

SEXUALITY, PLEASURE, POWER, AND DANGER: POINTS OF TENSION, CONTRADICTION, AND CONFLICT

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The study of women's sexuality has been fraught with contradictions and conflict, yet it provides a fruitful mechanism to examine social inequalities, power relationships, cultural norms, social scripts, and values about gender and social identities. In the 30 years since Carole Vance (1983) posited that women grapple with the tension between pleasure and danger and face ambivalence about how to experience and express their sexuality, research on women's sexuality has broadened the narratives about what sexuality means. As Vance (1993) wrote 10 years after the publication of *Pleasure and Danger*, "For women to experience autonomous desire and act in ways that give them sexual pleasure in a society that would nurture and protect their delights is at the same time our culture's worst nightmare and feminism's best fantasy" (p. 289). For feminist psychologists in particular, women's sexuality, often framed by this pleasure and danger dialectic, has proven to be extraordinarily complicated (becoming all the more difficult to theorize, study, label, and understand) and full of possibilities (providing a lens to examine a whole host of social inequalities and personal experiences).

In this chapter, we illustrate the paradox of pleasure and danger by examining points of tension, contradiction, and conflict about women's sexuality, power, and empowerment. We have divided this chapter into two parts. In Part 1, we begin by reiterating Fahs and McClelland's (2016) argument for critical sexuality studies and argue for how such a lens can revise the concepts, practices, and ways of seeing used by feminist psychologists

studying sexuality. We follow this with a critical examination of the typical ways in which sex researchers construct sexual satisfaction, embodiment, sexual activity and virginity, and agency. Last, we briefly explore the implications of traditional sex research for conceptualizing women's sexuality and understanding the social policies that affect women (e.g., the development of flibanserin or "female Viagra").

In Part 2, we revisit the feminist paradox of pleasure and danger (Vance, 1983) by pairing it with recent theories and empirical studies that have examined the contradictions of women's sexuality. We follow this by examining neoliberal discourses on sexuality (i.e., the notion of individualistic consumers, informed by capitalism, claiming "sexual empowerment") and how these discourses have influenced modern sex research as well as feminist responses, critiques, and revisions to traditional sex research. This section also highlights how neoliberalism, because of how it frames the individual (rather than the social context or broader political structures) as responsible for her or his fate, functions as a new iteration of sexism (Fine & McClelland, 2006, 2007). We conclude this section by examining theories of sexual performance and empowerment, looking at a variety of key moments in feminist sex research when tensions have been keenly felt between pleasure, danger, power, and pleasure for women. These include the study of abject or "disgusting" bodies, body hair, genital surgeries, orgasm, "scary sex," pornography, gender fluidity and trans bodies, and asexuality.

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Ultimately, this chapter contributes to the understanding of how the conceptual paradox illustrated by Vance's (1983) pairing of pleasure and danger still presents an elusive, chronic, overarching, and overlapping set of contradictory points of tension in women's sexual lives. We draw out these tensions to illustrate how feminist psychologists can use them to study and better understand women's sexual imaginations, desires, and lived experiences. By drawing from critical sexuality studies and their attendant goals, feminist psychologists can better grapple with the deeply contradictory and difficult ways in which women's sexuality is experienced today.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL SEXUALITY STUDIES

Traditional sex research has asserted, both subtly and overtly, a variety of beliefs about women's sexuality and sexuality in general. From the premise that sex is natural and that people engage in sex not because of sociosexual and sociopolitical scripts but because of their "natural" impulses, sex has been framed in traditional research as heterosexual, relatively easy to measure, and biologically based (Brody & Weiss, 2015; McGraw et al., 2015; for critiques, see Tiefer, 2006). Derived from these biases toward heteronormativity, biology, and gender dichotomization, ways of measuring and studying sexuality are overly simplistic, as are ways of conceptualizing and understanding sexuality (Bailey & Pillard, 1995; Bancroft, 2002). Sexuality is assumed to be fixed within the individual and more or less constant regardless of context (Tiefer, 2006), thereby upholding hierarchies and continuing to advocate for natural understandings of gender and sex.

The subfield of critical sexuality studies prioritizes examining the role of power imbalances when looking at, measuring, thinking about, or understanding women's sexuality (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Fletcher, Dowsett, Duncan, Slavin, & Corboz, 2013; Plummer, 2012). Plummer (2012) outlined a field of critical sexuality studies that focused on how sexuality was "orchestrated through power and inequalities" (p. 251), and Fletcher et al. (2013) defined critical sexuality studies as "an emerging

field of academic enquiry linked to an international network of advocacy agencies, activists, and political issues" (p. 319). Recently, Fahs and McClelland (2016) more precisely outlined the goals and parameters of critical sexuality studies by positing three elements that epitomize critical sexuality studies work: conceptual analysis, focus on sexual bodies that are often considered abject (or pushed out of bounds), and attention to heterosexual privilege.

