

Sexual Pleasure Across the Life Course:
Heterosexual Women's Narratives

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to Logan's electric, irreplaceable spirit. He has been an inescapable source of inspiration for me, who I will remember laughing at me and approaching everything—especially rule breaking—with a quiet, timeless style.

I also thank my family (biological and chosen) and the host of mentors who have decided to delight in me for reasons I will keep trying to understand.

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Introduction

Though orgasm and sexual pleasure are based in physiological experiences, these are distinctly social phenomena. Orgasm in this paper refers to the

Peak sensation of intense pleasure, creating an altered state of consciousness, usually with an initiation accompanied by involuntary, rhythmic contractions of the pelvic striated circumvaginal musculature, often with concomitant uterine and anal contractions, and myotonia that resolves the sexually induced vasocongestion (sometimes only partially) and myotonia, generally with an induction of well-being and contentment.
(Meston, Levin, Sipski, Hull and Heiman 2004:174)

Sexual pleasure is a subjective feeling of goodness about one's sexual experience, and while pleasure would logically precede orgasm, in any given sexual event, orgasm may or may not occur. In fact, heterosexual women comprise a unique group: they are the sexual identity group least likely to have experienced an orgasm in their most recent partnered sexual interaction (Frederick, St. John, Garcia, and Lloyd 2018). A national probability sample of primarily heterosexual US adults found that 91.3% of men orgasmed in their last interaction compared to 64.4% of women and 46.9% of men reported that this event was extremely pleasurable compared to 35.3% of women (Herbenick, Reece, Schick, Sanders, Dodge, and Fortenberry 2010). This orgasm and pleasure gap suggests that heterosexual (and bisexual) women appear to “lose out” in partnered sexual interactions in several ways if orgasm or “extreme” sexual pleasure are the yardsticks by which sex is deemed to have been “good” or successful. Though there is evidence that some women may not centralize their own orgasm in their evaluative processes when it comes to sex, with research finding that women considered orgasm “not necessary” in every partnered interaction (Nicolson and Burr 2003), heterosexual women—especially younger ones—face a context wherein their orgasm is not reliably produced in partnered interactions.

The reasons women who sleep with men may decentralize their own orgasm as they evaluate sex are likely cultural and the practical reactions to their own experiences.

I contend that the lower frequency of women's orgasms in heterosexual¹ is a social sexual pattern deserving of inquiry whether heterosexual women problematize it or not. Researchers have puzzled over how to make sense of the orgasm gap, and women's tendency toward altruistic or others-oriented motivations such as valuing a partner's orgasm more than their own (Kontula and Miettinen 2016). In recent years, scholars have also identified curious gap in research on sexual pleasure in social scientific research on sex, which tends to focus on the dark side of sexual matters in approach that foregrounds concepts such as "risk" and "dysfunction" instead of the factors which facilitate positive sexual experiences (Jones 2019). At this time, heterosexual women negotiate a social context wherein the cultural pieces are curiously mismatched; the orgasm is highly valued and is perceived to benefit a male partner's ego, (Salisbury and Fisher 2013), but—especially for younger women—the facilitating behaviors which make sex pleasurable for them remain linguistically relegated as "foreplay." Research foregrounding the positive aspects of sex, or those which contribute to women's higher likelihood of experiencing sexual pleasure or orgasm in partnered sex with men, is sorely needed.

Although research has documented several factors which appear to increase the likelihood of women's orgasm in partnered contexts with men (and orgasm is a part of pleasure for many) we have yet to fully understand how women articulate the role of sexual pleasure across the landscape of their sex lives, including *how* and *why* their

¹ Heterosex—sometimes written as (hetero)sex—is a term referring to sexual interactions between a woman and man.

relationship to sexual pleasure may change as they grow older and experience the transitions and turning points associated with movement throughout the life course. Social scientific interrogations into sexual pleasure have yet to characterize how heterosexual women both understand and tell stories of the pleasurable. Though qualitative research has begun to unpack the phenomenological features of “heterosex” (see Goldey, Posh, Bell, and van Anders 2016; Fahs 2011; Opperman, Braun, Clarke, and Rogers 2014; Montemurro 2014), single heterosexual women’s narratives of their sex lives can add critical details to the picture of heterosex because these women may be more likely than their consistently partnered counterparts to have gained various sexual experiences across their sexual life course.

Building upon survey data which identifies the orgasm and satisfaction gap, qualitative work delineating how women make meaning of sexual pleasure, and insights from life course perspectives, I analyze life history interviews to better understand how heterosexual women experience sexual pleasure as they move throughout their lives. Life history interviewing is a method which provides unique insights into people’s meaning-making, motivations, and feelings about how their lives have unfolded thus far. I draw upon sexual scripting theories (Simon and Gagnon 1986) and the Gender and Sexuality Life Course Framework (Carpenter 2010), seeking to answer the following research question: What are the factors, contexts, and behaviors which facilitate or inhibit pleasurable experiences for women across their sexual trajectories? I analyze interview data with 43 heterosexual, currently unpartnered Midwestern women, collected in 2015 to answer this question.

I find that women experience change in relation to sexual pleasure as they age. Many women shared that they experienced more sexual pleasure in partnered interactions as they aged. In particular, the women who accumulated more sexual experiences, those who encountered caring sexual partners, and those who developed sexual communication skills appeared to have more pleasurable sex as they age. However, I also found evidence that some women may find it more difficult or impossible to reach the heights of sexual pleasure, or never come to define it as a valuable project in the first place. Women who did not encounter the opportunity to accumulate positive sexual experiences or who had a broad range of negative experiences with sexuality (or some combination thereof) may never experience an orgasm or high levels of sexual satisfaction.

Theoretical Approach

According to Carpenter's (2010) Gender and Sexuality Life Course framework, a blend of historical, structural, and life stage factors coalesce with autobiographical events to shape people's experiences with gender and sexuality. Indeed, age, birth cohort, life stage, and biological phenomena shape women's experiences with sex, which can be understood as a cumulative experience. It is possible that the youngest women in the sample would have the most pleasurable experiences given changes in US sexual culture wherein women's orgasms are currently taken more seriously in society. However, we might also expect the youngest women to be less orgasmic or sexually satisfied due to their relative lack of sexual experiences which could contribute to greater self-knowledge about their sexual needs (Barnett and Melugin 2016). Most of the oldest women in the sample reported sex-negative attitudes and socialization during their childhoods and adolescence. Consistent with Carpenter's (2010) Gender and Sexuality Life

Course framework, I expected that women's relationship with sexual pleasure, and the meaning of sex, would be shaped by their cumulative experiences with sex within the broader cultural context of their lives.

