

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t”: Women’s accounts of feigning sexual pleasure

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Abstract

Faking orgasm has been identified as a common practice among women and feminist scholars have probed the connections between the socio-cultural meanings associated with faking and heterosex. Expanding on this line of inquiry, feigning sexual pleasure was explored in interviews with 14 women who reported having sex with men. Using a feminist critical discourse analytic approach, we attend to the dilemma that was frequently evoked in women’s accounts. Participants explained that feigning sexual pleasure was done in order to protect their partners’ ego. However, participants also talked about faking orgasm as being problematic in the sense that it was “deceitful” and “dishonest”. These contrasting discursive patterns created a dilemma whereby faking was situated as “necessary” but “dishonest”. As a way of negotiating this dilemma, participants made a distinction between exaggerating sexual pleasure and faking orgasm. We posit that exaggeration can be interpreted as a form of material (during the sexual encounter) and discursive (during accounting of the encounter) disruption of dominant discourses of heterosex such as the orgasmic imperative. Drawing on Annamarie Jagose’s and Hannah Frith’s problematizations of the prevailing tendency to position orgasm as either “authentic” or “fake”, we discuss women’s negotiation of the limited constructions of “real” pleasure.

Keywords

women’s sexuality, heterosex, orgasmic imperative, faking orgasm, feminist critical discourse analysis, Canada

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Women's sexual pleasure, including but not limited to orgasm, is imbued with social meanings. On the one hand, the achievement of sexual pleasure is evoked as an important marker of female sexual empowerment and agency (Gerhard, 2000; Gill, 2009; Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013). On the other hand, dominant discourses render heterosex as "real" sex and position the man as the "giver" of women's orgasm (Jackson & Scott, 2007; Moran & Lee, 2011). Such meanings, contradictions, and expectations that surround female sexual pleasure create particular possibilities as well as constraints regarding the interpretations of experiencing sexual pleasure and the absence thereof. Furthermore, particular representations of female sexual pleasure (e.g., orgasm as a goal in the context of heterosex) reflect and reproduce dominant discourses of female sexuality (Fahs, 2014; Gilfoyle et al., 1992; Gill, 2009).

In line with feminist and constructionist scholars, we understand sexualities as constructed rather than existing independently of social reality (Gavey, 1989; Gavey et al., 1999; Marecek et al., 2004). In contrast to biological notions of sexuality, where physiological and reproductive aspects of sexuality are understood as natural and normative (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998), the constructionist framework posits that sexuality is constructed and produced via social interactions and ongoing negotiations regarding particular understandings of sexuality. Within this constructive process, power and language potently shape interpretations and regulations of experiences as well as bodies (Bartky, 1988; Braun et al., 2003; Gavey, 1989). As a result, typical social realities and practices, either explicitly or implicitly, normalize and perpetuate inequality with respect to status, access, self-perception, behaviour, and the availability of a particular language itself (Gavey, 1989; Marecek et al., 2004). That is, "sex is discursively constructed" (Gavey et al., 1999, p. 37) and subject to ongoing co-construction and contestation rather than intrinsically or biologically given (Marecek et al., 2004). It is within this framework that we turn our attention to the constructions and meanings of sexual pleasure and orgasm.

Sexual pleasure and orgasm in the context of heterosex

Experiences of sexual pleasure and orgasm are given particular meanings within the broader socio-cultural and political context and hence sexual pleasure is "socially mediated" (Jackson & Scott, 2001, p. 100). Socio-cultural constructions of sexual pleasure are deeply interwoven with subjective understandings of experiences of orgasm. In the current Western constructions of sexual pleasure, orgasm is often equated with sexual pleasure and this signifies the prevailing orgasmic imperative. At the same time, the pervasiveness of the orgasmic imperative points to the relative dearth of legitimized alternative forms of sexual pleasure (Frith, 2013a; Jackson & Scott, 2001; Opperman et al., 2013; Tiefer, 2004). Orgasm is presented in discourse as defining a "holistic experience" (Potts, 2000, p. 59), as an accomplishment (Frith, 2013b), equivalent to sexual ecstasy (Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009), and, especially for female orgasm, as noisy (Roberts et al., 1995). In recent years, orgasm has been also positioned as a natural and normal part of one's sexuality and hence as of significant importance for sexual and overall

