



When, If, and How: Young Women Contend With Orgasmic Absence

Sarah N. Bell and Sara I. McClelland

Psychology and Women's Studies, University of Michigan

While cultural ideas about “healthy” and “fulfilling” sexuality often include orgasm, many young women do not experience orgasm during partnered sex. The current study examined how women described this absence of orgasm in their sexual experiences with male partners. We examined interviews (N = 17) with women ages 18 to 28 and focused on their ideas about orgasm and their explanations concerning when and why they do not orgasm. We explored three themes that illustrate the strategies young women use to contend with orgasmic absence: (1) What’s the big deal?; (2) It’s just biology; and (3) Not now, but someday. We found that young women’s explanations allowed them to reduce feelings of abnormality and enabled them to distance themselves from sexual expectations regarding the perceived value of orgasm. In analyzing the complicated gender and sexual dynamics surrounding orgasm, we turned to Fahs’ (2014) work on sexual freedom and the importance of articulating freedom from sexual obligations as a key intervention in critical sexuality research. In our discussion, we examine the implications of our findings for critical researchers looking to better understand the role of sexual norms in how young women imagine and discuss the role of pleasure in their own sexual lives.

Scientific and cultural discourses often cite experiences of orgasm as central to a “healthy” and “fulfilling” sexual life (Laumann et al., 2005; Puppo, 2011). Despite this construction, women often report that they do not experience orgasm during partnered sex. Two-thirds of women (69%) reported orgasm during their most recent sexual encounter with a man, as compared to 95% of men during their most recent sexual encounter with a woman (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, & Smith, 2006; see also Garcia, Lloyd, Wallen, & Fisher, 2014). This discrepancy demonstrates that the absence of orgasm is, in fact, a significant—albeit common—sexual experience for women. In addition, absence of orgasm is more likely to be experienced by younger women than older women, making this a central topic to young women’s sexuality in particular (Garcia et al., 2014).

Feminist and sexuality scholars have documented and critiqued the gap in orgasm rates between men and women and have argued for greater orgasm equality (i.e., equal rates of orgasm between men and women during heterosexual sex; see Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Richters et al., 2006). Orgasmic absence is both a significant and contested site of experience for young women; many

women have struggled to feel entitled to their own orgasm, and researchers have likewise fought to bring greater attention to women’s orgasm equality. Meanwhile, recent studies have found that heterosexual women report worrying that their lack of orgasm negatively reflects on a man’s sexual prowess and report feeling pressured to have orgasms from male partners and as the result of orgasm norms (Chadwick & van Anders, 2017; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). This signals the need for further discussion about sexual expectations regarding orgasm and its frequency. How do women who experience orgasmic absence make sense of that absence in light of increasing pressure to produce orgasms from male sexual partners, as well as feminist discourses that argue for pleasure to be equally distributed? Given that the absence of orgasm sits within a cultural milieu that privileges orgasm as normal, regular, and customary—and the absence of orgasms as dysfunctional (Opperman, Braun, Clarke, & Rogers, 2014; Potts, 2000)—we ask: How do women create a sense of freedom from expectations that they experience orgasms during partnered sex? Orgasm advocacy has been an important area of feminist work and has led to increased awareness of women’s orgasmic absence. The current study focused on how women manage their own expectations regarding orgasm within this complicated set of cultural and personal conditions.

Rates of anorgasmia in women (i.e., those who have never had an orgasm) vary depending on the study. One meta-analysis found that while rates of anorgasmia in

Correspondence should be addressed to Sara McClelland, Dept. of Psychology, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. E-mail: saramcc@umich.edu

This study did not receive funding and there is no conflict of interest for either author.

women were below 20%, some studies reported rates of 20% to 40%, and one reported rates as high as 50% (West, Vinikoor, & Zolnoun, 2004). Younger, heterosexual, and bisexual women are more likely than older women to report an absence of orgasm, especially during sex with men (Boroditsky, Fisher, & Bridges, 1999; Wade, Kremer, & Brown, 2005). In addition, women are more likely to experience orgasmic absence during sex with men than they are with other women; studies have found that heterosexual women report fewer orgasms than lesbian women (Frederick, St. John, Garcia, & Lloyd, 2017; Garcia et al., 2014). Frederick et al. (2017) compared orgasm rates for lesbian and heterosexual women and found that not only were lesbian women more likely to orgasm during sex than heterosexual women, but lesbian women were also three times more likely than heterosexual women to report “always” having an orgasm during partnered sex.

While these findings provide information on the prevalence of orgasmic absence, these data do not provide a full picture of what orgasmic absence looks like for women. For example, even among the women who reported an orgasm during their most recent encounter, this does not mean that they regularly or always experienced orgasm. In addition, these single-item data points cannot illustrate how women feel or make sense of this absence in their sexual lives. Richters et al. (2006) noted that simply counting orgasms tells researchers little about individuals’ experiences and bolsters the premise that more orgasms are better. Given the cultural milieu that affords importance to orgasms, it has become increasingly important to understand how young women make sense of their absence.

Literature Review

To begin to understand how young women manage expectations regarding orgasm, it is necessary to understand the trajectory of women’s sexual rights as well as cultural norms and discourses that prioritize orgasm in partnered sex and during intercourse more specifically. With these priorities in mind, we turned to Fahs’ (2014) sexual freedom model, which argued that freedom must consist of both positive liberty and negative liberty. Positive liberty includes “freedom to” explore one’s sexuality (and to, for example, demand orgasms as a regular aspect of sexual experiences). Negative liberty includes “freedom from” exploring one’s sexuality in ways that one does not desire (for example, not wanting to experience orgasm). Fahs’ (2014) “freedom from” argument elucidates how women may express negative liberty by refusing to adhere to a norm or choosing to not place a high value on that norm. While women may not be able to extricate themselves from strict sexual norms, there may be some relief by articulating dissent from these norms. Fahs (2014) argued that women face tough criticism and censure when they fail to adhere to norms (e.g., not shaving their legs) and that women need to feel that they have access to “freedom from” these

norms as they experience anxiety and distress when they fail to live up to them.

It may be particularly important to think about Fahs’ (2014) model of sexual freedom as it pertains to young women’s sexual development. Adolescent sexuality is often regarded as “excessive” and is constrained by discourses that seek to control or repress it (McClelland & Fine, 2008), making “freedom to” (e.g., freedom to receive accurate sexual education, freedom to have sex or desire without being shamed) particularly relevant to adolescent women. Young women, however, may encounter forces that wish to mold their sexuality into “proper” forms, including the expectation that they have “good” sex, as well as regular and reliable orgasms (Frith, 2013b). This makes “freedom from” arguments pertinent to understanding young women’s sexuality as well.

Orgasm and Women’s Liberation

Across a broad range of writing in feminist theory, fiction, research, and activism, female orgasm has been central to arguments regarding women’s sexual self-determination, agency, and subjectivity (Gerhard, 2001; Jong, 1973; Koedt, 1973; Segal, 1994; Steinem, 2012). This, at times, has meant emphasizing how women who explore or express their sexuality may achieve a sense of self through ownership of their sexuality and particularly, through their orgasm (Koedt, 1973; Segal, 1994). Lydon (1970), for example, argued that advocacy for women’s clitoral orgasms was crucial in so far as it decentered the male subject and placed greater importance on women’s anatomy. However, while these feminist critiques challenged dominant discourses that prioritized penile/vaginal sex, they also upheld others, such as the importance of orgasm, and also inadvertently defined women’s sexual liberation in terms of “freedom to” have clitoral orgasms. While feminists have worked hard to create “freedom to” have orgasms, sexual and cultural landscapes have since shifted to the degree that women’s orgasms are now often an expected and fetishized outcome, one that is sometimes imagined as a result of labor rather than desire (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). As a result of these shifts, there is an increased need to elaborate what women’s sexual “freedom from” feeling obligated to have orgasms might look like and to better understand how young women have absorbed messages that had aimed to provide more pleasure, but may have resulted in providing more pressure.

