sexual violence might not feel comfortable talking about it at all or not comfortable bringing it up on their own. It's also possible that those experiences weren't something they connected to their current experiences of sexual pleasure.

Pressure to please

Sometimes the participants know exactly what they want but express thoughts of feeling pressured to act otherwise and to let go of what they want. All of the participants had stories of feeling pressured to please their partners both sexually and emotionally.

Pleasing a partner sexually often meant being willing to have sex until their male partner had an orgasm, while pleasing emotionally seemed to be mostly about not speaking up about something feeling uncomfortable or painful. Some of the women connected it to being selfish if they didn't take care of their partners pleasure. Some connected it to being shameful or uncomfortable for the man. This confirms the studies that have found that orgasm through intercourse is believed to be the most wanted sexual experience, but while men's orgasms are seen as essential to sex, women's orgasms are seen as more of a bonus (Frith, 2014).

Some of the women might feel like communication and consent is a one-time decision; you go along with starting sex, so you should finish. The idea that it is equally as important and OK to communicate a no or a different desire during sex seemed not to be the case. That creates for a lot of pressure on the communication that happens prior to

the sex. How does it affect women when entering a sexual experience when they feel like the acceptance for communication and consent has already passed? This relates to the study that found that women sometimes consent to unwanted sex and do not consent to wanted sex (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2007).

Some of the participants also talked about the feelings of being released of pressure, or the feeling of freedom after having sex. Ada gave a guy a blowjob without wanting to because it would release her from the pressure of having vaginal sex. She described the experience as gross but felt relieved after and laughs about the whole experience when discussing it with the researcher.

After Daniela's boyfriend came during the last time they had sex, she also felt like having an orgasm. She wanted her boyfriend to touch her, but she quickly felt uncomfortable because he seemed tired, so she decided to stop it and just make herself come while her boyfriend went and did something else. She knew what she wanted but felt pressured to stop.

The pressure to please seems to be coming from specific ideas of being selfish, being too demanding, wanting to be good at sex and wanting love and a good atmosphere. Sometimes when the choice is between continuing with a bit of discomfort, pain or boring sex and stopping the sex or trying to change things up, it seems easier for the women to choose to continue. In a way it's the most comfortable option when the option of speaking up can create for another type of discomfort; a man that thinks you're selfish, a man who is ashamed or embarrassed, or a man who isn't sexually pleased.

The pressure to please is complicated because the participants also report that giving pleasure is connected to their experience of pleasure. Wanting to please a partner and getting pleasure from pleasing a partner is very much real. But when the pleasing of a partner comes from outside pressures or internalized ideas of how sex “should” be, then it’s not as pleasing to give pleasure anymore. Then it’s less about the genuine pleasure of pleasing and more a way of avoiding feelings of even greater discomfort.

Summed up, the participants know what they want to feel pleasure, and know that communication is important. However, when they’re in sexual situations with a partner, other aspects sometimes take priority over their pleasure. For instance, avoiding the discomfort of seeming selfish, avoiding taking away their partners’ pleasure, or the discomfort of changing what they previously consented to.

Self-esteem

The pressure to please sometimes is directly connected to the participant’s self-esteem. They question if they are worthy of being wanted and liked and feel like they should go along with things so that their partner is happy and satisfied with them.

Rebecca said: “I think I just have a lot of doubt that anyone actually wants me (...) is like just that voice that’s saying that any minute now he is going to realize you are not actually that hot or desirable and he’s going to be like what am I doing here.” The participants with self-esteem issues like these, or body image issues, seem to sometimes have a hard time speaking up and asking for what they want in sex. Rebecca’s last sexual

experience is with a guy who seemed to be willing to go along with what she asked for. They have sex four times, but when he leaves she still says she felt kind of sad because she would like to have more sex. The guy came several times, but she didn't have an orgasm, so she masturbated after he left. This is interesting because in many ways Rebecca is really empowered. She is in a long-term open relationship with a partner she seems happy with. She knows what she likes sexually and isn't afraid of asking for it. She goes to sex parties, explores kink and seemed energized by sex. But when it comes to asking for the specific things that could make her orgasm in the sexual encounters themselves, she doesn't. She is worried it will be boring for him and take too long. Same with Brianna who loves her vibrator and wanted to use it with her boyfriend around; he quickly felt "left out". Or when she was humping her boyfriend's leg he felt "used".