health (Frith 2013a; Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Potts, 2000). Thus, in addition to the dominant understandings of orgasm as signaling the end of sex (i.e., the orgasmic imperative), the experience of orgasm (or the absence of that experience) permeates different spectrums of our lives in terms of states (like ecstasy) or as related to senses (such as sounds). Beyond the naturalization of orgasm, the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s contributed to the belief that both female and male orgasms should be the desired and normal outcome of sexual interaction (Lavie & Willig, 2005; Nicolson & Burr, 2003). Female orgasm has become a symbol of liberated and agentic female sexuality (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gerhard, 2000; Gill, 2009).

The orgasmic imperative is closely associated with the coital imperative where intercourse is understood as being the “real” sex or, at least, the most fundamental aspect of sex (e.g., Braun et al., 2003; Frith, 2013a; McPhillips et al., 2001) and orgasm is expected to be experienced by both partners. The typical coital sequence involves penetration, female orgasm, and then the male orgasm as the climax or peak of the coital script (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Opperman et al., 2013; Potts, 2000). It has been argued that the coital imperative reflects a primarily phallogocentric construction of heterosex (e.g., Brown et al., 2018; Frith, 2013a; Gilfoyle et al., 1992). Frith (2013a), in her overview of literature regarding orgasm, documented the privileging of male sexuality in the coital imperative with female orgasm occurring in order for the male orgasm to “complete the event”. For example, women’s magazines consistently fashion penetration as being equivalent to sex and male orgasm is provided with a superior status in comparison to female orgasm (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Moran & Lee, 2011). In addition, Beres and Farvid (2010), Brown et al. (2018), and Potts (2000) commented on the presence of the coital imperative and the privileging of male sexuality and pleasure over female sexuality and pleasure in the accounts of their female participants. By “giving” the female partner an orgasm, a man gains the positive identity of a generous lover but, importantly, also affirms his identity of a “true” sexual man (Braun et al., 2003). In contrast, as Braun et al. (2003) argued, “the positive identities to be gained by women through discourse are less clear” (p. 249). The seeming (or pseudo) reciprocity regarding the “fair” exchange of orgasm provides women with an entitlement to orgasm. However, this entitlement is also an obligation: the woman is expected to have an orgasm so she reciprocates her partner’s offering of the gift of orgasm as conferred via his agency and skill (Braun et al., 2003; Frith, 2013a; see also Lavie-Ajayi, 2005).

Constructions, perceptions, and accounts of orgasmic absence

Aside from the (pseudo)reciprocity discourse, several dominant discourses assign a particular meaning to female orgasm. For example, within the scientific and medical discourses, orgasm has been constructed as closely connected to physiological response and, thus, as existing outside of the social context (Bell & McClelland, 2018; Jackson & Scott, 2007; Potts, 2000). The biological understanding is

systematically perpetuated by scientific perspectives which position orgasm as a natural (i.e., normal) part of the sexual response cycle (Jackson & Scott, 2001; Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009). Consequently, experiencing orgasm is equated with a healthy sexuality (Cacchioni, 2007; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Potts, 2000). Unsurprisingly, the absence of orgasm tends to be understood as a problem, and in particular as a physiological problem (Drew, 2003; Lavie & Willig, 2005; Wood et al., 2006). Furthermore, the absence of female orgasm (also called inorgasmia) has been increasingly pathologized. This trend of shifting one's experience from problematic to deficient and dysfunctional reflects the ongoing medicalization of sexuality where specific experiences are perceived as medical problems and dysfunctions in the need of treatment (Cacchioni & Tiefer, 2012; Kaschak & Tiefer, 2001; Stelzl et al., 2018). The scientific and medical understandings of the absence of female orgasm during coitus take precedence over alternative interpretations of that experience (Cacchioni, 2007; Nicolson, 2003; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Wood et al., 2006). Within the current hegemonic discourses of heterosex, it is thus expected that women should experience orgasm as it is a part of their natural sexuality. However, the fulfilment of that version of normal sexuality is only possible with the involvement of their male partner.