Orgasm and Women’s Health

The presence and frequency of orgasm in women has become a sign of “good health” over the past 20 years (Tiefer, 2001, 2002). Medical professionals often consider orgasm to be a sign of sexual health and function; lack of orgasm (if experienced as distressing) is often considered a primary sign of sexual dysfunction (Basson et al., 2004). Women’s orgasmic absence has historically been

medicalized via clinical classification as a sexual dysfunction in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. There are potential pharmaceutical remedies that may be used for treatment of (insufficient) sexual desire, should one be diagnosed with a sexual dysfunction (Graham, Boynton, & Gould, 2017). A growing body of literature aims to find the etiology of women's absence of orgasm, in part so that this absence can be eliminated (Heiman, 2002). Moreover, certain types of orgasm are, at times, theorized to be more "healthy" and superior to other types, revealing a hierarchy of orgasmic experiences (Prause, 2012).

In Graham's (2010) analysis of the criteria used to diagnose female orgasmic disorder (FOD) and the prevalence of FOD, she noted that *DSM* criteria have changed over editions of the manual (*DSM-III*, *-III-R*, *-IV*, *-IV-TR*, 5). For a diagnosis of FOD, the current edition, *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), requires a delay in or lack of orgasm despite adequate stimulation, duration for at least six months, and distress experienced as a result of this inability to reach orgasm. The criteria establishing a necessary duration of at least six months is a new addition to the *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), making the diagnosis more stringent than in previous editions of the *DSM*. The inclusion of "distress" as an indicator of sexual dysfunction is a controversial criterion, especially given how cultural norms support and privilege the presence of an orgasm as healthy (Bancroft, Loftus, & Long, 2003). Whose distress is being taken into consideration—the woman's, her partner's, or some combination of both? While the emphasis in the *DSM-5* is on the individual's distress, the origins of that distress and whether it is exacerbated by her partner's distress remain difficult to discern clinically. Some treatments for women's orgasmic dysfunction further prioritize intercourse by trying to "transfer" orgasms from masturbation to intercourse (Meston, Hull, Levin, & Sipski, 2004) or by encouraging specific coital positions to increase women's orgasms during penile-vaginal intercourse (Pierce, 2000).

Discourses that focus on treatments for women's orgasmic dysfunction, or that claim superiority of certain "types" of female orgasms, often prioritize a heterosexual partnered context for young women's orgasms (Fishman & Mamo, 2002). Orgasm is often regarded as the "main goal" of sexual interactions, a concept that has been critiqued for setting up an "orgasmic imperative" (Opperman et al., 2014; Potts, 2000). The orgasmic imperative developed from discussion of the "coital imperative," a term developed by feminist sexuality researchers who critiqued the norm that all sexual interactions are expected to culminate in intercourse (Frith, 2013b; Gavey, McPhillips, & Braun, 1999; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001). Studies have found that orgasms are regularly described as the end goal of sexual interactions, regardless of whether individuals are (interested in or capable of) experiencing orgasm (Frith, 2013a). In addition, Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips (2003) noted that a discourse of reciprocity during (hetero)sex functions to

create both entitlements and obligations, in so far as individuals come to expect to "exchange" orgasms during sex. These discourses reveal a set of cultural ideologies that privilege orgasm as a sign of health and the absence of orgasm, or the absence of the "right" kind of orgasm, as dysfunctional and abnormal.

Orgasm and Sex of Partner

While feminist advocacy and research has led to important discussions about the orgasm gap (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2012), an important parallel discourse has also emerged: female orgasm as a result of men's sexual capacity (Chadwick & van Anders, 2017; Fahs, 2011; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010). In studies with young women, researchers have often found that they frequently report they are not concerned about their own pleasure but instead worry about how their lack of orgasm will affect male partners (Frith, 2013a; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). For example, in interviews with self-reported "inorgasmic" women, Lavie and Willig (2005) found that they worried about their male partners' pleasure, stating "[orgasm] really contributes to their experience ... the guys want you to come." Similarly, Frith's (2013a) vignette study found that women imagined orgasmic absence as most frustrating to a male partner. One woman responded to the vignette about female orgasmic absence saying, "Tom didn't want to be a bad lover and tried to improve" (i.e., that Tom would interpret the lack of orgasm as reflecting poorly on his own sexual skills). In a vignette study with 810 men, Chadwick and van Anders (2017) found that women's orgasms functioned as a masculinity achievement for men, with men reporting greater feelings of sexual esteem and masculinity when they imagined a female partner having an orgasm during a sexual encounter with them. In their focus group study, Salisbury and Fisher (2014) found that women reported feeling concerned that their lack of orgasm negatively impacted their male partners' satisfaction. For example, one woman stated, "[T]he guy just feels like he isn't good, or he failed," and this resulted in her feeling "pressured to fake [orgasm]" (p. 621).

Turning from male sex partners to female partners, studies have found that heterosexual women experience fewer orgasms than lesbian women (Frederick et al., 2017; Garcia et al., 2014). When studies include bisexual women, the patterns tend to more closely resemble heterosexual women's orgasm rates (Garcia et al., 2014). A recent study by Blair, Cappell, and Pukall (2017) asked 806 men and women to report on their sexual behaviors and frequency of orgasm with partners. Participants were grouped according to the sex of their partner (women partnered with women, women partnered with men, etc.) rather than their sexual identity. The authors found that women partnered with women had more frequent orgasms than women partnered with men. Women partnered with men reported more frequent sexual activity that did not end in orgasm for them. Research has also shown that women tend to have sex which is longer in duration and which includes more frequent oral sex when partnered

with other women, two conditions which create more time and opportunity for women to reach orgasm (Blair et al., 2017; Blair & Pukall, 2014). These studies help demonstrate how the sex of one's partner, as well as heterosexual sexual scripts, impact the opportunity for and frequency of women's orgasm.

The Current Study

Orgasm is a particularly interesting phenomenon to study because it is simultaneously regarded as the peak moment of sex, a sign of sexual maturation and growth (Nicolson & Burr, 2003), an indicator of sexual health, and a symbol of feminist success in achieving more pleasure and more recognition of women's sexuality and desires. The absence of orgasm, then, is not an individual experience; rather, it is a *social* experience and should be interpreted as such. In previous research, women's orgasms have been imagined as a medley of interpersonal, physiological, psychological, and relational factors. Orgasm, therefore, sits uncomfortably at the intersection of these axes and is held to be the result of a woman's male partner, his prowess and labor, as well her sexual health, and related to her level of sexual emancipation. As young women learn about sexual pleasure in their own lives, this set of discourses begins to shape their own relationship to orgasm—when orgasm is present and, perhaps more important, when it is absent. The current study took up this absence as a central focus to better understand how young women manage this complex experience of sexual life.

To investigate these questions, we conducted a secondary analysis of interviews from a larger multimethod study with young adults ages 18 to 28 that focused on experiences and definitions of sexual satisfaction (see McClelland, 2011, 2014, 2017a). Throughout the interviews, participants spoke frequently about their experiences with and without orgasm, as well as how they imagined the role of orgasm in their (young) sexual lives. In the current study, we focused on these descriptions of orgasm and examined strategies women used to understand when orgasm was absent, as well as who was imagined as responsible (or not responsible) for female orgasm. In our analysis, we focused on what the explanations about orgasmic absence helped women to do or achieve in their sexual lives. If there were strategies to contend with orgasmic absence, what were they, and why were they necessary?