Scripting approaches provide additional insight into how culture shapes sexual meaning-making and behavior on the individual level (Simon and Gagnon 1986). Sexual scripting theories explain how culture shapes subjective experiences of sex and behavior through cultural scenarios at the institutional level, interpersonal scenarios at the interactional level, and intrapsychic scenarios at the level of the individual psyche. The Gender and Sexuality Life Course framework further explicates how people's sex lives and subjective feelings thereof are a product of the accumulation of various negative and/or positive experiences with "the sexual," and that the life course concepts of turning points, transitions, and trajectories can best explain how one's sex life unfolds over time.

Background

What makes for pleasurable sex? And who is having it? Sexual pleasure is conspicuously missing from much of social scientific literature on sexual life and behavior (Jones 2019). The frequency of orgasm has been utilized as a proxy for sexual pleasure in much of existing literature. To understand large scale patterns in sexual pleasure, research has examined patterns of orgasm rates in partnered contexts. Nationally representative survey data confirms that heterosexual women climax *usually-always* at a rate of 65%, compared to heterosexual men (95%), gay men (89%), bisexual men (88%), bisexual women (66%), and lesbian women (86%) (Frederick et al. 2018).

How do heterosexual women contend with this reality? The literature I consult concerns primarily questions of sexual meaning-making, sexual pleasure, and sexual satisfaction.

Meaning of Sexual Pleasure

Qualitative research has sought to expand understandings of how people define sexual pleasure and good sex. Research on young adults finds that many young men and women may view orgasm as the purpose and goal of sex, suggesting that there is consensus across lines of gender in interpretations of the goals of sex (Opperman et al. 2014). Indeed, orgasm is seen by many as the pinnacle of pleasure in partnered sex. This belief in orgasm being the goal of sex does not translate to gender parity in orgasm during partnered heterosex, however. In recent years, the “pornographication of media” and a heightened focus on women as consumers of sexual products which are intended to heighten women’s sexual pleasure (Attwood 2005) both reflect—and have likely contributed to—a greater cultural appreciation of the value of orgasm for women. Heterosexual women are still the sexual identity group least likely to orgasm in partnered interactions despite contemporary popular attention to the health benefits of orgasm. This reality creates an interesting dilemma for heterosexual women, as the pressure to climax during partnered sex has recently been found to cause distress to women who do not experience orgasm in partnered interactions regularly or reliably (Bell and McClelland 2018). Thus, understanding how and why heterosex fails to result in equitable pleasure and orgasm among men and women is key to larger conversations around sexual health and wellbeing.

Despite evidence that young men and women see orgasm similarly, other research on the meaning of sexual pleasure shows that heterosexual women (especially younger

women) display greater measures of ambivalence toward orgasm in partnered contexts, which could be due to their preconceived expectations of heterosex or reactions to the rarity of their orgasm when sleeping with men (Goldey, Posh, Bell, and van Anders 2016). Fahs (2011:52) finds that women (both heterosexual and lesbian) tend to view orgasm in partnered contexts as a “gift they are given,” which she considers to be tied to notions of passivity borne from gender socialization. In fact, the meaning of orgasm for heterosexual women, according to Fahs (2011:66), is rendered visible in women’s “perceptions that they must please (male) partners at their own expense, concern for feeling sexually normal, and avoidance of negative consequences, whether emotional, physical, psychological, or literal.” There is an opportunity to explore how these gendered perceptions of sex either remain stagnant or change as women move throughout the life course.

Experiences of Heterosex

More recent investigations of heterosex paint a sordid picture of women’s expectations and subjective experiences in partnered sexual interactions with men. For instance, Fahs and Swank (2017) locate four distinctive areas of emotion work in women’s stories of their sex lives: faking orgasms, tolerating sexual pain, defining sexual satisfaction based on a partner's pleasure, and narrating sex they call "bad sex" as acceptable due to their appraisals of their partner’s satisfaction. Sorting out how and when women draw lines between their own pleasure and their perceptions of their partner’s experience is most easily done with in-depth interviewing techniques.

“Faking” orgasm may be one of the most illuminating commonplace events observed in heterosex. According to Fahs (2011: 64), having sex with men predicts faking orgasm, even though faking does not seem to be predicted by “women's level of sexual experience, orgasmic ability, or number of partners.” Research has also brought women’s strategic practice of “faking to finish,” to light, which describes women pretending to climax to end unwanted sexual interactions with men² (Thomas, Stelzl, and LaFrance 2017), though women might also fake orgasm in order to end wanted sexual interactions. One piece of evidence suggesting that young people may take issue with the orgasm gap is the finding that both young men and women worry about lack of female orgasm in an interaction; however, young women report that they are concerned over their lack of orgasm primarily because it could negatively impact their male sexual partners’ egos (Salisbury and Fisher 2013). Nicolson and Burr (2003) found that heterosexual women were relatively unconcerned about their own orgasm during intercourse with men, but that they desired to climax during heterosexual intercourse (specifically penile-vaginal intercourse) in order to please their male partners. Indeed, the body of literature paints a portrait of younger heterosexual women’s more general tendency to focus on their male partners’ experiences of a sexual event. This others-focused or so-called altruistic approach may partially explain the orgasm gap, especially in younger age. The question remains: does this others-focused orientation change as women age?

²This finding comes from a relatively small sample of women’s sexual stories of unwanted sex (N=15).

The importance of norms, expectations, or cultural scripts is difficult to overstate in matters of partnered sex (Simon and Gagnon 1986). The social nature of sex means that individuals mobilize culture-specific sexual norms when they reflect upon their sex lives. For example, married women report distress when they feel that their sex lives do not live up to cultural norms surrounding marriage and their sexual identities, which assume lesbians to have “better” sex lives than heterosexual women (Paine, Allen, Umberson, and Reczek 2019). A likely unintended consequence of the (at first glance) progressive heightened emphasis on the “female orgasm,” it appears that an expectation of orgasm has become so central to sexual norms that women who do not climax in sexual interactions feel distressed by this failure to adhere to sexual scripts which define orgasm as the peak of sex (Bell and McClelland 2018). Thus, young women strategically explain the absence of orgasm in ways which serve to reduce feelings of sexual abnormality (Bell and McClelland 2018).

Sexual Satisfaction

“Sexual satisfaction” is a peculiar measure of sexual experience because it has been established that social factors such as gender affect how the concept is perceived. In-depth interviews offer the opportunity to explicate some of these interpretations of concepts such as satisfaction and pleasure. Fahs and Swank (2011:904) put it this way: “The question of how to measure sexual satisfaction has long befuddled sex researchers, as much debate exists whether orgasm or the more abstract self-reported satisfaction measures more accurately represent satisfaction.” Research has found that women and sexual minority men’s interpretations of their own sexual satisfaction are contingent upon their appraisals

of their sexual partners' enjoyment (McClelland 2011). This others-focused mentality makes studying sexual satisfaction and/or pleasure more challenging in some ways and suggests that qualitative work may be necessary to disentangle women's definitions of sexual pleasure from their perceptions of their partner's experience. This paper attempts to begin this process through deep analysis of women's discussions of pleasure and satisfaction.