Dominant discourses of "inorgasmia" have become interwoven with women's perceptions of their experiences regarding the presence and absence of orgasm. The presence or "ability" to experience orgasm, especially during intercourse, has implications for women's identities, their understandings of relationships with their male partners, and perceptions of emotional well-being and sexual pleasure (e.g., Lavie & Willig, 2005; Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Nicolson & Burr, 2003). As one participant in Lavie-Ajayi's (2005) study on meanings of inorgasmia stated regarding orgasm during penetrative sex: "I feel I should be able to have them because all [...] real women do and I'd just like to be able to do it" (p. 62). Hence, a woman's identity is perceived as somehow deficient if she does not experience orgasm. Furthermore, identity-related attributions, such as a woman being frustrated, cold, and not liking sex, become associated with the experience of inorgasmia (Lavie & Willig, 2005; Lavie-Ajayi, 2005).

We are not suggesting that women are passive in their adoption of the dominant discourses around orgasmic absence. It is clear from the existing research of women's accounts of orgasmic absence that women are aware and critical of the dominant meanings given to the absence of orgasm (e.g., Bell & McClelland, 2018; Cacchioni, 2007; Herbenick et al. 2019; Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Lafrance et al., 2017a, 2017b; Nicolson & Burr, 2003). For instance, in Nicolson and Burr's (2003), Lavie-Ajayi's (2005), and Bell and McClelland's (2018) research, several female participants reported that orgasmic absence was a part of life and hence should not be of a major concern. However, these same participants expressed difficulty in terms of systematically resisting dominant discourses and cultural expectations to experience and perform orgasm. The discrepancy between the dominant discourses, such as the orgasmic imperative, and subjective experiences tended to result in the aforementioned identity attributions. These negative attributions can, in turn, be

implicated in self-blame and perceptions of failure rather than a rejection of the dominant constructions of orgasmic absence, however problematic they appeared to the participants (also in Cacchioni, 2007; Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009). The dominant constructions of orgasm and, in particular, the absence of orgasm have a significant effect on how women interpret experiences of inorgasmia. By not having an orgasm, a woman's perceived ability to fully contribute to the sexual event as well as her ability to control the end of sex when she wants to are diminished. Thus, the current constructions of orgasm position female orgasm as reflecting women's sexual empowerment and liberation, as natural and healthy, and as a fundamental part of a "fair" heterosexual relationship. The practice of feigning sexual pleasure is situated within these discourses around orgasmic presence as well as its absence.

Feigning sexual pleasure

The understanding of orgasm as a fundamental and "real" component of the coital script positions a woman who does not experience orgasm as possibly never getting "there" (Potts, 2000, p. 66). "Failing" to complete the coital sequence thus positions her as "deficient" and unable to fully experience sexuality (Jackson & Scott, 2007; Potts, 2000). Feigning sexual pleasure or faking orgasm has been identified as a common practice among women as a way to negotiate implications of not meeting the normative expectations of orgasm (Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Roberts et al., 1995). For example, Muehlenhard and Shippee (2010) and Oppermann et al. (2013) found that women reported faking orgasm in order to "enable" their male partner to orgasm and thus end sex. The practice of feigning orgasm as a way of ending sex has been also examined in the context of the dominant heterosexual discourses where neither adequate language nor discursive space exists for expressions of unwanted, albeit consensual, sex (Chadwick et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2017).