Method

Participants

Participants in the original study were enrolled in a large urban college located in New York City and recruited using the university subject pool. Recruitment procedures included an online ad that called for participants to take

part in a “dating and relationships” study. Individuals did not need to have a current romantic partner to be eligible; purposive sampling strategies were used to ensure there was representation of individuals with non-White race/ethnicities, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) and heterosexual sexual identities. The current study focused on the 17 cisgender female participants in the sample. Just over half of the sample reported their race/ethnicity as White ($n = 9$); the other half of the sample reported their race/ethnicity as Latino ($n = 3$), Asian ($n = 2$), African American ($n = 1$), and biracial ($n = 2$). The sample included individuals who identified as heterosexual ($n = 8$), bisexual ($n = 7$), lesbian ($n = 1$), and undecided ($n = 1$). All cisgender female participants who identified as bisexual or heterosexual reported recent male sexual partners, and all of the data analyzed in the current study were from experiences with male sexual partners.

Measures

The study relied on a mixed methods design that included survey and interview procedures. Participants' demographics were collected during the survey portion of the study; relevant items are described in the following sections.

Demographics. Participants were asked to report their age, gender identity (*Female, Male, Trans, A gender not listed here*), race/ethnic identity (*Caucasian/White, Latino/a, Black/African American, Asian/API, A race/ethnicity not listed here*), and sexual orientation (*Gay/lesbian, Queer, Bisexual, Homosexual, Straight/heterosexual, Asexual, Undecided, A sexual orientation not listed here*). Participants were prompted to “check all that apply” when answering the gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation items. Socioeconomic status was assessed using mother's or primary guardian's level of education: “What level of education did your mother or primary guardian complete?” Response choices were *Less than high school, High school/GED, Some college, College degree, Graduate degree, Don't know, and Other*.

Current sexual relationship(s). Details about participants' current relationship(s) were assessed using several items that asked about the kind of relationships participants were currently involved in and their length. Items included: “Are you currently in a relationship or feel a special commitment to someone?” Response options were *Yes, No, and Don't know*. A follow-up for the previous question asked: “If yes, how long have you been in this relationship?” Respondents were given a blank line to answer this question. “Are you currently in any relationships where sexual activities are occurring between you and your partner?” Response choices were *Yes, No, and Don't know*. The follow-up question read: “If yes, how many sexual relationships are you currently

involved in?” Respondents were given open space to answer this question instead of preset choices. Finally, they were asked: “What are the gender(s) of your sexual partner(s)?” Response choices were *Male*, *Female*, *Trans*, and *A gender not listed here*.

Orgasm frequency. Participants completed an orgasm frequency item (Harris et al., 2009) that read: “When you and your partner have sexual relations, how often do you have an orgasm—that is, climax or come?” (1 = *Never/hardly ever*, *Less than half the time*, *About half the time*, *More than half the time*, 5 = *Most of the time/every time*). An additional response option was added to the original item to account for those engaging in sexual activities that might not be intended to result in orgasm: *No sexual contact between us that would lead to orgasm*.

Interview

The semistructured interview protocol was designed to invite participants to reflect on their experiences of sexual satisfaction. Participants were not asked to describe specific sexual encounters but rather asked how they imagined their sexual experiences and how they defined what was satisfying. Relevant interview questions were as follows: “What is important to you when defining your sexual satisfaction?”; “Is orgasm the same thing as being satisfied to you?”; “How important is orgasm to your sexual satisfaction?”; “How do you determine what is satisfying from unsatisfying?”; and “How do you think other people in your life think about sexual satisfaction?” The interview questions more generally probed for how participants imagined the range of associations they had with sex and with sexual satisfaction, as well as the strengths of these associations. In addition, several questions asked about participants’ formal and informal experiences of sex education, which helped in understanding where and from whom participants learned about sex and what to expect from sex. These included: “How did you learn about sex?” and “Do you talk about sex with friends?” Interviews were conducted by the second author and lasted from 30 to 40 minutes on average. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

In the current study, we focused on participants’ descriptions of their experiences, impressions, expectations, and feelings about orgasm and its absence. First, the authors searched for the word “orgasm” and other related terms, such as “climax” and “come” in each interview. Second, all interviews were read closely to look for any references to orgasm in ways that did not use any of these search terms. Across the 17 interviews, there were 138 mentions of orgasm or related terms, including its presence or its absence. These were read by the first author, patterns were noted, and these patterns were organized into overarching themes (Braun &

Clarke, 2015). Codes included ideas such as “I don’t need to have an orgasm” or “Men need orgasm more than women.” Codes that described similar ideas or overlapped conceptually were grouped together to form themes. Themes were data driven; that is, our process of analysis was inductively derived from what was apparent in the data and no a priori assumptions or theories drove the analysis. Ongoing reflection and collaboration between authors allowed for theme refinement and analysis. Theme refinement was an iterative process, characterized by several passes through the excerpts and assessing how well these themes described and captured the participants’ experiences with orgasm and its absence. Once the final themes were defined as per the patterns in the data and agreed upon by both authors, these new themes were applied to all of the participants’ excerpts and excerpts were grouped accordingly.

Data analysis was guided by a critical realist perspective (Ayling & Ussher, 2008; Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013; Ussher, 2010). The intention behind a critical realist approach is to retain the participant’s meanings and assess these in relationship to social and cultural understandings, in this case, of sexuality or gender. In the current analysis, our focus was how women labored to make sense of their own orgasmic absence within restrictive sexual norms. Ussher (2010) argued that the strength of a critical realist approach lies in its ability to underscore how participants describe their own experiences while still recognizing that these experiences occur within social environments. The aim of this analytic approach is to represent a participant’s meaning(s) in such a way that their own interpretations are retained. A critical realist approach begins by interpreting a participant’s subjective experiences at face value and then building context around these narratives to frame them within the broader discourses that shape personal experience. This is how we approached analysis of the current narratives; we began from the experiences of the participants and then elaborated on how these subjective experiences might have been mediated by cultural norms pertaining to sexuality and orgasm.

The content of participants’ descriptions was considered important; in other words, what young women said about orgasmic absence signified, in part, shared strategies that potentially travel among young women as ways to contend with orgasm and its attendant meanings. We paid attention to when and how women offered explanations of their own experiences of absence, as well as contradictory narratives (i.e., something could be described as both nonsense and as very important). In our analysis, we interpreted contradictions as reflecting the difficulty women faced in navigating “freedom from” orgasm norms and the need for multiple strategies to understand orgasmic absence. Therefore, while participants’ words were used to help develop insight into the phenomenon of female orgasm, their descriptions were also understood to reflect the social and political contexts within which individuals live.

In our analysis, we did not note any difference in how heterosexual and bisexual women described the absence of their orgasm; both groups of women endorsed the same

themes and patterns in the data in relatively equal amounts. As a result of this preliminary analysis, we chose not to group the women separately or focus on a group-level analysis. Despite other research that suggests sexual orientation is important to frequency of orgasm (Garcia et al., 2014), we found little in the way of experiential differences between heterosexual, bisexual, and women who reported their sexual orientation as “undecided” when it came to absence of orgasm. In addition, only one woman reported being unpartnered at the time of the study, so an analysis between partnered and unpartnered women was not possible.

Results

In this sample, women reported an average orgasm frequency of “about half the time” ($M = 3.60$; $SD = 1.64$). Twenty percent of the women reported “never or hardly ever” having an orgasm with their current partner, 20% reported “less than half” or “about half the time,” and the remaining 60% reported “more than half” and “most/every time.” Of the 20% that reported “never or hardly ever” having an orgasm, we do not know if this was in their lifetime or with their current partner. Excerpts analyzed in the study come from across the spectrum of reported orgasm frequency (i.e., from “never” to “every time”) and demonstrate that orgasmic absence is relevant across this spectrum, from those who never orgasm to those who may experience orgasm sometimes but still grapple with its absence.

Three themes captured how participants made sense of orgasmic absence: (1) What’s the big deal?; (2) It’s just biology; and (3) Not now, but someday. Individually, each theme highlights how women contended with orgasm norms and attempted to reduce pressure to conform to these norms. Together, these themes highlight how complicated this negotiation was for women and how they used multiple, sometimes contradictory, strategies to access “freedom from” contemporary orgasm norms.