Scholars have examined the relationship between identity and levels of sexual satisfaction, finding that women of lower socioeconomic standing (working-class and women with lower levels of education) and younger women, were more likely than their older and more privileged counterparts to engage in more frequent sex with low levels of sexual satisfaction (Fahs and Swank 2011). This study is notably centered on relatively privileged women, may reflect the stories of those with more positive sexual experiences overall.

A sexual partner's gender, as well as heterosexual sexual scripts undoubtedly "impact the opportunity for and frequency of women's orgasm" (Bell and McClelland 2017:682). Several other factors are predictors of women's pleasure or satisfaction in partnered contexts as well such as sexual experience, relationship status, sexual variety, intimacy, embodiment, and age. More sexual experience is linked to greater levels of sexual pleasure (Barnett and Melugin 2016). Being in a committed relationship is linked to the highest levels of sexual pleasure and satisfaction for young adults, followed by being in an "emotionally-involved relationship" and finally a "simple hookup" (Milstein Hilliard, Hall, Knox and Hunter 2020). Relational contexts produce more favorable contexts for young women's sexual pleasure; partner specific experience, specific sexual

practices, and a measure of commitment are understood to make relationship sex more pleasurable on average for young women (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012). Sexual variety or engaging in multiple specific sexual behaviors such as manual and oral genital stimulation in a given interaction is also positively related to women's orgasm (Herbenick et al. 2010). Other elements linked to women's sexual pleasure in partnered interactions are women's feelings of trust and closeness with a partner, and their provision of pleasure to that partner (Goldey et al. 2016). It has been found that a greater level of "embodiment," or subjective experience of oneself as a sexual being who is aware of her needs and pleasure, is linked to greater comfort with sexual desire which may lead to women's "greater entitlement to sexual pleasure" (Chmielewski, Bowman, and Tolman 2020). Montemurro (2014) argues that women see themselves as more deserving of desire as they age, which would suggest that sex could become more pleasurable in older age as women may become more likely to mobilize these beliefs into sexual communications and then behaviors which would increase their likelihood of experiencing pleasure.

Existing research suggests various contextual factors which could produce more favorable conditions for women's sexual pleasure and orgasm, but addressing how women understand and explain these factors (and their more global relationship to sexual pleasure) across their sexual trajectories is the primary task with which this paper is concerned. How might younger women's relationship to pleasure differ from that of older women? Moreover, for middle-aged and older women, how do they compare their earlier and later experiences with sex as their lives have unfolded?

Methods

Sampling

To understand the conditions under which women experience sexual pleasure, I draw upon 43 life history interviews of heterosexual women aged 18-89 focused on matters of sex and romance. These interviews were originally collected in 2015 for a study concerning how women's romantic and sexual lives unfold across the life course (Miller 2018). The sample was collected using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. To be included in the study, women had to identify as "single" at the time of the interview and reside in the Midwest (attempting to rule out region as an influencing variable). Single women were prioritized because they have been neglected in previous research on women's sexuality. Single US women, as a result of their experiences in the dating/sexual marketplace, may be exposed to more opportunities which promote change in their attitudes and perspectives on matters of sex, or sexual scripts.

The original investigator, Lisa R. Miller, sought out "coffee shops, bars, gyms, hair salons, and bus stops" among other public settings and used fliers to recruit interview subjects. The investigator also disseminated information about the study via social media and approached various women's groups to locate participants. To successfully reach older populations, the investigator visited local places frequented by older women, such as senior centers and aging advocacy organizations/groups. Snowball sampling allowed the investigator to recruit additional participants as interview subjects would recommend their family or friends to participate in the project. Convenience and snowball sampling contributed to a lack of racial/ethnic diversity and an overrepresentation of highly educated women in the study. Participants were not monetarily compensated for telling their stories.

The semi-structured interviews covered the women's life experiences from childhood to the time of the interview. These interviews included multiple moments where women were probed to discuss sexual pleasure, sexual satisfaction, sexual desire and orgasm, as well as whether a sexual event was "positive or negative" for them. Near the end of the interview, the women were explicitly asked what contributes to their pleasure and/or sexual satisfaction as well as if (and then how) their perspectives on sex have changed across their lives so far. Participants were also explicitly asked about how pleasurable and/or satisfying sex was when discussing previous partners. For the purposes of this paper, I limit my sample to 43 heterosexual women, drawn from a larger sample of 61 interviews. I purposively selected heterosexual women from 3 age groups in order to analyze a range of experiences with sexual life across the adult life course: young adulthood (18-35; N=13), middle age (36-55; N=15) and older adulthood (over 56; N=15).

Analysis

The data for this project were coded in the qualitative software program Atlas.ti 8. Combining inductive and deductive modes of inquiry, I sought to allow the findings to emerge from the data. While remaining attuned to the themes of previous research, I remained open to the idea that the data might "tell different stories," which is a form of modified grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2008). I tempered my expectations of what I might find using key research sexual pleasure to determine codes of interest. For example, quantitative literature on behaviors associated with orgasm (Frederick et al. 2018) led to some of the initial codes I used related to orgasm and sexual satisfaction such as oral sex and manual genital stimulation. The coding process began with an in-depth reading of each interview. Immediately

after reading each interview, I created a brief summary or notes about the woman's sexual story. Then, I assessed the woman's responses to the pointed questions about sexual satisfaction in the interview; these questions came in the form of probes such as, "And was that pleasurable for you?" When women discussed changes relevant to their sexual pleasure or satisfaction, I took note. Keeping notes on the most prominent and important themes allowed me to iteratively transform these codes into thematic sections.

Findings

Descriptive Statistics for the Sample

Overall, the sample is highly educated. The youngest group of women were the most ethnically diverse of any age group in the sample, with one Latina-identified participant, one Black participant with Spanish ethnic origins, and 2 mixed-race participants (one Black and white and one Hispanic and white). The rest (9/13) identified as white. Within the youngest group of women, 2/13 held high school diplomas at the time of the interview. The majority in the youngest group held master's degrees (10/13), and 3 of these were pursuing doctoral degrees at the time of the interview. 1 out of the 13 held a bachelor's degree, and one held a PhD. At the time of the interview, the majority of the youngest women (11/13) were never married. However, 3/13 were divorced at the time of the interview. 4/13 were mothers. 7/13 currently are non-religious, while the other half (7/13) are either Catholic, non-denominational Christian, Methodist or evangelical.