If sexual empowerment has given women access to things like more sexual freedom, a language of agency and sexual education, why can't sexually empowered women like Rebecca ask for the things that will make her come? Or why do self-described "sex nerds," like Brianna, get negative feedback from her boyfriend when she expresses her wants that would be more focused on her pleasure?

It seems like there are still sexual norms dictating what women can and can't ask for. They can ask for sexually adventurous thing, but not if it could be seen as "boring" or "take too long". When participants talk about the fear of being boring or "taking too long" it seems to be connected to situations where their male partner isn't stimulated through penetrative sex, oral, vaginal or anal.

This is related to sexual script theory, that show how sexual norms create pressure for women to have sex with men in a certain way (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Jackson & Scott, 2007). So the results indicate that the same way that there is a heterosexual sexual script, there is an empowerment script. The participants are educated on the sexual norms, stereotypes and heterosexual sexual scripts, have accessed a language and experience of agency and empowerment, but they are still stuck in an empowerment script that dictates how the sexual encounters should happen. Sexual freedom and pleasure is encouraged, but still only in certain ways. Even though these women have more experiences to access now than before, their pleasure still suffers in other scripted expectations, like pleasing their partner, not being boring, and constantly proving their worthiness as sexual partners.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study: a small group of participants, pressure to please the researcher, and unmarked race and cultural aspects. This study has 8 participants which limit the results. With more participants and more diversity, there would be more data to analyze the relations between age, race, sexuality, gender, and other identities. This study also does not include any transwomen.

Half of the women were women of color and research shows that race affects women's experiences of sexuality. The researcher being a white European cis gender woman could also affect the participants' responses. Because of racial and colonial

histories that have oppressed women of color in particular, it could be harder for these participants to speak about sexual pleasure in relation to race. The interview questions didn't address race in specific, but there's reason to believe that race and cultural aspects might have been brought up more frequently if the researcher was a woman of color.

During these interviews several of the participants seemed to be thinking about how to give the best and most "correct" answer to the researcher. Some asked what was normally said in the interviews, and some asked for permission to say certain things. This could be a sign of women feeling pressure to please and wanting to figure out how they should and are expected to talk about their own pleasure, which could have limited the answers the researcher was given access to. Because the interview setting was pretty formal, compared to say talking to a friend, it could create for more pressure to respond correctly. It could also be that the language of sexual agency and empowerment is a societal norm connected to the previously mentioned empowerment script, and that the women didn't feel comfortable when talking about sexual pleasure when it didn't fit into that script.

Since all participants identified as interested in sex, volunteered for an interview study on women's sexual pleasure, and most of reported a very strong sex drive, they might not be a representative sample of all sexual women who have sex with men.

Recommendations for future research

More research is needed on women's experiences of sexual pleasure. Specifically, the field could benefit from more qualitative data allowing women to speak about their own sexual pleasure. Longitudinal data that assesses the effectiveness of various solutions to allowing women a healthy sexuality would also be desirable.

Future research should keep diving into women's own narratives of their pleasure and keep exploring why there's a gap between the discourse of sexual empowerment and the actual embodied sex that women are having. Is there an empowerment script inhibiting women from accessing sexual pleasure? Are women believing they are sexually liberated and empowered a way for patriarchy to keep control of women's bodies?

Future research should also go deeper into the meaning of empowerment. Where is empowerment rooted, in self-esteem, education, experiences, or somewhere else? Is it different for everyone? What is the most effective way to assist women in owning their sexual pleasure and having good sexual experiences?