The orgasmic imperative positions women's orgasm as expected but it is the male partner's skill through which this expectation is met. Hence, orgasmic noise and orgasmic bodily expressions are not only important to show that she is "fully a woman" but also to make it perfectly clear that he succeeded in his efforts (Jackson & Scott, 2001; Roberts et al., 1995). In turn, the absence of orgasm can make a woman's partner insecure and anxious about his expertise (Potts, 2000). Protecting a partner's ego, affirming his skills, and avoiding hurting partner's feelings are often reported reasons for feigning sexual pleasure (Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Oppermann et al., 2013). As has been argued, the performance of orgasm constitutes "women's work" (Cacchioni, 2007; Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013; Oppermann et al., 2013). It has been proposed that this performance work is enacted by women as a form of relationship maintenance. In one of the central studies in this area, Roberts and colleagues (1995) found that "achieving orgasm" was understood by female participants as an important component of love and intimacy. In the context of female orgasm, man's technique and effort signified generosity and giving of love on his part. In demonstrating the

experience of orgasm, women felt that they were able to *show* their partner that he was providing them with pleasure and thus intimate love. In contrast, not having orgasm undermined that intimacy, which women sometimes circumvented by faking orgasm. In the Roberts et al.'s study, women related the practice of faking as contributing to relationship maintenance. Thus, faking requires physical and emotional work so a man's labour is acknowledged and threats to his masculinity are alleviated. In turn, relationship stability is not potentially jeopardized. These factors and relationship dynamics can override women's ability to experience sexual encounter without orgasm or to say no to unwanted sex (Braun et al., 2003; Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013; Thomas et al., 2017). Women's accounts of faking orgasm as well as the broader discourses around the practice of faking orgasm suggest that "faking orgasm is a compelling 'showcase' site of heterosexual relations" (Roberts et al., 1995, p. 523). It is with this understanding of faking orgasm in relation to heterosex power relations that we approach our own research. In particular, the aim of our investigation was to explore women's accounts of feigning sexual pleasure with particular attention to what meanings women give to their experiences of feigning sexual pleasure.

Method

Participants and procedure

To examine the accounting of the practice of feigning sexual pleasure, we invited female undergraduate students at our university to talk about their experiences. The study was advertised in the university weekly newspaper and via posters placed around the campus. The study's recruitment poster stated that we were conducting a study about women and sexual pleasure in the context of consensual sexual encounters. In addition, the information on the posters stipulated that we were looking for participants of 19 years of age (i.e., the age of majority in New Brunswick, Canada) or older who had been sexually active for at least one year. As a token of appreciation, participants' names were entered in a draw for one of several gift certificates.

Our analysis is based on interviews with 14 women who reported having sexual encounters with men. Their age ranged from 19 to 28 years ($M = 21.64$, $SD = 2.95$). Twelve participants self-identified as "heterosexual" or "straight", one as "bisexual" and one as "heterosexual/bi-curious". On average, the participants reported as being sexually active for five years ($SD = 2.74$, range = 2 – 13 years) and as having had 4.43 partners ($SD = 3.08$, range = 1 – 12 partners). All participants were students at the university, which is an undergraduate, liberal arts institution located in New Brunswick, Canada. The one-on-one interviews took place on the university campus with one of the authors being the sole interviewer. Each interview lasted, on average, between 60 and 90 minutes (including detailed review of informed consent and debriefing). Interviews followed a semi-structured format organized around three broad themes: talking about sex, experiences of

feigning sexual pleasure, and instances in which women resist the practice of feigning sexual pleasure. We want to note that we purposefully chose fairly broad language in our questions around exaggerating sexual pleasure and avoided the potentially leading term “faking orgasm.” Instead, we asked questions like “Have you ever been in a situation where you didn’t feel super excited but let on that you were having more fun than you were?”. Our aim in doing so was to open space for potentially more complex articulations of pretending sexual pleasure (Farvid, 2010; Lafrance & Wigginton, 2019).