In the middle-aged group, all participants identified as white. 1/15 in held only a high school degree, but had completed some college. A third of this age group (5/15) held bachelor's degrees. A third (5/15) held master's degrees, and another completed a JD. Under a third of these

women (3/15) held a PhD. A third of this group (5/15) were never married. The majority (9/15) women were either divorced or separated, with 2 having been divorced twice. Under half (6/15) were mothers. Just under half (7/15) primarily identified as non-religious, while 4/15 were some form of Christian. Two women identified with Buddhism, and 1/15 was Jewish, while one woman identified herself primarily as spiritual.

In the oldest group, all but one participant identified as white. The non-white participant is an Indian/Asian American woman. At the time of their interview, over half (8/15) held high school diplomas or GEDs; 2 women completed some college, and one held an additional vocational degree. Just one participant had less than a high school degree. One woman held an associate's degree. A few (3/15) held bachelor's degrees, and one woman held a master's degree. Finally, one older woman held a PhD. Almost all (14/15) of the oldest women were mothers. All of the oldest participants had been married at some point (15/15) and most (12/15) had been divorced at least once, with 4/15 having been widowed at least once. Most of the older women (9/15) identified with some form of Christianity, and the remainder identified as non religious (2/15) or primarily spiritual (4/15). Overall, compared to the US population, this is both a highly educated and largely white sample. This means that my findings cannot be confidently deemed representative of US women's sexual experiences or generalizable beyond the experiences of relatively privileged, white heterosexuals.

Key Themes

This analysis seeks to illuminate the qualitative experience of women's pleasure in partnered heterosexual interactions. Analyzing women's narratives around sexual pleasure, I found several key themes. Women in the sample often did not experience or

focus on pleasure early in their sexual life course. However, many women experienced more sexual pleasure and satisfaction as they aged as women met increasing opportunities for pleasure as they encountered new partners after relationship dissolution, accumulated sexual experiences, and sharpened their ability to use their sexual voices. Most importantly, self-focused motivations for sex appeared to become more common as women aged. However, some women experience little sexual pleasure throughout their lives. A number of women in the sample (N=5) did not experience greater sexual satisfaction as they aged. These exceptional women fell into the oldest age category of women, and either had religious convictions marked by sexual conservatism or negative earlier experiences with sex (or a combination of both) which may have prevented them from ever conceiving of their own sexual pleasure as a worthwhile or valuable project.

Women across age groups reported that emotional intimacy and/or intellectual connections with sexual partners, as well as trust, increased their sexual pleasure and level of sexual satisfaction. Women also said they experienced greater pleasure when they communicated their needs with partners. In line with sex research, women named behaviors such as foreplay, clitoral stimulation (oral and manual), as behaviors which contributed to their pleasure, sexual satisfaction, and likelihood of orgasm.

Sex in young adulthood: expecting pain, passivity, and pleasing him

I found that many women either did not experience or focus on their own sexual pleasure in their earliest sexual experiences. Rather, women discussed expecting pain in their penile-vaginal sexual debut. They also tended to tell stories of passivity as they explained their first voluntary sexual experiences. In addition, these stories of first

experiences often included references to what these women perceive to be “normal” experiences or expectations.

Women often described being the guardians of the interactional and sexual boundaries in their earliest consensual experiences in young adulthood, reflecting gendered sexual scripts. Demonstrating the mark of cultural scripts wherein men are expected to be sexually dominant or aggressive and women passive, some women explained their roles as the guardian of the figurative “distance” of these interactions. Women’s descriptions of “how far” they “let” male partners go in their earliest sexual experiences revealed that sexual agency in young adulthood may have taken the form of stopping interactions from going “too far.” Camila, an 18-year-old Latina, reflected upon one of her sexual experiences: “I don't know - it wasn't rape-y at all, but he was seeing how far he could get, and I was like, ‘No.’” Linda, a 58-year-old white woman, said this of her sexual experiences in adolescence, that she was mainly motivated to monitor the boundaries of these interactions because she was afraid of her parents: “I’m not going to say I was a prude, I made out with, with you know guys I went out with and stuff like that, but I never let it get any farther than that.”

In discussing their initial experience with penile-vaginal intercourse, women often referred to their original expectations that the first incidence of heterosexual intercourse would be painful or non-pleasurable. When asked about the role of pleasure in her first time, Melissa (38, white) said, “I think the making out before the actual sex was more pleasurable than the actual sex act. But I didn't have, there wasn't any pain, when I lost my virginity, it wasn't all terrible like that.” Within the phrase “like that” lies the assumption that at least for some, the pain was to be expected. It is noteworthy that Melissa also indicated that this experience was a

positive, “cool” experience for her; she underscored the mutual consent of the interaction, as the event was a result of planning between herself and her partner. However, pleasure appears not to have comprised part of her expectations for this event, making the event at the very least a *normal* one, even exceptional, for not being painful. Kelly (39, white) recalled, “It was OK. I didn't have anything to compare it to at the time. But thinking back, I'm like, *meh*. Which I imagine most people's first time was pretty *meh*.” Speaking about her first time, Carolyn (43, white) said this:

It was very underwhelming. It was with my boyfriend at the time who had already graduated from college, and you know he attempted to be nice. He really didn't know what he was doing either. I certainly didn't know how to be assertive. So, it wasn't painful. But it was really like, ‘Ohh, that. Ohhh. Okay.’ It was very underwhelming, which I think is the same for a lot of young women.

In Carolyn's words, there is also evidence of her retroactive interpretation of the event being underwhelming, at least in part, due to her inability to be assertive, presumably about her sexual needs.

Reflected in these narrations of their “first times,” women referenced what they deemed to be a “normal” level of sexual satisfaction during virginity loss, underscoring the distinctly social nature of sex and telling sexual stories. Culturally-informed expectations shape perceptions and narrations of sexual events. Within these stories are women's ways of interpreting what was possible in the sexual landscape of their adolescence or emerging adulthood. Women spoke in ways that normalize their experiences with pleasure (and the commonplace lack thereof) in their earliest sexual interactions with male partners (Bell and McClelland 2018).

Passivity

In many descriptions of penile-vaginal debut, a measure of passivity is visible in women's narrations. Paloma (26, Black) recalls the following about her first time: "...We went back to his house, after the prom, we drove. And—yeah, I get out of my gown, and we have sex, and I lay there until he got up to take me home." To the question of whether this was pleasurable, she responded curtly, "No." The story is brief and non-descript, not unlike the event itself.