Future researchers should also look at trans women's experiences of sexual pleasure. What are trans women's experiences of sexual pleasure and how is it connected to race, sexuality, age, gender and other identities? How does the construction of gender and women as a category affect sexual pleasure? Women of color should also get more research allotted to their sexual pleasure. How do the racial and colonial histories of

oppression affect women of color's sexual pleasures? What are the challenges that women of color might face in their pursuit of pleasure?

In addition, the culture and conversation in the U.S. around women's agency and sexuality is rapidly changing and researchers should consider how current feminist movements and political discussions affect women's sexual pleasure.

Conclusion

Women experience both feelings of empowerment and feelings of vulnerability connected to their sexual pleasure. These feelings vary from person to person, come up in different situations, and mean different things; however, this interview study shows several general patterns. Feelings of empowerment are connected to the ability to communicate, self-esteem and body image, equality, and choosing not to prioritize pleasure with a partner. Feelings of vulnerability are connected to social norms and expectations, pain and discomfort, sexual violence, pressure to please and self-esteem.

When looking at the last time the participants had sex and their general thoughts, feelings and experiences of sexual pleasure, a lot of complex and problematic topics came up. All of the women reported having high sex drives, enjoying sex and otherwise empowering experiences connected to their sexual pleasure. Many also reported experiences of discomfort, pain, feeling pressured to please, and not being able to ask for what could increase their pleasure. This indicates a pleasure gap between the feelings of empowerment and the feelings of vulnerability.

Feeling empowered, through communication, education, and sexual experience isn't enough to access sexual pleasure when in an intimate setting with a partner. It seems like the women find it easy to know how they want to have sex, what sexual pleasure should look like, but in the actual sexual meetings, reality becomes too muddled and complex. Sexual pleasure isn't the one and only goal during sex. Women want to be loved, be remembered in a positive way, want to please, they want to be seen as adventurous, fun, and non-demanding. There are in other words lots of different wants that clash with the want of sexual pleasure.

Most of the women do highlight communication as important, so communication might contribute to decreasing the pleasure gap. But for pleasure to happen the partner needs to be open to *ongoing communication* throughout. Communication in the beginning of sex is not enough. In addition, several of the women mention that in asking for the specific things that would generate more sexual pleasure, they would feel too much and too demanding. They don't want to bore a partner and don't want to take too long. Sometimes these feelings come from the direct reaction of the partner, sometimes from the lack of reaction from the partner, and sometimes from an internalized expectation that the reaction will be negative. Overall, this creates a situation where women don't bring up their wants and concerns in the first place.

Sexual pleasure might exist best when it is being allowed the space to exist from both the person experiencing it and their partner. This could mean that the gap between the pleasure wanted and the pleasure accessed decrease the more you're willing to center

your pleasure, prioritize it, and communicate about it throughout. The more a woman can see herself as worthy of pleasure the less the pleasure gap might be.

This interview study shows that things change both physically and emotionally from second to second in a sexual setting: it could be that the anal sex goes from pleasurable to burning suddenly, that the sex is nice but then the legs start hurting during vaginal penetration, or it could be that good sex gets interrupted by flashbacks from sexual trauma, or feelings of not being wanted.

This interview study has shown that there is a pleasure gap between how women talk and think about sexual pleasure and the pleasure they are actually having. A discourse of empowerment makes women believe that if they define themselves as sexual individuals with agency, high sex drive and lots of sex education, then they should be having good sex. But in reality, women experience a wide variation of sensations connected to their pleasure, including: pain, discomfort, low self-esteem and self-criticism. With constant communication during sexual acts, believing one is worthy of pleasure, and shedding the idea that feminism, kink, high sex drive, queerness or otherwise norm critical identities and views somehow make you immune to issues with your sexual pleasure, the pleasure gap could decrease.

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