What’s the Big Deal?

Across the interviews, participants commented on orgasm norms and interpreted their own experiences in light of these norms. The question of whether orgasm was “a big deal” emerged in two distinct but related ways: (1) participants worried about whether their own experiences were normal, offering such statements as “There is something wrong with me” and (2) participants asserted that the absence of their own orgasm was “no big deal”; sometimes participants endorsed both beliefs. These strategies allowed women to feel at least a temporary sense of reduced pressures or “freedom from” the obligation to produce orgasms in their immediate sexual encounters. Occasionally, women endorsed contradictory narratives, such as refuting the importance of orgasm and also wishing to achieve orgasm someday. These contradictions revealed some of the strategies women relied on to understand this absence.

Participants described being aware of sexual norms that suggested women ought to be having orgasms from partnered sex and were surprised to learn that not all women orgasm during intercourse. Rebecca¹ (age 21, Black, heterosexual) reflected on the moment when she first realized that few women orgasm from partnered sex, stating: “I remember I saw on the news, there’s like only twelve [percent] or something like that of women actually have an orgasm from sexual intercourse.” Similarly, Eileen (age 19, Latina, heterosexual) reflected on hearing that not all women orgasm; her words relayed both a sense of relief and continued concern about being abnormal: “I have heard that [not all women orgasm], and it’s just like, it kind of makes me feel at least a little bit better, but then it’s like, I still feel a little weird about it, like there is something wrong with me.” Eileen’s reflection is a good example of the dynamic women reported as they struggled to create a sense of “freedom from” having to produce orgasms. While they may have heard that absence of orgasm is common for women, they still reported feeling abnormal from their own lack of orgasm.

While some women reflected on orgasm as a norm, and even worried about whether their experiences of orgasmic absence were “normal,” others asserted that orgasm was “no big deal.” In so doing, participants conveyed ambivalence toward sexual norms, at times using them to understand their own experiences and at other times rejecting them. Eileen (age 19, Latina, heterosexual), who had earlier worried there was “something wrong” with her, later in the interview refuted the importance of her own orgasm, saying that it was in fact “no big deal”:

Well, right now, like, I’ve never had an orgasm. And it’s not, I guess, just from not knowing what it feels like, it’s just like, “Oh, okay, whatever.” I mean it’s not that big of a deal. But like how everybody talks about it and everything, it would be nice, to you know, know what that’s like, but I don’t feel like it’s important—[it’s not] that important to me right now.

Eileen’s back-and-forth between worrying about normality and also asserting that orgasm was not important to her demonstrated an underlying ambivalence about orgasm norms and the centrality of orgasm in women’s imaginations. Eileen’s reflections on the cultural primacy of orgasm (“everybody talks about it”) gets awkwardly metabolized with her own interest (“it would be nice”) and her own ambivalence about buying into the importance of orgasm (“it’s not that big of a deal”). This mixture offers a useful image through which to understand why the absence of orgasm represents something important and worthy of further development by sexuality researchers.

Other participants reflected on orgasmic imperatives and worked to reject their primacy. For example, Rebecca (age 21, Black, heterosexual), who previously recalled learning about

¹ All participants are referred to by pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

how uncommon orgasms are for women, later added to her thoughts on orgasm stating, “Everybody would like to go, ‘Oh, every time I have sex, I have an orgasm, and it’s great, and that’s it.’ But, I mean, you don’t necessarily have to have one.” Similarly, Susan (age 18, Asian, bisexual) noted that orgasms were just not that important to her own satisfaction, stating, “I’ve never really had one, and even if I did, it wouldn’t really matter to me.” Both Rebecca and Susan work to distance themselves from the orgasmic imperative here, noting that orgasms were not that important to them; these examples illustrate the labor necessary to make absence palatable and even normal. It is worth noting that participants who described never having had an orgasm also immediately followed this statement up by insisting that this absence was “no big deal.” The two statements, in fact, always occurred together in participants’ narratives. The fact that participants contextualized orgasmic absence as “not a big deal” leaves open the possibility that they may have felt that it was, in fact, a big deal or may have been worried that it is a big deal to others.

The competing explanations women offered—worrying about being abnormal and/or asserting orgasm was not a big deal (to them)—indicated a push and pull with cultural norms. This tension between embracing norms and resisting them demonstrates how young women searched for alternative narratives to explain the absence of their orgasms. One of these narratives had to include the diminishment of orgasm as important to manage its absence and any feelings of discomfort that absence invoked. The process of investing effort to downplay the importance of orgasm helped women achieve (albeit for only a moment) “freedom from” having to produce orgasms in their sexual encounters. This does not suggest that women felt a permanent sense of “freedom from” the expectation to orgasm. In fact, women often needed to use several strategies at any given time to feel a sense of “freedom from” orgasm norms. Young women may need to renegotiate this freedom as they navigate their sexual trajectory over time and into adulthood and encounter new expectations or norms that are (also) difficult to meet. In the next theme, we see another strategy women used, which included psychological and physiological reasons for orgasmic absence.

It’s Just Biology

Young women consistently made internal attributions about the origin of their orgasm absence (Snead, Magal, Christensen, & Ndede-Amadi, 2014). In other words, participants often described orgasmic absence as arising from within their physical body. In these descriptions, women described orgasmic potential as existing solely within the individual, with no reference to sexual knowledge, a partner, a partner’s ability, skill, or even age. By structuring orgasmic ability in this way, women were able to see it as outside of their volitional control, which granted them the ability to feel “freedom from” pressures to have or produce orgasms, at least for right now. For example, Susan (age 18, Asian, bisexual) remarked on her inability to

have orgasms: “Well, I know everybody’s body’s different so not everyone can be able to reach an orgasm, so I know for me I’ve never really been able to and I’ve accepted it, its not something big to me.” Susan imagined physiological factors shaping her ability to have orgasms and her physical body as incapable. Others focused on explaining why they felt orgasms were so difficult to achieve and outlined the steps they needed to take to eventually have an orgasm. Elizabeth (age 18, multiracial, bisexual) remarked on how she needed to overcome physical insecurities during a sexual experience to be able to have an orgasm:

When I’m having sex and I feel self-conscious, then I’m not really able to have sex true to myself because I’m not comfortable. It’s like, I’m kind of understanding now, when I masturbate, that’s true to myself, because I’m comfortable, I can have an orgasm, I’m not thinking about what my body looks like. It’s a completely different—it’s like, it’s a level of comfort that I feel should be incorporated into sex in order for it to be good sex.

In an interesting and complex chain of logics, Elizabeth blamed her lack of orgasm on her inability to lose her self-consciousness during partnered sex. This attribution is not made to her partner or even to an external standard of physical beauty, but was seen as her own fault for not being better at being comfortable.

Other women relied on a similar logic but suggested that there was some inherent or natural difference between men’s and women’s orgasmic abilities. Participants often argued that it is just “harder for women to have orgasms” and turned to biological arguments about natural differences, such as men having more testosterone or that men just “need that release” more than women, or simply that “it’s hard for women to have an orgasm” (Susan, age 18, Asian, bisexual). Aliyah (age 28, White, undecided) similarly reported that some women do not necessarily possess the same needs related to orgasm: “Women, I think, *some* women do need it. Me, I don’t necessarily need it. I like it, you know, and I have a partner that I feel very satisfied with.” These explanations about sex differences and orgasm also dovetailed with discussions of nature, needs, and sex.