Pleasing him

Participants often remember prioritizing male pleasure during their first voluntary sexual events. Though no claims can be made that this is a gender-specific phenomenon (since this is an all-woman sample), some women in the sample do not recall or discuss their experiences with pleasure in early sexual relationships in depth. The way they spoke about these relationships also reflects a focus on men's pleasure, which falls in line with the literature on women's perceptions of sex (McClelland 2011) and heterosexual women's socialized desire to please men (Fahs 2011). I contend that this focus on male pleasure may have shaped whether and how women remember their own physiological experience of past interactions. Something that at first glance could indicate poor memory potentially renders visible a distinct focus on male pleasure. Sarah (32, white) responded to a question about whether she orgasmed in a sexual relationship during adolescence:

I honestly don't remember. I must have. Yeah, I must have. But I don't actually have a lot of memories, that I remember...I remember feeling really proud of myself the first time, I could actually give him a hand job and have him ejaculate. So like, for me, those are the memories I have, of wanting to please him, and wanting to bring him pleasure. I don't really have memories in that relationship of what it was like for me, although, it must have been, because I don't, I think I

would probably remember if I never did, and if my first time having an orgasm would have been with someone else.

To be sure, women derive sexual pleasure by producing pleasure for a partner. Early in their sexual life, it is notable that producing pleasure for another person of their own volition reflects the joy and satisfaction of mastering a new hobby. This is the case for many women as they told stories of feeling “cool” or fascinated by the prospect of providing pleasure to another person, especially in their earlier experiences. Ana (28, white and Hispanic) remembers her discovery of “boners” with fondness:

Yeah, for some reason, when I was 14 and I figured out that if you rubbed the inside of a man’s leg, you’d give him a boner. (*Laughs*) And I thought it was magic. (*Laughs*) I mean, I’m a creative non-fiction writer. I just thought it was just magic and so, any guy friend that I had, I was like just, “Can I see if I can give you a boner? Because, well, this is just for science. This is purely just for science.” It didn’t matter where, cafeteria at school, rub the inside of somebody’s leg and you can like totally have a boner that day.

The enjoyment of providing pleasure is not something that disappears as women age, but I argue that it is often supplemented by an increasingly self-focused motivation for sex. At the time of the interview, Ana confirmed that she both enjoyed penetrative sex and considered it an act unlikely to lead to her own orgasm. Notably, Ana’s response includes mention of the penetrative orgasm, perhaps because it is a highly valued sexual event. She even admits later that this is not the way she reaches orgasm. However, when having sex with men, Ana knows she will “get hers” afterwards:

I mean, like, I know that a lot of the time I don’t get off from penetration. Like I think that Charlie was the only person ever able to do that for me, and that was one time. *Yeah, I can’t really at all.* But I still really like it. It still feels really good. But, usually, during like penetrative sex, I’m mostly focused on the man. So, I’m mostly, like, I’m really engaged in knowing this feels really good for him and fun for me because this feels really good to him.

Discussions of the pleasure of producing someone else's pleasure were not uncommon. Jenny (46, white) said she likes giving head, because, "I get really fucking turned on by knowing I can turn somebody on like that," when she listed off what contributes to her own sexual pleasure. This finding lines up with research which confirms that women often derive pleasure from providing it to others (Goldey et al. 2016), and that many women's appraisals of their partners' pleasure may heighten their own pleasure. It may also be the case that some women trade in physiological pleasure for emotional satisfaction during their earliest experiences with heterosex (Higgins, Trussel, Moore, and Davidson 2010).

While for some women, it was difficult to disentangle their own pleasure from a male partner's, others were able to draw the line between physical feelings of pleasure and psychological experiences of an event. Sarah (32, white) remembered performing oral sex on a partner, saying, "Ah, yeah, I mean, it wasn't physically pleasurable for me, at all. (*Laughs*) But emotionally, I just enjoyed knowing that I was bringing them pleasure and they were enjoying themselves."

Increasing opportunities for—and entitlement to—pleasure

Each person's sexual life course is marked by some measure of fluidity and change. Most women in this sample's perspectives on—and perhaps definitions—of sex changed across their lives. Specifically, the middle-aged and older women in the sample discuss a movement away from this other-focused discussion of pleasure. For many women in the sample, aging was accompanied by increasing opportunities to experience sexual pleasure. These women, who were unpartnered at the time of their interview, may have moved from one relationship to another, encountering more opportunities to meet

new partners and gain sexual experience than consistently partnered women, which may have led to more favorable conditions for their pleasure over time.

Relationship dissolution and new partners

One critical way that women experience increasing opportunities for pleasure is through what often can only occur after relationship dissolution in a monogamous culture: encounters with new sexual partners. Thus, relationship dissolution—specifically divorce—is reported to be something of an indirect catalyst for sexual pleasure. These encounters hold the potential to shape sexual scripts, which has been found by life course scholars of sexuality (Wade and DeLamater 2002). For instance, a relationship devoid of sexual pleasure may end, and women may be provided with the opportunity to seek out (or to be sought out by) a novel partner who is more attentive to their needs sexually. This could cause a be considered a turning point, causing a sexual awakening, a heightening of sexual desire, or the facilitation of sexual learning. One’s perspective on sex may change as a result. For the oldest respondents in the sample, a new husband caused changes which led to greater sexual pleasure. This the case for Mary (75, white) at the time of her interview. Mary said that she orgasmed for the first time in her life with her second husband. When asked, “What made it so good with the last husband?” She replies,

All the times that I had, I never climaxed, ever...My last husband made me [climax] completely, the very first time, and he always did. He always hung with me, because it took sometimes a long time. He was always there with me, and went through and waited.

New sexual relationships could prompt change or renegotiation of sexual scripts (Wade and DeLamater 2002; Carpenter 2010) wherein one’s own pleasure emerges as

important. Through relationship dissolution and encountering new partners, women have the opportunity to have sex with someone who may be more attentive, skilled, or giving compared to previous partners. A new partner may also create the conditions for sexual learning or be more receptive to sexual communication. Lucy (27, white) remembered her ex-husband's inability to discuss sexual pleasure, saying, he "was not really open to those conversations...we, he wouldn't talk about it. Other partners would talk about it." When narrating why one sexual experience was more pleasurable than others in her past, Linda (58, white) said this: The fact that the man cared about... making me have pleasure as well as me making him have pleasure. The man took the time to make sure I was, I enjoyed myself as well. It wasn't just all, *him, him, him, him, him.*" Highlighted by this quote, the presence of a novel partner who, for one reason or another, was invested in facilitating her pleasure could increase a woman's odds of experiencing satisfying sex.

As reflected in Mary's story, divorce can usher in these new experiences indirectly by placing women back in the sexual marketplace. Tammy (54, white) described a sexual partner post-divorce, who both cared about her pleasure and facilitated her sexual learning. Her sexual partner also had a micropenis, which she believes contributed to his non-penetrative skills and willingness to engage in varied sexual behaviors such as oral sex:

He kind of taught me that kind of pleasure, to be able to ask for what I want, and... He, with his inability to really use his penis, was using other creative ways to do it, one being his mouth. So, that has been very pleasurable for me, and very interesting and new.