Clearly demarcating the stakes and parameters of different concepts in sex research has been a key contribution of recent feminist work that seeks to counter traditional claims about sexuality and its nature. Conceptual analysis has thus proven to be essential to the field of sex research in its development and expansion during the past several decades (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Tiefer, 2006). Many researchers have taken up the project of challenging traditional sex researchers' definitions of and methodologies around a variety of concepts, particularly those that affect younger women, including "safe sex" (Alexander, Coleman, Deatrack, & Jemmott, 2012), sexual empowerment (Lamb, 2010), sexual satisfaction (McClelland, 2010), desire and arousal (Mitchell, Wellings, & Graham, 2014), sexual attraction (Savin-Williams & Joyner, 2014), and normative adolescent sexuality (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). In this chapter, we look at a variety of aspects of sexuality that critical sexuality studies have explicitly helped us to think about in a more critical manner.

Feminist modes of engaging in conceptual analysis confront the ways in which traditional sex researchers have imagined and defined sexual satisfaction, embodiment, sexual activity and virginity, and agency, thus challenging traditional sex researchers and traditional psychologists to expand their definitions of these concepts and to realize they are in need of revisions, specifically for the often invisible, hidden, or subtle aspects of these concepts. When conceptual analysis is a required element of critical sexuality research, investigators are encouraged to assess and examine possible hidden assumptions behind the ways that women's sexualities are theorized, constructed, measured, or imagined (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Here, we offer four examples of conceptual analysis.

Sexual Satisfaction

Researchers studying sexual satisfaction have had to struggle with measuring and understanding exactly what satisfaction might mean for different people, particularly across social identity lines. Traditional research designs have typically asked participants to assess their level of sexual satisfaction on a Likert scale (Meston & Trapnell, 2005), often ignoring the possible biases or perspectives that could influence how researchers understand or generalize about sexual satisfaction. McClelland (2010, 2014) found that women often factor in their partner's satisfaction when imagining their own sexual satisfaction, whereas Nicolson and Burr (2003) found that partner satisfaction mattered more than personal satisfaction for women who reported their sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, research on who expects to be sexually satisfied has greatly complicated the measurement and assessment of sexual satisfaction, because sexual minority youth expected less satisfying sexual relationships than heterosexual youth (Diamond & Lucas, 2004). The traditional roles of passivity and submission prescribed for all women predicted lower rates of sexual arousal, autonomy, and enjoyment (Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006), further complicating what it means for women to be sexually satisfied. Fahs and Swank (2011) have imagined sexual satisfaction as a combination of physical satisfaction, emotional satisfaction, frequency of orgasm, and emotions about sex. These varying ways of thinking about sexual satisfaction complicate both what researchers know about women's sexual lives and how they understand whether (or how much) women feel sexually satisfied, as both physical markers of satisfaction and emotional indicators of satisfaction collide. We recommend that psychologists measure research participants' sexual satisfaction using multiple indicators rather than (over)relying on orgasm or a single Likert scale.

Embodiment

Research on embodiment has included material about living in, perceiving, and experiencing the world from the physical and material places of the body (Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2013). What it means to "be embodied" is nevertheless immensely complex because it refers to the lived experience of

being in the body, having corporeality, and existing in actual skin. Although traditional research on embodiment has focused on the experiences of being in the body, recent feminist work has focused on the body as having latent knowledge, that is, knowledge embedded in the lived experiences of the body moving through the world (Grosz, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Young, 2005). In tandem with disability studies, fat studies, freak studies, trans studies, and feminist science studies, critical sexuality studies attend to how embodiment is neither fixed nor stable but rather draws from notions of normality and abnormality and shifts throughout time and context (Fahs & McClelland, 2016).

Specifically, the body can have subjective experiences outside of cognition (Young, 2005), just as people can simultaneously embody both an objectified or material self and an experiencing or subjective self (Fahs, 2011a). People can be desired and feel desirous (Cahill, 2014), can occupy both a subject and an object position (Plante, 2006), and can simultaneously be a biological entity and a socially scripted one (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). People can be subjected to social forces that control and discipline their bodies (e.g., framing how they speak about and engage in sex; Foucault, 1978), just as they can fight back against unwanted or destructive ways of imagining the body in relation to social identities such as race, class, gender, size, and sexual identity (Bobel & Kwan, 2011). The body can be both a performative and a material thing (Butler, 1990), combined with or separate from technology (Haraway, 1991), as well as imagined and real (Gatens, 1996).