At the end of the interview, participants received verbal and written debriefing. The written debrief also contained contact information for counselling services. The participating women chose pseudonyms to be used instead of their actual names. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim by trained transcribers into word documents. Any potentially identifying information (e.g., age, name of partners) was removed. Subsequently, the accuracy of transcription was checked by a research assistant.

Analytic (and interpretive) approach

Analysis began by reading and re-reading printed and electronic versions of the transcripts with attention to those sections of interviews where women talked about feigning sexual pleasure, including faking orgasm. One of the authors extracted pertinent segments from the transcripts and organized them into a word document which represented a general code (e.g., faking orgasm). The second author then read the code file and compared it to the transcripts. The code’s content was discussed and consensus was reached with respect to adding or removing extracts. As the next step, we both re-read the broad code and collaboratively generated more nuanced codes. For example, the general code of faking orgasm contained references to protecting partners’ feelings as well as descriptions of faking being dishonest. To reflect the distinct ways of accounting for the practice of pretending sexual pleasure, additional and more specific codes were developed (e.g., “faking-protection of partner’s feelings and ego” and “faking-dishonesty”). As with the general code, the content of each specific code was discussed by the two authors to ensure its consistency across transcripts. In the subsequent analysis, we explored the discursive content of these focused codes. Our analytic and interpretive process was guided by feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA; Lazar, 2005, 2007).

In general, discourse analysis concerns itself with the role of language in the construction of psychological, social, and cultural meanings (Willig, 2008). Discourse is “a broad concept referring to a way of constituting meaning which is specific to particular groups, cultures, and historical periods and is always changing” (Gavey, 1989, p. 464). Within this framework, discourse is understood as involved in actively producing but also reproducing sense-making (Burman & Parker, 1993; Edley, 2001; McKinlay & McVittie, 2008) and hence enabling as well as constraining the ways in which people can discursively account for an experience (Marecek et al., 2004). More specifically, critical discourse analysis focuses on

the ways in which language interacts with power and inequality (Gill, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) with FCDA specifically attending to how dominant gender power structures and relations are discursively maintained, perpetuated, negotiated, and resisted. As we situate our research within a feminist poststructuralist framework which concerns itself with the connections between language, power, and gender relations (Braun et al., 2003; Gavey, 1989; Gill, 2009), the FCDA approach was an appropriate fit with respect to our examination of how the articulated understandings and experiences reflected but also countered the current dominant discourses of sexual pleasure and female sexuality in relation to power and gender relations. In the following section, we report as well as discuss the analysis of two major discursive patterns: the dilemma of feigning sexual pleasure and the distinction between faking and exaggerating.

Analysis and discussion

The dilemma of faking: Damned if you do, damned if you don't

Most participants reported that they feigned sexual pleasure. The frequency of feigning ranged from occasional to frequent. Participants provided numerous and diverse reasons for feigning sexual pleasure, including as a means to avoid hurting partner's feelings, to exaggerate the degree of their own pleasure, and to end unwanted sex (Thomas et al., 2017). For instance, participants explained that they exaggerated as they "didn't want to embarrass him" (May), did not want him "to feel bad" (Meg), "did not want him to feel negative about himself" (Hayden), and not "causing him emotional stress" (Jem). Several participants also articulated that their partners "got upset" (Adison, Meg, Red) or "frustrated" (Lily) when the women were not experiencing orgasm or expressed a decrease in arousal. Hence, feigning was sometimes formulated as protecting the partner from some form of negativity or as avoiding negative reactions from one's partner. Participants also couched feigning as done to make the partner feel positively such as "to keep him happy" (JoAnne) and "to make him feel better about himself" (Adison).