Emergence of self-focused sexual motivations

Women's motivations for sex can become more self-focused as they age as well. When asked to discuss her level of sexual satisfaction across her sexual history, Mallory (29, white)

experienced “very little for most of them...Up until recently.” Mallory ties this lack of pleasure to the interaction being “more about pleasing the guy than it was about pleasing myself” during her earlier years, evidence of a shift in her definition of sex and her feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure. Indeed, there is evidence of change in motivations for sex as she has moved throughout her life; self-focused motivations for sex have emerged as she has gained sexual experience with new partners. What led to this increased level of satisfaction appears for Mallory appears to be the accumulation of sexual experience. Mallory had been single and engaging in casual sex for years at the time of her interview:

It's really been kind of like, “I'm doing this right now because I want to do it, and not so much about anything to do with the guy.” I've been definitely more invested in, “I want to enjoy this experience.” That might also be what's helped to increase my sex drive a little bit, because I'm more focused on my own self-enjoyment, in a situation. And not just on, “Is the guy enjoying this situation?”

Mallory’s sexual desire has increased as a result of her positive experiences, creating what appears to be an exponential increase in the chance that she will experience pleasure in any given interaction in the future.

Other participants’ experiences reflect the theme of increasingly self-focused motivations for sex as well. Tammy (43), for example, attributed her new focus on sexual pleasure to a combination of factors: time spent alone, divorce, aging, and menopause, which released her from the fear of pregnancy, changing her intrapsychic scripts around sex. In older age, Tammy said, “You’re not thinking about your partner’s needs, you’re thinking about your own needs.” She compared her early and later experiences, calling them “totally different:”

I really had never had a boyfriend that... or husband that wanted to please me...when I left my husband, I was already all the way through menopause. I went through it very quickly. And so there was this first time, outside my marriage, in a relationship where I realized, “Hey, I don’t—I can’t get pregnant anymore. I don’t have to worry about that.” And that really gave me a sense of relaxation and freedom and also to ask more for what I wanted. Um, so that was

kind of an epiphany for me. Um, if that makes any sense. I didn't have to worry anymore about, you know, it wasn't about procreation anymore, at my age it's about pleasure. So, and I had a boyfriend that was willing to um, engage that conversation with me. Whereas my husband could, could have cared less.

Carolyn's (43, white) reflections adhere to a similar narrative when she compared her youth to her latest years. She spoke of change in the meaning of sex, which affected her relationship to pleasure. Carolyn's words demonstrate that the social value of being desired by men in young adulthood may be linked to her tendency to focus on pleasing men earlier in her sex life:

When I was young, the importance of sex was to show that I was always with men...to show the partner that you would do it for them. It was about—sex was always for the other person. I mean, I've had really bad sex. But it was about giving to them what they wanted. I think it's very much now, I have a healthier idea about... it's mutual satisfaction, and that it's about something I want as well. That it's not just about their pleasure. But that it's like I have a stake in this as well. So, that's absolutely changed.

Katherine (45) explains this emerging self-focused motivation as being catalyzed by the transition of divorce:

I would say...probably, it really wasn't until, gosh, maybe mid to late 30s, that I really had more sexual feelings...Earlier on, I did stuff, out of curiosity, out of obligation, out of thinking that's just how it was, without so much having the sexual desire. Maybe part of it through manipulation, thinking, "OK, can I get something out of this?" Something like that. But not, "Wow, I'm really attracted to this person, I really want to have sex with them." That's been more recent, maybe in the last 10 years, maybe? Yeah. After I got divorced, it wasn't really until then.

Women's accounts of change in their sex lives showed that they may feel increasingly motivated by their own desire to experience pleasurable sex as they move through life and sexual relationships.

Aging and actionable self-knowledge

As some of the above quotes underscore, women learned about themselves and their sexual needs as they aged and accumulated sexual experience. In particular, the women in this sample who have moved throughout dating/sexual marketplace for longer periods of time may have been most poised for learning in this regard. Many women reported that they have become more aware of their sexual needs and desires. Melissa (38, white) talked about sexual learning, highlighting how the accumulation of sexual experience culminated in her finally having “great sex”:

Well, after a certain point in my life... When I was younger, I was trying to figure out what I liked, and stuff, that was kind of a struggle, and maybe that's why I had so much sex, because I didn't know what was supposed to be good, and then I found out!

Claire (30, white) indicated that sex is much more pleasurable for her at the time of her interview than when she was younger, because of increased self knowledge regarding which factors are likely to produce her pleasure during partnered sex: “Um, I think I know more what I want and what feels good. Yeah. And just like, how to do things. You know, I know more about foreplay and what’s good about that.”

Some women also discussed aging as a catalyst for letting go of sexual shame and getting more comfortable with their sexual needs and desires. Dana (41, white) elaborated on how she has grown to accept the value of casual sex and become more comfortable with her sexual needs:

I’ve definitely become much more comfortable with myself. Um, much more comfortable with what I want and need and desire. And it’s not so much, um, yeah—I, I don’t feel bad anymore about having a friend on the side if, you know, we start that back up again. I think I would have felt a lot of shame in that maybe in my 20s, um, but I don’t feel shame in that anymore, you know, in my 30s, probably mid 30s, it took me to not feel as much shame. Um, you know, in my 30s and 40s I don’t feel like that’s something to be ashamed about or something, you know—I mean I don’t go out and advertise it to people, but, you know... it’s one of those things that I need, so... you know.

Exceptions to increasing pleasure across the life course

Miller (2018) showed that women may maintain attitudes reflecting sexual conservatism across their romantic lives. I contend that this maintenance of sexual conservatism also affected these women's relationship to sexual pleasure in the oldest group, and 5 women embodied this trajectory. Their experiences and background (many of these women being religious) contributed to their sexual scripts being less amenable to change than many of the middle-aged and younger women in the sample. For instance, Maria (89, white), one of the oldest women in the sample, never got the opportunity to experiment sexually outside of marriage. The maintenance of sexual conservatism (which likely prevented women from reaching the more pleasurable sex lives that other women achieved) was most common amongst the oldest age group of women. I expect that some of the middle-aged women who describe self-focused motivations for sex would continue to have fulfilling sex lives if they can locate willing and able sexual partners. Some of the oldest women maintained the sexual scripts from their upbringing, which led to their continued lack of pleasure in older adulthood. Maria and Ella's stories capture the thrust of the oldest women's narratives whose relationship to sexual pleasure did not improve as they moved into middle and older adulthood.