Consequently, methodological disagreements have appeared in the psychological literature on embodiment, with some researchers using positivistic approaches to studying the body (Hunter, 2002; Jones, 2001; Martins, Tiggemann, & Churchett, 2008) and others using grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis to study this phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Fahs, 2014a; Tolman, 2009). Critical and feminist work on embodiment has focused on a variety of aspects of bodies, including tattoos (Pitts, 2003); crying and tearfulness (Hepburn, 2006); dizziness (S. D. Brown, Cromby, Harper, Johnson, & Reavey,

2011); anorexia and eating disorders (Bordo, 1993); cosmetic surgery (Heyes, 2007); breastfeeding (Schmied & Lupton, 2001); body hair (Fahs, 2014); audible and visceral body movements (Bates, 2013), sweating, pain, and aging (Gillies et al., 2004); and walking (Young, 2005). In each of these conceptualizations, the body is constructed as both material and abstract, worthy of imagining both in actual skin or flesh and as a funnel for theoretical inquiry. Along these lines, researchers have also argued that the body has political implications and that there are links between the body and relationships of power. For example, women with more body objectification (i.e., feeling treated as an object by others or themselves) have reported lower amounts of sexual pleasure and satisfaction (Claudat & Warren, 2014; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007; Steer & Tiggemann, 2008). We recommend that feminist psychologists approach the body simultaneously as material, fleshy, and real and as a political, socially constructed entity. We would ideally like to see more research that delves into the interplay between the body and the social context, seeing the living, breathing body not just as either physiological or social but as a complex interplay of social scripts and political narratives.

Sexual Activity and Virginity

The notion of first becoming sexually active is a key concept of sexuality research, yet the parameters are poorly defined and full of assumptions about heteronormativity (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). To start, people often have vastly different definitions of what constitutes “having sex” (Bersamin, Fisher, Walker, Hill, & Grube, 2007; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007; Sanders et al., 2010; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999), making virginity and becoming sexually active all the more difficult to define. Consequently, researchers have examined sexual activity in a variety of ways, including by asking participants to describe their definitions of “sexually active” (García, 2009) solely in terms of specific sexual behaviors such as oral sex, vaginal sex, and anal intercourse (Julio et al., 2015) or by simply asking, “Are you sexually active?” (Bach, Mortimer, VandeWeerd, & Corvin, 2013). Most traditionally (and conservatively), some researchers continue

to assume that vaginal intercourse defines sex and that all sexually active people engage in penetrative vaginal intercourse (Brody & Weiss, 2015; McGraw et al., 2015).

This diversity in thinking about sexual activity and virginity presents researchers with a formidable challenge, in that it also obscures the vast range of experiences that people may define as within or outside of having sex (e.g., kissing, fantasizing, masturbating, sexual touching, watching pornography, feeling horny, feeling wet, getting an erection). Instead, intercourse takes center stage (along with an emphasis on penetration), showcasing risks related to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections as defining the experience of having sex.

Tolman (2009) has raised questions about what is being activated in sexual activity and what this says about gender and power; Fahs and McClelland (2016) wrote,

In particular, we worry about the assumed role of the penis/phallus as the only real “activator” or “activating agent” in sexual activity. This reliance on penetration (accompanied by a desire for consistent measurement) has also resulted in the need for a “real” beginning, measurable and marked clearly, which has constructed a female body as only *activated* when *penetrated*. (p. 398)

The terms *sexual debut* or *sexual initiation* also suggest that penetration defines sexuality and that having penetrative sex means something important (Akintola, Ngubane, & Makhaba, 2012). This way of measuring sexual activity has persisted even after the difficulties of measuring first sex were found (Fahs, 2016a), and many scholars have noted the absence of appropriate or good measures of sexual activity for lesbian and bisexual women or for gay men (Carpenter, 2005; Goodenow, Szalacha, Robin, & Westheimer, 2008). Critical sexuality scholars have started to ask questions about first sex by broadening definitions of what early sexual experiences look like or feel like and by defining sex outside of contexts of risk (e.g., contracting an infection; Braun, 2013; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001; Tolman, 2009).