Of the various ways of accounting, the most common reason revolved around protecting masculinity and, in particular, the (fragile) male ego. Many women positioned feigning as being sensitive to one's male partner with use of words such as "protect" (Alberta, Jem), "save" (Red), "care for" (Jem, Heather), and not "hurting them" (Adison, X). For example, Adison perceived her partner's ego as "very fragile" and Hayden expressed a sense of responsibility in relation to her partner's ego: "you feel, like you need to help their ego, I felt very obligated to do that". And in Heather's words: "I may have lied and said I'd never faked it before but that was more to soothe his ego". Furthermore, X articulated the implications for her partner's ego if she did not feign:

it was probably feeding his ego a little bit? I don't know, that would probably be the worst time to bring a guy down, like, during sex, and being like, oh, by the way, this

isn't that great. We need to stop. Which is probably what I wanted to say. But didn't. Probably 'cause I just think that would be mean.

As evidenced by the excerpts above, the participants' accounts of feigning almost inevitably contained language prioritizing the male partner's needs, feelings, and ego. This prioritization of male sexuality was also apparent in women's accounts of their own feelings associated with lack of pleasure or an absence of orgasm. Several participants expressed feeling frustrated or disappointed in relation to "never getting that satisfaction" (Lily) or not "getting anywhere" (Meg). Yet, they typically did not convey their experiences of lack of pleasure to their partner and feigned instead. As noted earlier, if women did express dissatisfaction and/or related feelings to their partner, these were sometimes met with a negative reaction. As a consequence, women feigned in future interactions to avoid adverse responses. These discursive patterns reflect Gilfoyle and her colleagues' (1992) contention that current dominant discourses provide limited space for the articulation of women's sexuality outside of its embeddedness within male sexuality. Our findings extend the existing research in this area (e.g., Fahs, 2014; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Frith, 2013a; Gilfoyle et al., 1992). For example, Farvid and Braun (2006) examined the constructions of sexuality in two widely-read women's magazines, *Cosmo* and *Cleo*. They found that the topics of men, their biologically-driven sexual needs, and women's orientation toward the satisfaction of those needs comprised a significant number of magazine articles. Hence, it is *his* work and *his* expertise that give a woman the possibility of experiencing pleasure. As Roberts et al. (1995) stated: "Women's pleasure, unlike men's, is not seen to be natural, but rather as dependent on men's work" (p. 526). Our analysis also indicates that the woman is being "worked on" by her male partner so she can experience orgasm and the importance of her orgasm appears to be firmly oriented toward male sexuality in terms of satisfying his abilities as well as his needs. Yet, women are not always or regularly experiencing orgasm as a result of "his work," which they navigate by faking. By feigning, the woman can meet the cultural expectations of orgasm (i.e., the orgasmic imperative) while upholding man's masculinity in terms of his skill and expertise (see also Farvid & Braun, 2006; Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Oppermann et al., 2013). In other words, by feigning she protects male sexual prowess and ego. In doing so, the woman avoids negative responses (e.g., frustration) to her orgasmic absence. In correspondence with the scholarship in this area, the analysis of the participants' accounts demonstrates that feigning of sexual pleasure represents a form of emotional and physical work to acknowledge man's labour and to alleviate potential threats to his masculinity (e.g., Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013; Roberts et al., 1995). In the words of Cacchioni, "women often 'perform' or 'fake' orgasm using their bodies and voices" (2007, p. 308).

Participants situated not feigning sexual pleasure as problematic in terms of being insensitive, mean, and hurtful. However, even though the women were concerned with protecting the male partner, in some form or another, they were aware that they were lying or being dishonest. Thus, our analysis revealed that feigning

sexual pleasure was perceived as both required and problematic. Participants repeatedly talked about feigning being “mean” and “not nice” (Adison), as “deceitful” (Alberta), “deceiving him” (Laura), and “being dishonest” (Laura, Hayden), and faking as something “you don’t want to admit” (Lily). Alberta further explained:

We know that you’re not supposed to do that

Interviewer: Why are we not supposed to do that?