Young women in the study argued that men, in general, seemed to have more orgasms and that there were a variety of physiological and psychological reasons for this difference. One woman noted, for example, “I guess you have to be confident. And you don’t get confident for a while. Like, you know, young girls lack confidence” (Lucy, age 19, White, heterosexual). Other reasons included biological differences. For example, Aliyah (age 28, White, undecided) argued that men required orgasm physiologically and this explained the difference in orgasm rates: “I just always assumed that men their only focus is to orgasm, like ... from what I know, they masturbate much more regularly, daily. They need that release, you know? It’s like testosterone that ends up in

their body and they just need it.” This finding echoes a common misperception that testosterone is directly linked to men’s sexual desire (van Anders, 2012). These examples of internal attributions and natural differences offer another version of the “freedom from” narrative for young women: If orgasmic ability is something a person naturally has or does not have, this may offer respite from having or wanting orgasms, at least temporarily. After all, if you simply cannot have orgasms, there is less obligation or concern about feeling abnormal for not having them.

Not Now, But Someday

In the previous two themes, participants reported on cultural discourses that prioritized orgasms as the end goal of sex. In addition, we found that young women restructured the orgasmic imperative by imagining themselves as becoming orgasmic eventually. This temporal restructuring offered another narrative for young women to process the primacy of orgasm in their lives and another form of “freedom from” expectations regarding orgasm in their sexual lives. By imagining a future self that will be orgasmic, young women resolved some of the internal tension that resulted from trying to adhere to sexual expectations for consistent or present orgasms. For example, Mary (age 26, White, heterosexual) commented: “I think that an orgasm, while important in the long term, you know your long-term sexual life, I don’t think is necessary today or in every physical interaction.” Similarly, Eileen (age 19, Latina, heterosexual), who earlier struggled with endorsing and submitting to the orgasm norm, remarked: “Hopefully in the future I will [have an orgasm].” These excerpts are still evidence of the orgasmic imperative, in so far as orgasm is something to be strived for, but by restructuring the orgasmic imperative to function over the long term instead of immediate sexual encounters, both Mary and Eileen created an expectation that they may find easier to meet (at some point in the future).

Beatrice (age 22, White, bisexual) reported what she heard from other sources, in this case a women’s fashion magazine, about what she could do to help herself reach an orgasm during sex, stating:

Because from reading *Cosmo* [the magazine] my entire life with my sister, you need to be relaxed and really let your mind go and sort of climax to an orgasm. I think that if you had that connection with somebody, you’re not so much nervous, like, “Oh my God, is he looking at me this? Oh, does he notice my flaws?” But more relaxed and enjoying the situation as a whole, so that they can—I think they have a better chance of climaxing that way than they would just randomly having sex with somebody.

Beatrice’s example highlights the ways that women described a kind of self-talk, similar to the previous theme, which illustrated how lack of orgasm was

imagined to be the fault of the woman herself. Participants regarded orgasms as something that should be strived for and something that could be achieved by relaxing and losing one’s self-consciousness. Beatrice challenged the orgasmic imperative by developing explanations for why orgasms are difficult for some young women but also constructed a set of future-oriented steps to help her (future) self. It is possible that by giving thoughtful explanations for the absence of their orgasm, or by imagining a future self as orgasmic, young women may have been able to feel a sense of “freedom from” having to be orgasmic in the moment, as they anticipated being able to meet expectations of orgasm in their future sexual experiences, when their bodies mature or become orgasmic, or when they become more comfortable or confident in their bodies during sex. It is likely, however, that as women get older, if they do not regularly experience orgasm as part of their sexual experiences, they will have to revisit these strategies, perhaps invent new ones, and invest even more labor into contending with these cultural pressures to produce reliable orgasms.

Discussion

In the current analysis, we were especially interested in how young women relied on descriptions of orgasm that enabled “freedom from” sexual expectations regarding consistent orgasm during partnered sex. Using Fahs’ (2014) sexual freedom model, we analyzed the ways that young women described how they were able to reduce expectations for orgasm or feelings of abnormality for not having consistent orgasms in their partnered sexual experiences. Throughout the themes identified in this analysis, we were able to trace several logics and contradictions in women’s narratives about their own orgasm and its absence. We found that young women oscillated between characterizing orgasm as unimportant, blaming psychological and/or physiological shortcomings of women’s bodies, and reflecting on how they might potentially experience orgasm someday. These themes suggest that while sexual norms are important in shaping young women’s experiences with the absence of orgasm, women also worked to define their sexual experiences on their own terms and at times struggled to find a place for their own lack of orgasm amid these competing discourses.

“Freedom from,” as Fahs (2014) elaborated it and our extension of her theory here, recognizes how women work to define the importance (or lack thereof) of orgasm on their own terms. This is noteworthy because absence can easily slip into pathological spaces when framed by different theoretical perspectives (an indicator of dysfunction, his lack of sexual prowess, her lack of sexual liberation). The “freedom from” analysis we explored in this study does not imply young women reached a point of feeling unburdened by cultural pressures but rather a (momentary) freedom from these pressures. We noted that women relied on several

strategies in this study; this may underscore how complicated this negotiation of sexual freedoms was for them and may suggest that this type of negotiation may never be fully realized. That is to say, women may need to continually invest effort into feeling “freedom from” sexual norms. New situations and new sexual encounters will likely require new labor to be invested toward reducing cultural pressures to being sexually “healthy” and “free.” For example, as women age, sexual norms often do not lessen; they change. Thus, cultural expectations will demand new and different strategies from women who wish to lessen these pressures (McClelland, 2017b; McClelland, Holland, & Griggs, 2015).

Women in this study used a range of strategies to gain “freedom from” obligations to orgasm; this is different than leveraging “freedom from” participating in a sexual system altogether. Participants were clearly still interested in having sexual experiences with men, even if those did not include orgasm, and were hoping to experience orgasm during partnered sex eventually. This is a potentially unintentional consequence of trying to construct “freedom from” valuing orgasms: Women’s exhortations that orgasms were not important allowed them to justify continuing to participate in a sexual system that disadvantaged them. Analysis of these data using Fahs’ (2014) “freedom from” framework allowed this complicated relationship with sexual norms to emerge, particularly how women may both deny the importance of norms when they cannot live up to them and yet also strive to someday live up to these same norms.

The three themes—what’s the big deal?; it’s just biology; and not now, but someday—reflect the ways that women tried to tap into being free of yet another sexual expectation. Throughout the interviews, young women endorsed the importance of orgasm and offered such statements as “It would be nice to, you know, know what that’s like”; at other times they protested the importance of these norms through assertions that the absence of orgasm is “no big deal.” In our study, we also found that this oscillation between wanting and unwanting demonstrated an underlying ambivalence toward norms and the role of orgasm in young women’s sexual lives—and perhaps also an underlying desire to downplay the significance or importance of orgasm to themselves or to the researcher. These alternating and contradictory positions demonstrate how restrictive sexual expectations can be, especially when they are not easily met. Participants additionally restructured the orgasmic imperative to work in the long term and discussed their hope to achieve orgasms eventually. Unfortunately, these themes also illustrate that to gain this respite from sexual expectations, young women had to see themselves as faulty, orgasms as unimportant, and/or their future selves as deserving and perhaps better prepared for pleasure than their current selves. Our findings highlight—like much of the research on young women’s sexuality—that young women imagine their sexuality as something that they must work for, a location of sacrifice and labor, and a space often fraught with self-blame, with little attention on the

interpersonal or cultural factors that play a role in their experiences.

Attribution theory (Frank & Maass, 1985; Heider, 1958; Rowland, Myers, Adamski, & Burnett, 2013) offers a way to understand how individuals may attribute orgasmic absence to either internal or external factors such as their partner or partner’s skill. Attribution theory has not been used extensively in sexual and relationship research, although some research has assessed different relationship or sexual factors related to attributions (Frank & Maass, 1985; Rowland et al., 2013). For example, Loos, Bridges, and Critelli (1987) examined the attribution styles of women who experienced reliable orgasms compared to the attribution styles of women who did not. They found that highly orgasmic women tended to regard orgasmic “successes” as indicative of their own internal orgasmic ability and “failures” as situational, while women who were not highly orgasmic showed the opposite pattern, not taking credit for orgasms when they did occur and “blaming themselves” for the absence of orgasm. Similarly, we found that women who did not have orgasms tended to see this as a lack of personal ability. However, we also found that these internal attributions, at times, functioned to reduce feelings of anxiety. Internal attributions may, in some instances at least, help women create a sense of “freedom from” sexual expectations that may be difficult for them to achieve. It is important to note that if women attribute the absence of orgasm to themselves and their own abilities, while they may gain temporary “freedom from” sexual obligations, this strategy may also encourage them to seek medical treatment for sexual dysfunction and/or cause anxiety for not living up to sexual expectations over the long term (see Tiefer, 2001, 2002).