We strongly recommend that sexual activity and virginity become dislodged from their relationship to intercourse—a far too narrow definition of sex that also prioritizes penetrative sexual experiences above other kinds of sexual experiences—in favor of a focus on the wide range of early sexual experiences available to individuals. We also advocate strongly against the idea that virginity is a clear dichotomy between virgin–nonvirgin for young people and instead suggest that psychologists imagine virginity as a continuum of sexual behaviors, thoughts, and activities (Blank, 2008).

Agency

Sexual agency has also proven especially difficult to define and measure, particularly as it remains connected to the rhetoric of sexual “choice.” Agency has been conceptualized as feminist and antifeminist, conservative and progressive. Specifically, researchers have thought about women’s sexual agency as a precursor to good and deliberately chosen sex (Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2006) and as protective against bad sexual outcomes (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2007), yet agency also has been criticized for its role in encouraging women to see themselves as personally responsible for all sexual outcomes (Allen, 2003; Bay-Cheng, 2015; Charles, 2010; Gill, 2007; Stringer, 2014).

Coupled with neoliberal and modern sexism tropes that women can independently choose the context of the sex they have (and that they “deserve” bad outcomes), agency has been defined as the perception of having power and choice about sexual partners and activities and of having the ability to refuse sex (Erchull & Liss, 2013; Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015). Simultaneously, agency has meant the way women adapt to sexual norms by performing as empowered (i.e., pretending to have power when they do not), regardless of whether they have actual sexual power (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Gill, 2008). Proponents of sexual autonomy deride other women as sluts for having “lack of control” over themselves and others (Schalet, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2003). Furthermore, the influence of neoliberalism has combined conversations about sexual agency with the idea that corporations can sell empowerment to

women through their purchase and consumption of goods and services (Gill & Harvey, 2011), thus raising questions about how to have agency when agency is defined around ideals of spending money on oneself and “becoming” empowered.

Ultimately, sexual agency has the potential to become linked with highly regressive and dangerous rhetorics alongside more nuanced and progressive rhetorics of what it means to make sexual choices and have sexual control. We recommend that psychologists work to divorce sexual agency from the idea of performing as empowered or “being” (vs. “not being”) empowered and instead focus on empowerment as a complex goal for more autonomy, independence, control, and freedom.

This focus on conceptual clarity is not merely an exercise in nuancing how psychologists measure or study sexuality. Rather, such conceptual analysis also influences social policies and programs, such as welfare (Abramovitz, 1996; Masters, Lindhorst, & Meyers, 2014), sex education (Fine & McClelland, 2006), funding of sex research, visibility of certain kinds of scholarship or perspectives, and invisibility of other kinds of scholarship or perspectives. For example, the notion of measuring “sexual events” appeared prominently in recent debates about the Food and Drug Administration’s approval of flibanserin (or the “female Viagra” drug). Though women only had satisfying sex one time more per month (a finding many thought did not justify the risks), some researchers argued that this tiny increase in sexual events coincided with women’s sexual satisfaction (Puppo & Puppo, 2015; Stastna, 2015). Furthermore, notions of sexual activity often obscure the ways in which young women having anal intercourse are constructed (or construct themselves) as virgins or sexually inactive. The relentless focus on penetrative vaginal–penile intercourse obscures sexual health risks and distorts understanding at a policy level of important aspects of women’s (and girls’) sexuality (Carpenter, 2001). Ultimately, the call for critical sexuality studies and the associated work on conceptual clarity is one that will help psychologists to more deeply consider the impacts of the methodological and conceptual choices they make when doing research.

PLEASURE AND DANGER REVISITED

Critical sexuality studies also invite a more serious consideration of the sorts of unresolved tensions that exist for women's sexuality, particularly the ongoing tensions between pleasure and danger. In elaborating the various ways in which women negotiate and experience pleasure and danger—that is, the pleasure combined with danger, but also the pleasure experienced as danger—Vance (1983) laid the groundwork for both theoretical and empirical inquiries about the complicated and ambivalent terrain of women's sexual subjectivities. She argued for a necessary complicating of theoretical frameworks to understand women's sexuality, noting,

To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structures in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience of sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live. (p. 1)

What does it mean, for example, that women sometimes experience their sexuality as infused with incompatible messages about—and experiences with—empowerment, violence, pornography, desire, and insidious silences about their bodies and pleasures? What kind of danger is present in women's internalization of oppression? If women's sexuality is informed by coercion, how can women feel empowered? How can we as feminist psychologists work to reconcile or better understand these contradictory feelings and positions while also valuing and honoring the importance of not merely reducing the tension between pleasure and danger? What does it mean for women to experience both pleasure and danger, perhaps simultaneously or perhaps at different stages of their lives, as part of their sexualities?