Well, I mean, eventually it leads back to yourself like if you exaggerate or fake then ultimately your desires aren’t going to be met and then it’s, it is deceitful, it is lying, so then, in essence you’re almost outing yourself as someone that’s not completely truthful.

Similarly, Kat reported not feigning sexual pleasure as she found the behaviour of exaggerating troubling as it contradicted her sense of herself as an honest person: “I don’t like to lie, people know me as a pretty honest person”. Women were explicitly articulating that this form of dishonesty was something that they did not want to identify or be identified with:

because I was so used to pretending but at the same time I don’t wanna lie anymore either, and I mean I already came clean there’s no point in faking it anymore. I’ve already came clean. (Hayden)

Throughout the analysis, we became increasingly aware of the dilemma women faced when they did not experience orgasm during heterosex. While seemingly justified by one’s orientation to partner’s needs, faking sexual pleasure is clearly not easy to reconcile. The women we interviewed repeatedly stated that feigning sexual pleasure is wrong, on the one hand: it is lying and deceitful. However, on the other hand, not feigning sexual pleasure has the potential of being hurtful to the partner as it threatens his ego and can undermine his masculinity (Chadwick & van Anders, 2017). The following excerpt from an interview with Lily further illustrates this bind: “I don’t like doing that, I don’t like lying and, cause, that just sets up for more in the future. I just kind of wanted it to end and have him feel alright and then we could have a good day.” Women’s accounts of the dilemma highlight the role of power in heterosex, aligning with the identification of orgasm (and thus faking of orgasm) as a site of gender power relations (e.g., Frith, 2013a). Women’s navigation of their experiences of orgasm and the lack of it is situated within the current heterosex discourses around male and female sexuality (e.g., Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Levy, 2006; Moran, 2017). These discourses tend to both naturalize and mask power inequality between women and men, where female sexuality exists primarily vis-à-vis male sexuality (Marecek et al., 2004; Tiefer, 2004). The protection of the male ego supersedes woman’s ability to be honest when orgasm is

not experienced and openly express what she is feeling (e.g., disappointment, frustration). In particular, the identification of the dilemma reveals how the current dominant heterosex discourses not only hinder women's ability to honestly express orgasmic absence but, at the same time, make it difficult for women to avoid implications of being dishonest.

Exaggerating versus faking: Navigating the dilemma and troubling the meaning of the real and the fake

Importantly, participants' accounts also revealed the ways in which they negotiated this dilemma. In particular, women's accounts highlighted a distinction between faking (orgasm) and exaggerating (sexual pleasure). The following two excerpts capture the discernment they cast between exaggerating and faking:

Exaggerating to me is just being a little louder and saying things more frequently maybe just like, but faking is just full on like if you're not liking it but you're just actually making these fake little sounds and like saying stuff even though you don't want to even though it doesn't feel good, to me that's faking. (Lily)

sometimes I do maybe elaborate just a little bit more, to make it seem a little bit bigger? I think it's a guys ego thing? It's, I don't know, I'm sensitive I'm sensitive to my partner's ego. (May)

The majority of women offered at least one distinction between faking and exaggerating as a means of moving away from faking orgasm as "a total lie" (Adison). The way in which women positioned exaggerating provides a nuanced, yet not easily formulated, negotiation and shift away from the dilemma they faced. As Laura stated, there are different degrees of deceit: "There's extremes of exaggerating pleasure you could just exaggerate it a little bit just to make his ego better or you could pretty much downright lie and say it's good when it sucks if that makes sense. So I think that they're in the same category but there's different in degrees of deception". Adison elaborated:

Faking has a more, it has a more

Interviewer: What does that mean?

I wanna use the word . . . Faking it, and over, over exaggerating it is means makes it makes it seem like it felt better than it actually did. Faking it is, NO, it didn't happen but I am gonna pretend like it happened.