It is noteworthy that childhood sexual experiences (primarily negative ones) were not uncommon in the sample. For example, a number of women were punished for their earliest expressions of sexuality or received the message that *bad girls* are sexual and *good girls* are not. Some women experienced negative responses to their earliest expressions of sexuality, and others were molested by family members or proximal peers such as neighbors. Sharon (71, white) never had a "sex talk" growing up, and also experienced molestation from a male family member when she was just five or six years old. Sharon said that this event made her afraid of boys. Still, at age 71, Sharon shared that she will not get into the car alone with a man she does

not know from work or a designated place, theorizing that her molestation is the root cause of this practice. When Sharon later met the man that she would marry, he forced himself upon her sexually. Sharon said this experience of assault impacted her because, “Back in those days I wanted to be a good girl and good girls didn’t do things like that. That made me feel guilty so I needed to marry him because I wasn’t a bad girl.” This husband also abused her. When she was finally able to leave him, Sharon had bad sexual experiences with men who she remembered being primarily “in it for themselves.” Sharon said that it took her a long time to realize sex could be good. This realization came as she interacted with new partner who was, in her words, “letting me be me, or whatever you want to put it, not threatening me or not pressuring me, not trying to push his way in or not, just taking his time and letting it go, just letting it go, I guess. That part of sex has changed for me.” Reflecting upon her life, she said she is glad she found out that “sex can be good for me or any woman, I guess.” At the time of the interview, Sharon reported that she had never discussed her sexual experiences with another woman until now. Sharon was able to realize that sex *could* be good, despite her past experiences. However, Maria and Ella’s stories reflect the impact of the accumulation of consistently negative experiences with sex and conservative attitudes which may prevent the movement toward sex-positivity, and eventually sexual pleasure, that someone like Sharon exemplifies.

At the time of her interview, Maria (89) used the word “alien” to describe the idea of partnered sexual involvement in her contemporary life. Maria, a Catholic, grew up with the message that “pre-marital sex” was wrong, and thus viewed sex primarily with a lens of fear. In fact, Maria was so afraid of others knowing she was having sex on her wedding night that she delayed her first partnered sexual experience with her husband. Maria said she does not know if she could change the “very narrow view of sex” which she was raised with, and mentions her

upbringing several times across her narrative. Maria never got opportunities to experience sex with multiple partners across her lifetime. She said she used to have orgasms with her late husband, and shared that she did not engage in verbal communication about with sex him. Maria reported that she does not desire sex. In fact, she seeks to avoid it at the time she was interviewed. In Maria's narrative, however, there is evidence of a curiosity of what her experience could have been if her circumstances had been different, namely if she had not been raised to think sex outside of marriage was wrong. For example, when asked, "Do you think you have felt pretty similarly about sex as you've gotten older, have your feelings and beliefs about it stayed the same, or?" Maria responded, "Well, (*Stammers, laughs*) I haven't had the opportunity, so it has remained the same." She exemplifies the difference between older and middle-aged participants; more older women in this sample were barred—or barred themselves—from the experiences that allowed middle-aged women (and likely will allow the youngest participants) to have more fulfilling sex lives and more sexual pleasure in older age.

Ella's (73, white) sex talk amounted to a conversation with her mother where she was told not to "spoil her reputation" or stay in cars late at night with boys. As a result, Ella considered anything past kissing and hugging sexually immoral. Her and her husband later lost their virginity to each other, and Ella remembered that they were both very scared at the time. Ella revealed that physical intimacy between herself and her husband left something to be desired. Due to health issues, or lack of mutual sexual desire (Ella thinks she may not have been sexy), Ella's husband would often reject her advances. Although at the time of the interview, Ella identified as single, she had a friend/companion that she loved. However, Ella was sure that she would not do any more than kissing with this friend, and she was "cautious" about making sure their interactions did not cross her proverbial lines. Ella was also disgusted by the idea of oral

sex. She was staunch in her convictions that she would not have sex unless she had a marriage license. Ella also did not orgasm in marriage, and said the following about sexual events within it: "When it was over it was over." Ella's response mirrors the brevity of Paloma's first time. However, I expect that Paloma's sexual experiences may unfold in a more positive manner than Ella's, because Paloma was single at age 26, likely with many sexual experiences ahead of her. Paloma also did not embody Ella's sexual conservatism. Ella clarified that she was not saying she doesn't get sexual feelings, but that she believes deeply that sex belongs inside of marriage. Ella and Maria's experiences with sexual conservatism, fear of sex, and lack of positive sexual events appears to have led them toward a life devoid of sexual pleasure in older age.

Pleasure Facilitating Factors

Sexual communication

Across age groups, women explained that sexual communication regarding their needs and desires during sex increased their odds of experiencing sexual pleasure. Women who described their most satisfying sexual relationships often discussed how sexual communication had intensified their pleasure. Women may be more likely to discuss these needs with partners in relationships later in life, because they may finally be both aware of and comfortable with these needs.

It has been established that there is a positive association between women's sexual communication with partners and their sexual satisfaction (see Macneil & Byers 2005). Additionally, Montemurro (2014) explains that women begin to feel that they deserve desire as they age, becoming more sexually agentic in the process. Miller (2018) suggests that this may occur because women may be more free from gendered sexual norms (primarily those about

passivity) as they age. The exceptions to this pattern are the older women in the sample and those who carried high levels of conservatism around sex into later life, discussed above. When asked about what would make sex pleasurable for her, Maria indicated that she would self-censor in her relationship: “No, and I never had... (pause) and I would never tell him, (chuckles) what I wanted. Again, I don't know if it's because my early upbringing.”

Intellectual/emotional connections

Many women in the sample reported desiring an emotional and intellectual connection with sexual partners. These feelings of connection may form the basis for trust, another critical factor which many women spoke about when discussing sexual partners with whom they have had pleasurable or satisfying sex. Melissa (38, white) said, “A lot of it for me is based in the intellectual exchange.” Claire (30, white) said something similar:

I think definitely I have to have an emotional connection or you know, like, um, I feel like if it's just that I'm physically attracted to someone I won't have an orgasm very easily. So I like having a lot of conversation with the person and liking them as a person.

When probed about sexual satisfaction across her life so far, women indicate that attraction is key. Marsha (36, white) theorized that “it's directly correlated to my level of interest in and attraction to the guy. Because there are a number of guys who I'm somewhat attracted to, but not like, ‘Woohoo, I'm so attracted to you.’ And those tend to be less satisfying.”

It also appears that women in this sample may use emotional and intellectual connection and trust as a litmus test for sexual partners, like Kelly (39, white):

And definitely I've discovered that I need to have some kind of emotional and really intellectual connection with someone before I have sex with them. Not

because I feel insecure about it or anything, but I'm just not interested, they're not very attractive to me.

Amy (28, white) said this about a former sexual partner: “the longer we were together and the more emotional closeness we had, the better we were in bed.” Without these elements, some women would not even consider sex with a potential partner. These findings are consistent with previous research which places trust and closeness are critical to increasing the odds that women will have pleasurable sex (Goldey et al. 2016). The mechanisms through which trust, emotional and intellectual connections produce more favorable conditions for women’s sexual pleasure are unclear, but Nagoski’s (2015) work suggests that the aforementioned relational conditions allow women the mental or psychological freedom from their brain’s figurative “break” system, which allows them the license to experience the depths of sexual pleasure with partners.