These same frameworks extend to research about women's sexuality, because contradictions between pleasure and danger inform the core of recent scholarship about sexual satisfaction, pleasure, embodiment, and agency (McClelland, 2010, 2014; McClelland & Fine, 2008; Tolman et al., 2013; Young, 2005). Much work has sought to understand

the contradictions in women's sexual lives, particularly as women report increasing gains in social and sexual power (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Fahs, 2011b; Gill, 2008) while sexual violence, abusive images in pornography, and erosions of reproductive rights continue to haunt women's sexuality (Attwood, 2007; Gill, 2007; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005). Since the second wave of the women's movement, American women seemed to achieve greater gender equality in the public settings of work and education, though scholars have noted that progress toward gender equity has been slower or even stalled in the realm of family life and sexual practices (England, 2010). Moreover, issues of reproductive rights and access to abortion have been eroding in the United States for the past three decades (Fine & McClelland, 2007; Smyth, 2002), further challenging the portrait of women's sexuality as empowered. Layered onto this, women are increasingly pressured to internalize patriarchal viewpoints when imagining their bodies and sexualities, sometimes even by eroticizing their own powerlessness and lack of safety (Fahs, 2011b). These complex ideas about danger inform the core of women's sexual lives.

Some theorists have posited that neoliberal discourses of individualism, personal “brands,” and highly capitalistic and materialistic notions of agency and empowerment have in part driven the contradictions seen in women's sexuality (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Kauppinen, 2013). Because neoliberalism posits that capitalism, a relentless focus on the individual, and privatization lead to positive outcomes for women (Gonick, Renold, Ringrose, & Weems, 2009; Lahad, 2014), a neoliberal vision for women's sexuality has appeared more frequently in psychological articles about women's sexuality (Brown-Bowers, Gurevich, Vasilovsky, Cosma, & Matti, 2015; Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010). For example, Hakim's (2010, 2011) argument about erotic capital—that women should use their “sexiness” to get ahead in business and in life and that feminists largely believe that women are immoral when doing so—has been heavily criticized for its use of neoliberal rhetoric as a framework for sexual empowerment (Green, 2013) and for how it justifies negative outcomes for women who are considered ugly, fat, or “frigid” (Kwan & Graves, 2013;

Sala, Terraneo, Lucchini, & Knies, 2013; Watkins, Smith, & Aquino, 2013).

Tensions among pleasure, power, and danger most notably appear around issues of sexual performance and empowerment. That is, the ways that people imagine expressing and narrating their sexuality reveal much about the ways that the body and sexuality are experienced in relation to social life. For example, body shame is significantly associated with lower sexual pleasure for women (Koch, Mansfield, Thurau, & Carey, 2005; Pujols, Meston, & Seal, 2010; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005). We can also see in these examples the ways in which the rhetoric of empowerment and liberation are often deployed as a disguise for neoliberal ideas of consumption or patriarchal ideas of coercion (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Gill & Harvey, 2011). In the following sections, we specifically consider a variety of “symptoms” of sexual performance as related to contradictions about sexual empowerment: abject or disgusting bodies, body hair, genital surgeries, orgasm, “scary sex,” pornography, gender fluidity, and asexuality. We also discuss how the inadvertent or intentional breaking of traditional sexuality scripts can create a sense of liberation and pleasure for women who contest patriarchal regulations of their sexuality. Ultimately, these sections showcase emerging areas in which disconnects among pleasure, power, and danger are experienced, seen, or felt.

Abject or Disgusting Bodies

Some of the most important research about disconnects between pleasure, power, and danger revolves around studies of bodies considered abject, disgusting, or “othered” (i.e., viewed as gross). This concept was originally introduced by philosopher Julia Kristeva (1982) but also has deep implications for feminist psychologists. Some of the work on abject bodies includes advocacy for the sexuality of people with disabilities (Shildrick, 2005), fighting for more visibility for women of color (Lee, 2000), reclaiming fatness as a space of social resistance (Joanisse & Synnott, 1999), “pro-ana” websites that promote solidarity among anorexic people (Dias, 2013), and studies that seek to understand how bodies circulate in social space (Casper & Currah, 2011).