Women deserve the right to expect and experience orgasm, and the orgasm gap is an important feminist issue. However, women report feeling concerned about their lack of orgasm in part because orgasms are regarded as normal and healthy, and are imagined to reflect on male partners’ sexual skills and satisfaction. While feminists have long argued for the importance of female orgasm and orgasm equality, an unintended outcome of this struggle has been that young women are left to explain orgasmic absence and attempt to construct avenues of freedom from these expectations. It is also important to consider what might be lost in the process of striving for orgasm equality.

Women in this study did talk about pleasure in ways that did not include orgasm, such as the pleasure of emotional intimacy; it might be that the space created through the absence of orgasm allowed for other types of pleasure to receive more attention. Recent research suggests that women define sexual pleasure in a multiplicity of ways and orgasm may not be central to this definition (Goldey, Posh, Bell, & van Anders, 2016). This finding is important as it directly challenges the primacy of orgasm in sexual norms and in cultural understandings of “healthy” and fulfilling sex. It is also possible that women do not feel entitled to ask for or expect orgasms and this may have led women

to downplay the significance of orgasms in their sexual lives. McClelland's (2010) theory of intimate justice encourages us to question when participants assure themselves (or a researcher) that something is "no big deal." This kind of discursive assurance may signal how individuals contend with the stresses of inequality by distancing themselves from the desired thing itself. While feminist researchers often prioritize women's accounts and their ability to define what is important sexually, McClelland (2010) and others (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997) suggested that we must consider potential meanings behind women's accounts of "no big deal." Therefore, feminist researchers have a difficult task: They must balance the desire to recognize women's sexual agency (i.e., encouraging women to define sexuality on their own terms or to downplay the significance of orgasm) with the task of documenting and critiquing the orgasm gap and calling for orgasm parity.

McClelland, Rubin, and Bauermeister (2016) argued that when researchers encounter "no big deal" narratives in their research, it is essential not to simply take these at face value but rather to interpret the range of possible accommodations that individuals might make when evaluating the discourses within which they live. For example, a researcher might ask, What is the psychological cost of wanting something that is imagined as unlikely (see also Leary, 2005)? In the current study, intimate justice (McClelland, 2010) encourages us to consider how the discourses surrounding female orgasm have created a set of expectations for young women's pleasure but have, unfortunately, not been accompanied by better sex education to teach young women and men how to help achieve this pleasure during partnered sex. In this case, the fight for orgasm equality, paired with the commodification of sexual pleasure more broadly (Lamb, 2010), has created a perfect storm within which young women struggle to find respite from the orgasmic imperative. Our findings underscore the complexities of adolescent sexuality development in the early 21st century, after the sexual revolution, in the midst of the commodification of feminist and sexual liberation (Gill, 2008), and before sexual education in the United States has been allowed to be anything but punitive about pleasure.

Other interpretations of these data are, of course, possible and offer compelling additional insights. For example, another analysis of these data might focus on the role of personal choice. Women's narratives about orgasmic absence could be interpreted to intentionally justify choosing to participate in a sexual system that takes their pleasure less seriously than it does men's. Researchers have analyzed the complexities of women's narratives about personal choice as it relates to fitting into social norms (e.g., traditional beauty rituals) and found that women may conform to strict or oppressive norms and also construct this action as a liberating choice as opposed to mere conformity (Braun et al., 2013; Stuart & Donaghue, 2011). This framework is related to but distinct from the one we explored here. Contending with orgasmic absence does not involve necessarily making a choice about whether to adhere to or reject a

norm. In our study, women imagined orgasm as largely out of their control (beyond becoming more relaxed and confident) and, as a result, "choice" played less of a role in these descriptions.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

When evaluating the results from this current study, there are several strengths, limitations, and directions for future researchers to consider. The sample's location in New York City potentially introduced factors that are not relevant to all young adults in the United States, including a large urban environment and the prioritization of comprehensive sexual education policies in the state of New York. However, the location did add racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, which makes these results potentially more relevant and more applicable to the U.S. population as a whole.

In the survey portion of the study, 20% of the women in the study reported "never or hardly ever" having an orgasm with their current partner; however, in the interview portion of the study, nearly every woman spoke about difficulties associated with consistent and reliable orgasm. Future research might investigate potentially different strategies used by women who never or infrequently experience orgasm, as compared to those who experience orgasm more frequently or with less worry and anxiety. The mixed methods design in the current study helps illustrate that orgasm frequency items do not adequately capture important feelings women have about orgasm and its (in)frequency in sexual activities with male partners (see also McClelland, 2011).

Even with a sample that was diverse by sexual identity, data were insufficient to compare experiences with partners with a range of sexual and gender identities. Given that prior research has found lesbian women tend to have more frequent and reliable orgasms than heterosexual and bisexual women (Garcia et al., 2014), it is possible that lesbian women may feel less pressure to produce orgasms with same-sex partners. Future research could investigate this relationship to see how or if women partnered with women construct a sense of "freedom from" as the norms and meanings around orgasm are arguably different for women partnered with men than those partnered with women or female-identified partners. Future research could also expand the "freedom to" and "freedom from" paradigm beyond the immediate sexual experience to include sexual fantasies, which may likewise be met with restrictions or expectations (Morrison, 2004; Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004), as individuals ask themselves: What am I allowed to want?

While this study was focused on young women, these findings suggest that women across the life span may struggle with sexual expectations that develop in early adulthood. Whereas adolescent girls are typically admonished for exploring their sexuality (Frith, 2013b; Tolman & McClelland, 2011), older women are expected to have regular orgasms during partnered sex (Braun et al., 2003; Fishman & Mamo, 2002; Meston et al., 2004; Pierce,

2000). The narratives and patterns we see in young women's sexuality may be the result of more restrictive policies and discourses they encountered as adolescent girls (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). It may be problematic to view these two developmental time periods as distinct and unrelated, as women may carry the vestiges of restrictive discourses well into their adult years. Policies and discourses need to shift to be more inclusive of a range of sexual experiences as healthy and "normal," and adolescent female sexuality should be buttressed by supportive and positive educational contexts.

There is a large body of work on adolescent sexuality that explores how cultural forces work to control young women's sexuality through a variety of structural and political means (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Some of this research frames young women's sexual freedoms in terms of sexual subjectivity (i.e., the idea that young women can identify their desires and act on them; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006) and sexual agency (i.e., the ability to refuse or consent to sexual activities; Bay-Cheng, 2015). In addition to framing young women's sexuality in terms of choice making, it would be useful to also consider how young women's perceptions of what they are "free" to pursue in terms of their sexuality also shapes their decisions, albeit unconsciously or discursively. Future research might consider how women who are or are not having orgasms may strive to create a sense of freedom from sexual expectations or how adolescent girls struggle to assert their freedom to explore their own pleasure and sexuality.