According to women in the sample, the following specific behaviors increase their sexual pleasure, satisfaction, or their likelihood of orgasm: foreplay, penetration, clitoral stimulation (oral or manual), a combination of the aforementioned behavior, and acts of sexual variety. These findings are consistent with the quantitative literature on sexual satisfaction, and confirm that while heterosexual women continue to enjoy penetrative sex, there are a few other behaviors which more reliably lead to the “female orgasm” and sexual satisfaction in partnered sex. These are the behaviors which increase women’s odds of orgasm and sexual pleasure. Dana (41, white) claimed, “It has to be clitoral stimulation for me to have an orgasm.” When asked what leads to her orgasm, Carolyn’s (43, white) response encapsulated the modal response to questions about orgasm and pleasure:

Oh, clitoral stimulation for me. I can’t orgasm or haven’t been able to orgasm from straight vaginal penetration. So, it’s always got to have some clitoral stimulation if I’m going to climax. So, anything that’s got that involved is that I would, you know,

find pleasurable. Oral sex. Or, um, penetrative sex with some kind of clitoral stimulation.

These answers are ultimately unsurprising given previous research and popular notions of what “gets women off.” However, I would be remiss not to mention that these behavioral factors are critical to women’s sexual pleasure. These are the defining features of pleasurable sex for heterosexual women, in their own words. Moreover, they may be practices which younger and more sexually conservative heterosexual women may have trouble embracing or asking for.

Discussion

This analysis builds upon previous research by revealing that women’s relationship to sexual pleasure changes across the life course as they accumulate sexual experiences which can alter their definitions of sex, improve their self-knowledge and comfortability with their sexual needs. It appears that novel experiences with sex can facilitate the development of self-focused motivations for partnered sex, which increases the likelihood of sexual pleasure and orgasm in future interactions. Positive sexual interactions with new partners can prompt the rejection (or renegotiation) of formerly-accepted gendered sexual scripts (Carpenter 2010) which involve the primary motivation to please a male partner during sex. This analysis is able to address the orgasm gap in some ways, suggesting that the orgasm gap between heterosexual men and women may become less pronounced for sexually active adults across the life course for those without overwhelmingly negative experiences across their sex lives.

Most importantly, I find that opportunities for some women’s pleasure increase as they age because women encounter new partners, have positive sexual experiences, and

sharpen their ability to use their sexual voices to communicate their needs with partners. I also find that a combination of factors, contexts, and specific behaviors beyond, or concurrent with, penile-vaginal penetration lead to women's sexual pleasure, orgasm, and satisfaction. It appears that women who engage in sexual communication with partners tend to experience more satisfying sex as they are able to communicate their sexual needs with partners who seek mutual pleasure. Transitions and turning points like divorce served as indirect catalysts for greater sexual pleasure, which has been found by others studying older women's sex lives (Morrissey Stahl, Gale, Lewis and Kleiber 2019). Social constructionist perspectives on sex often emphasize the fluidity and variable nature of sex across time, culture, and the life course. Consistent with this perspective, I find that women's relationships to sexual pleasure often change across their lives. The women in this sample also regularly mobilize cultural assessments of "normal" satisfaction in their narration of sexual satisfaction, especially as they discuss their first experiences with penile-vaginal intercourse.

I find evidence that self-focused motivations may emerge over time as women move through the life course. I contend that Carpenter's (2010) Gender and Sexuality Life Course Framework can explain how the accumulation of positive or negative experiences colors one's subjective experience of themselves as sexual beings with pleasurable or non-pleasurable lives. My findings may reflect that women's greater self-knowledge and comfort with sexuality may reflect higher levels of embodiment (Chmielewski et al. 2020).

Not all of the women in the sample embodied a general movement towards more pleasure as they aged. I found that for some women, a series of negative experiences with sex and a sex-

negative childhood background may prevent them from reaching higher levels of sexual pleasure with partners later in life. Due to their previous experiences with negative definitions of and associations with sex, these women's sexual scripts appeared less amenable to the changes that would be necessary for them to experience greater sexual pleasure in older age.

My findings concerning the behavioral features of pleasurable sex support the notion that “foreplay” and other non-penetrative activities may deserve recognition as *the main [pleasure] event* for heterosexual women. This troubles definitions of penile-vaginal intercourse as the pinnacle of—or most “real”—form of sex. One wonders whether interviews with similarly-situated men would reveal similar patterns concerning the accumulation of self-knowledge and comfort, and increasingly self-motivated reasons for sex with a partner across the life course.

Limitations

This study is characterized by several limitations. While these findings may be high in validity, it is important to note that this study includes the sexual stories primarily of white, highly educated women's experiences with sexual pleasure; these women do not represent the US population at large. In addition, life history interviews are subject to recall bias, wherein participants may have trouble remembering events as they occurred, or retroactive analyses of events may color what they say in an interview. Though the interviewer appears to have been successful in making most participants comfortable to share, the subject of sex is still largely taboo for many, especially those of older generations. This may have affected the stories that women were willing to share, or the

topics they would discuss in depth. For instance, the interviewer found that women would often become quiet or exceptionally nervous when asked about masturbation.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of life history interviews of 43 heterosexual women, I find that aging is accompanied by more favorable conditions for sexual pleasure and orgasm. Women in young adulthood do not focus on, or seem to expect, to experience orgasm during their initial experiences with heterosex. Moreover, younger women's experiences reveal that they tend to adhere more closely to a goal of pleasing their male partners. This could mean that the giving or sexually sacrificial behaviors born from gendered socialization (Fahs 2011; Miller 2018) may be renegotiated, abandoned, or complemented by an increasing belief in their value of their own orgasm and pleasure if women have positive sexual experiences (Carpenter 2010). Women's own physiological pleasure may only emerge as a meaningful factor in their evaluations of sexual events as they gain positive sexual experiences with partners.

Many middle-aged and older women in the sample, who have often accumulated sexual experiences with various partners, moved away from others-focused evaluations of sex, appear motivated by their own desire for pleasure. Several of the behaviors which lead to women's orgasm (non-penetrative) are considered under the umbrella term of "foreplay," and this study contributes to a body of knowledge which troubles the mainstream notion that penetrative sex is the main pleasure event for women. From a gender equality perspective, this research can help us understand why and how the orgasm gap remains, especially for younger heterosexual women. Moreover, given that socialization marked by sex-negativity and the accumulation of negative or pleasureless

sex might lead to distress (or at the very least a lack of pleasure), this research contributes to a broader conversation about factors which harm women's ability to access sexual wellbeing and satisfaction.

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