More specifically, fatness and body hair both represent spaces where women’s bodies have historically been constructed as gross or disgusting. The emerging field of fat studies has sought to expand definitions of acceptable bodies and push back against the moralizing and medicalizing traditions of medical discourses (C. Cooper, 2010; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Saguy & Riley, 2005). For example, fat studies can intervene as a counternarrative against damaging public health discourses that shame and ostracize fat bodies (T. Brown, 2014), whereas fat acceptance work can direct attention away from moral panics about obesity and instead focus it on stigma (Saguy & Riley, 2005). Work on fat sexualities (Satinsky, Dennis, Reece, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2013; Weinstein, 2015) and the gendering of fat stigma (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Rooth, 2009; Satinsky et al., 2013) also push forward fat bodies as a frontline in the battle for women’s sexual empowerment.

Body Hair

The various anxieties that people have about their body hair, particularly leg, underarm, and pubic hair, highlight how hair operates at the interface between self and culture and symbolizes much about cultural beliefs and practices surrounding race, class, and gender. Similarly, body hair has at times been used as a site of rebellion and resistance (Fahs, 2012, 2014c). Body hair norms have been pervasive and consistent across Western cultures, with studies consistently showing that women feel compelled to completely remove their leg and underarm hair (Fahs, 2012, 2014c; Toerien, Wilkinson, & Choi, 2005) and to be mostly hairless in their pubic region; men, however, have far more flexibility around body hair and pubic hair choices than do women (Terry & Braun, 2013). Although there are some cultural exceptions to this (e.g., Eastern Europe), pressures for women to remove body hair have pervaded other parts of the world as well. In the United Kingdom, a full 99% of women have reported that they removed body hair at some point (Toerien et al., 2005), and women who did not remove body hair reported facing appraisals of themselves as disgusting, manly, unattractive, unfeminine, and gross (Fahs, 2012,

2014c; Fahs & Delgado, 2011). Although most men have “manscaped” or trimmed their pubic hair at some point (Boroughs, Cafri, & Thompson, 2005), men have reported feeling entitled to choose the degree to which they would remove hair, whereas women have not felt entitled to similar levels of choice about their body hair (Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, women of color report facing more severe penalties than White women for choosing to have body hair, particularly because family members worry about respectability and public image (Fahs & Delgado, 2011). Ultimately, women’s choice about body hair remains limited by the social and cultural punishments for women who do not comply with normative standards for hairlessness.

Genital Surgeries

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women seeking female genital cosmetic surgery, in part because of the growing pressures for women to “hate” their genitals (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; DeMaria, Hollub, & Herbenick, 2011; Roberts & Waters, 2004; Schick, Calabrese, Rima, & Zucker, 2010). Women also hear messages that their genitals are not acceptable in their natural state and that they need to clean, sanitize, deodorize, exfoliate, and even surgically alter their genitals (Bartky, 1990; Braun & Tiefer, 2010). This “disease mongering” has led to pressures for women to seek labiaplasties, vaginal “rejuvenation,” the injection of Botox into G-spots, and the surgical tightening of the vagina; these procedures have been heavily criticized by feminists as undermining women’s self-confidence, being destructive to women’s body image, and being problematic both socially and politically (Braun, 2005; Braun & Tiefer, 2010). Furthermore, women who have had labiaplasties have not reported improvements in their sex lives (Bramwell, Morland, & Garden, 2007). Instead, negative genital attitudes correlate with women refusing to allow a partner to perform oral sex on them (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2011), being resistant to genital self-examinations, using vibrators less, and attending fewer gynecological appointments (Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry,

2010). The supposedly empowering outcomes of female genital cosmetic surgeries are thus not supported by the literature and seem to contribute to a variety of other problems associated with women’s sexualities and bodies in contemporary culture.

Orgasm

The sexual compliance literature has suggested that women often have sex when they do not want to (Katz & Tirone, 2009; Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010). When prioritizing the role of partners’ needs over their own needs, women’s feelings about orgasm, and their tendency to fake orgasm at high rates, reveal the limitations of the rhetoric of sexual empowerment that circulates today. Rates of women having boring or unpleasurable sex—particularly younger women, women of color, less educated women, and women from lower socioeconomic statuses—reveal links among gender, power, and embodiment (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003; Fahs & Swank, 2011; Katz & Tirone, 2009; Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010). The quest for orgasm as a product of sex reveals links between capitalism and sex (i.e., orgasm as a measurable, observable product that women should quest for; Jackson & Scott, 2007) and suggests that women fake orgasm in part because a product of sex is always expected (Fahs, 2014a). Heterosexual women reported faking orgasm three times more often than heterosexual men (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010), often to please their male partners, end the encounter, feel sexually normal, avoid negative reactions from a partner, and reinforce a male partner’s sexual skills (Fahs, 2011b; Frith, 2013). Moreover, the most common reasons for heterosexual women to fake orgasms were to make their male partner happy and to give him an ego boost (E. B. Cooper, Fenigstein, & Fauber, 2014). Conversely, men faked orgasm for their own benefit, such as wanting to sleep or feeling too drunk to get an erection (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010). The gender and power imbalances with orgasm suggest that women do not feel entitled to refrain from orgasm (real or fake) and that they sometimes struggle to get their sexual needs met through partners.