Conclusion

Given the importance placed on orgasm in partnered (hetero)sexual contexts, young women who do not orgasm during sexual encounters with men may contend with the discrepancy between their own lived experiences and the cultural norms that privilege orgasm as healthy and functional. Young women in this study reflected on their absence of orgasm and constructed several narratives about this "lack." We interpret these narratives as forming "freedom from" sexual expectations regarding consistent orgasms, which helped reduce feelings of abnormality and dysfunction, although importantly, came at some cost. Given the dramatic gap in orgasm rates for men and women, it is important to demand equality in this domain, as women should be entitled to orgasms if they desire to have them. Part of this demand for orgasm equality includes documenting the orgasm gap and suggesting ways to achieve orgasm (perhaps via clitoral stimulation or other means). Sexuality and feminist scholars have been addressing these issues for decades. Yet as feminists and sexuality scholars advocate for greater sexual freedoms for any group or population, it is important to remember that the implications of this freedom may also come with unintended outcomes. This is especially true as orgasm rates function as a measurable outcome of "health," serve as a commodity in sexual exchanges, and remain something one "gives" to a partner in exchange for

effort invested. Without articulating or creating space for "freedom from" a sexual expectation, important feminist gains regarding sexual freedoms and sexual equality retain the potential to transform into a restrictive obligation as opposed to a pleasurable freedom.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Armstrong, E. A., England, P., & Fogarty, A. C. K. (2012). Accounting for women's orgasm and sexual enjoyment in college hookups and relationships. *American Sociological Review*, 77, 435–462. doi:10.1177/0003122412445802
- Ayling, K., & Ussher, J. (2008). "If sex hurts, am I still a woman?" The subjective experience of vulvodynia in heterosexual women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 37, 294–304. doi:10.1007/s10508-007-9204-1
- Bancroft, J., Loftus, J., & Long, J. S. (2003). Distress about sex: A national survey of women in heterosexual relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 32, 193–208. doi:10.1023/A:1023420431760
- Basson, R., Althof, S., Davis, S., Fugl-Meyer, K., Goldstein, I., Leiblum, S., ... Wagner, G. (2004). Summary of the recommendations on sexual dysfunctions in women. *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 1, 24–34. doi:10.1111/j.1743-6109.2004.10105.x
- Bay-Cheng, L. (2015). Living in metaphors, trapped in a matrix: The ramifications of neoliberal ideology for young women's sexuality. *Sex Roles*, 73, 332–339. doi:10.1007/s11199-015-0541-6
- Blair, K. L., Cappell, J., & Pukall, C. F. (2017). Not all orgasms were created equal: Differences in frequency and satisfaction of orgasm experiences by sexual activity in same-sex versus mixed-sex relationships. *Journal of Sex Research*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/00224499.2017.1303437
- Blair, K. L., & Pukall, C. F. (2014). Can less be more? Comparing duration vs. frequency of sexual encounters in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 23, 123–136. doi:10.3138/cjhs.2393
- Boroditsky, R., Fisher, W. A., & Bridges, M. L. (1999). Measures of sexual and reproductive health among Canadian women. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 8, 175–182. doi:10.1363/3925107
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2015). (Mis)conceptualizing themes, thematic analysis, and other problems with Fugard and Potts' (2015) sample-size tool for thematic analysis. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19, 739–743. doi:10.1080/13645579.2016.1195588
- Braun, V., Gavey, N., & McPhillips, K. (2003). The "fair deal"? Unpacking accounts of reciprocity in heterosexual. *Sexualities*, 6, 237–261. doi:10.1177/1363460703006002005
- Braun, V., Tricklebank, G., & Clarke, V. (2013). "It shouldn't stick out from your bikini at the beach": Meaning, gender, and the hairy/hairless body. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 37, 478–493. doi:10.1177/0361684313492950
- Chadwick, S. B., & van Anders, S. M. (2017). Do women's orgasms function as a masculinity achievement for men? *Journal of Sex Research*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/00224499.2017.1283484
- Fahs, B. (2011). *Performing sex: The making and unmaking of women's erotic lives*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fahs, B. (2014). "Freedom to" and "freedom from": A new vision for sex positive politics. *Sexualities*, 17, 267–290. doi:10.1177/1363460713516334
- Fahs, B., & McClelland, S. I. (2016). When sex and power collide: An argument for critical sexuality studies. *Journal of Sex Research*, 53, 392–416. doi:10.1080/00224499.2016.1152454
- Fine, M., & McClelland, S. I. (2006). Sexuality education and desire: Still missing after all these years. *Harvard Educational Review*, 76, 297–338. doi:10.17763/haer.76.3.w5042g23122n6703