“Scary Sex”

Recent attention to sex outside of the bounds of “normal” or “conventional” practices has revealed much about the relationship between cultural framing and individual behavior and choices. Fahs, Dudy, and Stage (2013) posited that moral panics about “deviant” or “weird” sexuality divert attention from actual sources of danger, thereby framing the dangerous as safe and the safe as dangerous or in danger; by framing various cultural crises of sexuality through moral panics, attention veers away from actual dangers (e.g., invisibility of unprotected anal sex among teen girls) and toward fake dangers (e.g., lesbians marrying, sex scandals in the media). Such panics about scary sex also obscure the pervasiveness of sexual coercion and sexual violence by instead focusing attention on tiny populations of sex offenders instead of directing attention at normative masculinity as potentially violent (Fahs, 2016b; Mopas & Moore, 2012; Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2015).

Recent attention to scary sex has focused on how scripts of sexual normality get framed against larger cultural backdrops of women’s submission and men’s dominance. Complicated conversations about consent and bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism (Barker, 2013; Downing, 2013; Dymock, 2012), kink culture (Scott, 2015), queer body modification (Pitts, 2000), professional dominatrix work (Lindemann, 2010), and new modes of thinking about consent and deviant sex (Larsen, 2013) have broadened the cultural understandings of how women might perform, experiment with, or engage in scary sex to appropriate, transform, or reinforce their own oppression. This work has led to highly controversial conversations in the literature about the dichotomies between good and bad sex and between moral and immoral practices (Barker, 2013; Bauer, 2014; Scott, 2015).

Pornography

One of the most contentious arguments within the feminist movement has centered on the role of pornography. Divisions between sex-positive and radical feminists have been fierce, long lasting, and intense: Sex-positive feminists typically argue against censorship and advocate that pornography

can be both liberating and a teaching tool for sexuality (Queen & Comella, 2008), whereas radical feminists argue that pornography exploits women by eroticizing their vulnerability, passivity, and abuse (Dines, 2010). These tensions, captured in Carole Vance’s (1983) *Pleasure and Danger* and debated since the 1982 Barnard conference on sexuality (Echols, 2016), have had long reverberations in women’s sexual empowerment and choices. Of course, new work has suggested that both “freedom to” and “freedom from” are essential to understanding women’s sexual freedom, and thus both sides can be integrated meaningfully (Fahs, 2014b).

Although people may disagree about the value of pornography, a recent content analysis of popular pornographic videos revealed that more than three quarters of the sex scenes examined had elements of male aggression toward women (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010). Social science research on pornography has shown that women’s consumption of pornography has increased in recent years, though studies vary in their assessments of how many women watch pornography (ranging from 10%–80%; A. Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000; Daneback, Cooper, & Månsson, 2005; Laumann, Gagno, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). This finding suggests that women may have internalized the erotic fantasies of the consumer world (i.e., those put forth by the commercial pornography industry).

Other studies have suggested that the general trend toward accepting porn in the past 20 years is much stronger among men than women (Lykke & Cohen, 2015). Qualitative research has found that women report deep ambivalence about pornography, with worries about the labor conditions of porn actresses to concerns about feeling repulsed by its depiction of women despite awareness of feeling sexually aroused by it (Attwood, 2005; Fahs, 2011b; Parvez, 2006). Quantitative research has suggested that women have less sexual satisfaction and lower self-esteem when their male partners watch more pornography (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Muusses, Kerkhof, & Finkenauer, 2015; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012) and that women often watch pornography because their male partners want them to (Poulsen, Busby, & Galovan, 2013).

Yet, the negative relationship between female consumption of pornography and women's own sexual satisfaction is much weaker (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Morgan, 2011; Yucel & Gassanov, 2010). Ultimately, conflicts about pornography and its implications for women's sexual pleasure and power continue to pervade contemporary feminist debates about what constitutes sexual empowerment.