- Fishman, J. R., & Mamo, L. (2002). What's in a disorder: A cultural analysis of medical and pharmaceutical constructions of male and female sexual dysfunction. *Women and Therapy, 24*, 179–293. doi:10.1300/J015v24n01_20
- Frank, D., & Maass, A. (1985). Relationship factors as predictors of casual attributions about sexual experiences. *Sex Roles, 12*, 697–711. doi:10.1007/BF00287864
- Frederick, D. A., St. John, K. H., Garcia, J. R., & Lloyd, E. A. (2017). Differences in orgasm frequency among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual men and women in a U.S. national sample. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1007/s10508-017-0939-z
- Frith, H. (2013a). Accounting for orgasmic absence: Exploring (hetero)sex using the story completion method. *Psychology and Sexuality, 4*, 310–322. doi:10.1080/19419899.2012.760172
- Frith, H. (2013b). Labouring on orgasms: Embodiment, efficiency, entitlement, and obligations in heterosex. *Culture, Health, and Sexuality, 15*, 494–510. doi:10.1080/13691058.2013.767940
- Garcia, J. R., Lloyd, E. A., Wallen, K., & Fisher, H. E. (2014). Variation in orgasm occurrence by sexual orientation in a sample of U.S. singles. *Journal of Sexual Medicine, 11*, 2645–2652. doi:10.1111/jsm.12669
- Gavey, N., McPhillips, K., & Braun, V. (1999). Interruptus coitus: Heterosexuals accounting for intercourse. *Sexualities, 2*, 35–68. doi:10.1177/136346099002001003
- Gerhard, J. (2001). *Desiring revolution: Second wave feminism and the rewriting of American sexual thought 1920 to 1982*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising. *Feminism and Psychology, 18*, 35–60. doi:10.1177/0959353507084950
- Goldey, K. L., Posh, A. R., Bell, S. N., & van Anders, S. M. (2016). Defining pleasure: A focus group study of solitary and partnered sexual pleasure in queer and heterosexual women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 45*, 2137–2154. doi:10.1007/s10508-016-0704-8
- Graham, C. (2010). The DSM diagnostic criteria for female orgasmic disorder. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*, 256–270. doi:10.1007/s10508-009-9542-2
- Graham, C. A., Boynton, P. M., & Gould, K. (2017). Women's sexual desire: Challenging narratives of "dysfunction." *European Psychologist, 22*, 27–38. doi:10.1027/1016-9040/a000282
- Harris, K. M., Halpern, C. T., Whitsel, E., Hussey, J., Tabor, J., Entzel, P., & Udry, J. R. (2009). The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. Retrieved from <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/design>
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Heiman, J. R. (2002). Sexual dysfunction: Overview of prevalence, etiological factors, and treatments. *Journal of Sex Research, 39*, 73–78. doi:10.1080/00224490209552124
- Home, S., & Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J. (2006). The Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory: Development and validation of a multidimensional inventory for late adolescents and emerging adults. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 30*, 125–138. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2006.00276.x
- Jong, E. (1973). *Fear of flying*. New York, NY: New American Library.
- Kitzinger, C., & Wilkinson, S. (1997). Validating women's experience? Dilemmas in feminist research. *Feminism and Psychology, 7*, 566–574. doi:10.1177/0959353597074012
- Koedt, A. (1973). The myth of the vaginal orgasm. In A. Koedt, E. Levine, & A. Rapone (Eds.), *Radical feminism* (pp. 199–207). New York, NY: Quadrangle Books.
- Lamb, S. (2010). Feminist ideals for a healthy female adolescent: A critique. *Sex Roles, 62*, 294–306. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9698-1
- Laumann, E. O., Nicolosi, A., Glasser, D. B., Paik, A., Gingell, C., Moreira, E., & Wang, T. (2005). Sexual problems among women and men aged 40–80y: Prevalence and correlates identified in the Global Study of Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors. *International Journal of Impotence Research, 17*, 39–57. doi:10.1038/sj.ijir.3901250
- Lavie, M., & Willig, L. (2005). "I don't feel like melting butter": An interpretive phenomenological analysis of the experience of inorgasmia. *Psychology and Health, 20*, 115–128. doi:10.1080/08870440412331296044
- Leary, M. R. (2005). Interpersonal cognition and the quest for social acceptance: Inside the sociometer. In M. W. Baldwin (Ed.), *Interpersonal cognition* (pp. 85–103). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Loos, V. E., Bridges, C. F., & Critelli, J. W. (1987). Weiner's attribution theory and female orgasmic consistency. *Journal of Sex Research, 23*, 348–361. doi:10.1080/00224498709551372
- Lydon, S. (1970). The politics of orgasm. In R. Morgan (Ed.), *Sisterhood is powerful: An anthology of writings from the women's liberation movement* (pp. 197–204). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- McClelland, S. I. (2010). Intimate justice: A critical examination of sexual satisfaction. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 4*, 663–680. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00293.x
- McClelland, S. I. (2011). Who is the "self" in self-reports of sexual satisfaction? Research and policy implications. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy, 8*, 304–320. doi:10.1007/s13178-0110067-9
- McClelland, S. I. (2014). "What do you mean when you say that you are sexually satisfied?" A mixed methods study. *Feminism & Psychology, 24*, 74–96. doi:10.1177/0959353513508392
- McClelland, S. I. (2017a). Conceptual disruption: The self-anchored ladder in critical feminist research. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. doi:10.1177/0361684317725985
- McClelland, S. I. (2017b). Gender and sexual labor near the end of life: Advanced breast cancer and femininity norms. *Women's Reproductive Health, 4*, 29–45. doi:10.1080/23293691.2017.1276367
- McClelland, S. I., & Fine, M. (2008). Rescuing a theory of adolescent sexual excess: Young women and wanting. In A. Harris (Ed.), *Feminism, subcultures, activism* (pp. 83–102). New York, NY: Routledge.
- McClelland, S. I., Holland, K. J., & Griggs, J. J. (2015). Vaginal dryness and beyond: The sexual health needs of women diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. *Journal of Sex Research, 52*, 604–616. doi:10.1080/00224499.2014.928663
- McClelland, S. I., Rubin, J. D., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2016). Adapting to injustice: Young bisexual women's interpretations of microaggressions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 40*, 532–550. doi:10.1177/0361684316664514
- McPhillips, K., Braun, V., & Gavey, N. (2001). Defining (hetero)sex: How imperative is the "coital imperative"? *Women's Studies International Forum, 24*, 229–240. doi:10.1016/S0277-5395(01)00160-1
- Meston, C. M., Hull, E., Levin, R. J., & Sipski, M. (2004). Disorders of orgasm in women. *Journal of Sexual Medicine, 1*, 66–68. doi:10.1111/j.1743-6109.2004.10110.x
- Morrison, T. G. (2004). "He was treating me like trash and I was loving it ..." Perspectives on gay male pornography. *Journal of Homosexuality, 47*, 167–183. doi:10.1300/J082v47n03_09
- Muehlenhard, C. L., & Shippee, S. K. (2010). Men's and women's reports of pretending orgasm. *Journal of Sex Research, 47*, 552–567. doi:10.1080/00224490903171794
- Nicolson, P., & Burr, J. (2003). What is "normal" about women's (hetero) sexual desire and orgasm? A report of an in-depth interview study. *Social Science and Medicine, 57*, 1735–1745. doi:10.1016/S0277-9536(03)00012-1
- Opperman, E., Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Rogers, C. (2014). "It feels so good it almost hurts": Young women's experiences of orgasm and pleasure. *Journal of Sex Research, 51*, 503–515. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.753982
- Pierce, A. P. (2000). The coital alignment technique (CAT): An overview of studies. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy, 26*, 257–268. doi:10.1080/00926230050084650
- Potts, A. (2000). Coming, coming, gone: A feminist deconstruction of heterosexual orgasm. *Sexualities, 3*, 55–76. doi:10.1177/136346000003001003
- Prause, N. (2012). A response to Brody, Costa, and Hess (2011): Theoretical, statistical and construct problems perpetuated in the

- study of female orgasm. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 27, 260–271. doi:10.1080/14681994.2012.732262
- Puppo, V. (2011). Embryology and anatomy of the vulva: The female orgasm and women's sexual health. *European Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Reproductive Biology*, 154, 3–8. doi:10.1016/j.ejogrb.2010.08.009
- Richters, J., de Visser, R., Rissel, C., & Smith, A. (2006). Sexual practices at last heterosexual encounter and occurrence of orgasm in a national survey. *Journal of Sex Research*, 43, 217–226. doi:10.1080/00224490609552320
- Rowland, D. L., Myers, A. L., Adamski, B. A., & Burnett, A. L. (2013). Role of attribution in affective responses to a partnered sexual situation among sexually dysfunctional men. *BJU International*, 111, E103–E109. doi:10.1111/j.1464-410X.2012.11347.x
- Salisbury, C. M. A., & Fisher, W. A. (2014). "Did you come?": A qualitative exploration of gender differences in beliefs, experiences, and concerns regarding female orgasm occurrence during heterosexual sexual interactions. *Journal of Sex Research*, 51, 616–631. doi:10.1080/00224499.2013.838934
- Segal, L. (1994). *Straight sex: Rethinking the politics of pleasure*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Snead, K. C., Jr., Magal, S. R., Christensen, L. R., & Ndede-Amadi, A. A. (2014). Attribution theory: A theoretical framework for understanding information systems success. *Systematic Practice and Action Research*, 35, 871–891. doi:10.1007/s11213-014-9328-x
- Steinem, G. (2012). Halfway into a feminist century. *Ms*, 22. Retrieved from <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1P3-2770656621/halfway-into-a-feminist-century>
- Stuart, A., & Donaghue, N. (2011). Choosing to conform: The discursive complexities of choice in relation to feminine beauty practices. *Feminism and Psychology*, 22, 98–121. doi:10.1177/0959353511424362
- Tiefer, L. (2001). A new view of women's sexual problems: Why new? Why now? *Journal of Sex Research*, 38, 89–96. doi:10.1080/00224490109552075
- Tiefer, L. (2002). Beyond the medical model of women's sexual problems: A campaign to resist the promotion of "female sexual dysfunction." *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 17, 127–135. doi:10.1080/14681990220121248
- Tolman, D., & McClelland, S. I. (2011). Normative sexuality development in adolescence: A decade in review. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21, 242–255. doi:10.1111/j.1532-7795.2010.00726.x
- Ussher, J. (2010). Are we medicalizing women's misery? A critical review of women's higher rates of reported depression. *Feminism and Psychology*, 20, 9–35. doi:10.1177/0959353509350213
- van Anders, S. M. (2012). Testosterone and sexual desire in healthy women and men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 41, 1471–1484. doi:10.1007/s10508-012-9946-2
- Wade, L. D., Kremer, E. C., & Brown, J. (2005). The incidental orgasm: The presence of clitoral knowledge and the absence of orgasm for women. *Women and Health*, 42, 117–138. doi:10.1300/J013v42n01_07
- West, S. L., Vinikoor, L. C., & Zolnoun, D. (2004). A systematic review of the literature on female sexual dysfunction prevalence and predictors. *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 15, 40–172. doi:10.1080/10532528.2004.10559819
- Zurbriggen, E. L., & Yost, M. R. (2004). Power, desire, and pleasure in sexual fantasies. *Journal of Sex Research*, 41, 288–300. doi:10.1080/00224490409552236