Gender Fluidity

Gaining visibility in recent years, gender fluidity—and specifically trans experiences of sexuality and the body—has disrupted the dichotomy between male and female in important and meaningful ways (Devor & Dominic, 2015; Feinberg, 1996; Gagné & Tewksbury, 1998). Trans people, particularly those in transition, are often seen as liminal, in the middle, on the edge, or completely out of sight, both on television and in material lived realities (Booth, 2011), raising new possibilities for examining queer identities and their important and disruptive influence on assumptions about heterosexuality (Nash, 2010). Fighting against contexts that ignore or trivialize the middle or third gender categories (Halberstam, 2005), gender fluid, genderqueer, and trans people have disrupted the clear notion of what women are and how psychologists see, understand, measure, or assess the experiences of women more broadly.

Faced with numerous institutional challenges, trans people have been terrorized, pathologized, and confined in different institutional spaces, including the mental health system (Israel, Gorcheva, Burnes, & Walther, 2008; Mohr, Israel, & Sedlacek, 2001); indeed, some mental health professionals have argued that gender fluid, gender queer, and transgender people have gender identity disorder (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002). Prisons have also received attention in recent years as places where trans people are discarded, neglected, misunderstood, and abused (Jenness & Fenstermaker, 2016; Smith & Stanley, 2011). Conflicts between the trans/gender fluid community and the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community have also stirred up debates about the role of trans identities in gay liberation struggles (Feinberg, 1996; Stone, 2009): Drag queens have been simultaneously

mocked and celebrated (Taylor & Rupp, 2004), and trans women have been admitted to, and barred from, “women-only” feminist spaces (Goldberg, 2014). The notion of pleasure, power, and agency for trans or genderqueer sexualities has also appeared as an emerging and hotly debated area in sexuality research (Edelman & Zimman, 2014).

Asexuality

As a final example of the tensions among pleasure, power, and danger, recent literature on asexuality has questioned whether asexuality constitutes a politicized, feminist stance against the enforcement of mandated (hetero)sexuality (Fahs, 2010; Przybylo, 2011) or an unchosen and biologically based identity (Bogaert, 2004). Locating the invisible histories of asexuality has led to work that questions where to find the “asexual archive” (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014), and other work has questioned whether asexuality fits with queer understandings of rebellion against heteronormativity (Scherrer, 2008). Furthermore, debates about what asexuality is—ranging from abstention from partnered sex to an absence of sexual identity to a refusal to engage in some sex but not all sex—have upended traditional assumptions about what it means to have sex at all and what identities become linked to various sexual practices (Bogaert, 2004; DeLuzio Chasin, 2011; Przybylo, 2013; Rodríguez, 2011). Ultimately, this literature argues for the power of sexual refusals as a queer, rambunctious space of rebellion and resistance (Fahs, 2010; Przybylo, 2011).

CONCLUSION

When looking at this chapter as a whole, it is crucial to remember that intentional and explicit decisions to contest traditional sexuality scripts can improve women's sexual lives. Although women are generally policed and chastised for not following conventional sexuality scripts, women who call themselves feminists report more enjoyable sex lives and more embodied agency than women who avoid such labels (Curtin, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2011; Schick, Zucker, & Bay-Cheng, 2008; Yoder, Perry, & Saal, 2007). Moreover, sexual injustices can often work as an organizing principle

for feminist social movements, such as Take Back the Night and SlutWalk, both of which have taken a prominent place in recent feminist activist efforts (Matthews, 2005; O’Keefe, 2014). Resistance to traditional sexual scripts seems to greatly benefit women in their personal and political lives.

The study of women’s sexuality, particularly its relationship to pleasure, power, agency, and danger, presents psychologists with a host of challenges, both theoretical and methodological. In this particular cultural moment—when women’s sexuality is constituted by a strong sense of personal empowerment and choice alongside deep and intrusive erosions of sexual well-being and power (Fahs, 2011b), sexual inequalities, and backlashes against women’s reproductive rights—confusion and chaos can surround what we know about women’s sexualities.

In this chapter, we not only reviewed some of the broader tensions in the study of women’s sexuality but also reiterated an argument for critical sexuality studies as closely aligned with the goals of feminist psychology (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Specifically, we presented the emerging field of critical sexuality studies, discussed the pleasure–danger dialectic, and highlighted how tensions surround concepts such as sexual empowerment and how these tensions affect the status of women’s sexuality today. Furthermore, by looking at how concepts change, evolve, or become invisible, the workings of power within feminist psychology itself become more visible. Ultimately, women’s sexuality is a space within which the project of social justice can be enacted and explored, particularly as it wields so much possibility for change, fluidity, and responsiveness to contemporary cultural scripts, demands, and expectations. This is both exciting and terrifying, a charge for feminist psychologists to closely consider the framing of women’s sexuality and the ever-present tensions between pleasure and danger.

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