While faking was presented as a "downright lie", exaggerating was positioned as involving a lesser degree of deceit. Thus, the dishonesty aspect of the dilemma is tempered by talk of exaggeration. At the same time, exaggerating still "achieves"

the protection of a partner's ego. As Laura said: "you could just exaggerate it a little bit just to make his ego better".

To explore participants' articulation of exaggeration, we approach the understanding of sexual pleasure as "socially mediated" (Jackson & Scott, 2001, p. 100). Within this framework, what is experienced and what meaning is given to such experience are understood as affected and interwoven with culturally bound constructions of these experiences. This rich fabric of social understandings includes language in terms of what is discursively available to us and what is not. Hence, language is implicated in the possibilities of what represents pleasure, how pleasure is experienced, and how its meanings are constructed. In line with this approach, exaggeration can be interpreted as a form of discursive navigation within the existing parameters of heterosex such as the orgasmic imperative. In other words, when accounting for the practice of feigning sexual pleasure, women are carving a discursive space on the peripheries of the available language. This discursive resourcefulness enables them to avoid "being dishonest" (Laura, Hayden) while maintaining the protection of the (fragile) male ego. Accordingly, the participants' discernment between exaggeration and faking can be seen as acts of both resistance and reproduction of dominant discourses of heterosexuality (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014).

Not only does exaggeration provide a way of navigating the dilemma when accounting for feigning, we suggest that it also represents a material distinction (i.e., as experienced by and via one's body during the sexual encounter; Jackson & Scott, 2007) from both – having orgasm and faking orgasm. For our participants, exaggeration was "being a little louder" (Lily) and May stated that she "elaborate(s) just a little bit more". In comparison to faking where "it didn't happen but I am gonna pretend like it happened" (Adison), some degree of pleasure was felt during the sexual encounter and, thus, exaggeration does not constitute "a total lie" (Adison). Participants in other research on faking orgasm also reported that they exaggerated their level of arousal and pleasure for reasons such as further arousing their partner (Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010; Opperman et al., 2013). These few mentions in research literature suggest that exaggerating may not be an uncommon practice. In fact, while exaggeration seems to function as a way to navigate the dilemma of faking it could also be associated with other meanings such as enhancing one's own pleasure.¹ Yet, and in contrast to the practice of faking orgasm, exaggeration has not been systematically explored by scholars. This "gap" in literature may reflect the wider understanding that pleasure equates with orgasm (i.e., the orgasmic imperative) and that female orgasm is noisy (e.g., Frith, 2015; Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013; Roberts et al., 1995). These dominant social understandings limit women's possibilities to experience and express different degrees of pleasure, making the navigation of the dilemma difficult. Within the constraints of heterosex, exaggeration can be then interpreted as a form of agency which disrupts the entrenched conflation of pleasure with orgasm.

Beyond the disruption of the orgasmic imperative, we propose that exaggerating problematizes the culturally taken-for-granted meanings of real and fake orgasms.

In particular, we draw on Annamarie Jagose's (2010) and Hannah Frith's (2015) analyses or, to use Jagose's word, "queering" of the prevailing tendency of contrasting "authentic" and "fake" orgasms. Both scholars question the positioning of the real and the fake as opposites on one linear dimension. This dimension generally aligns with the biological and physiological aspects of orgasm, one of the current dominant conceptualizations of orgasm (Jackson & Scott, 2007; Potts, 2000). The biological facet of orgasm has been extensively prioritized by "expert" sources such as Freud's formulations around female orgasm and Masters and Johnson's physiological model of sexual response (see also Gerhard, 2000; Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009). This biological determinism represents an all-or-none, objective (i.e., independently existing) standard of what women "should" experience (Frith, 2015). However, these "objective" depictions of orgasm may not be (consistently) experienced by (all) women. Furthermore, other forms of pleasure are at best marginally recognized (see also Farvid & Braun, 2006; Jackson & Scott, 2007).

When "authentic" orgasm is not experienced but performed, it is regarded as "fake", or "not-real". To problematize this distinction, Jagose argued that faking orgasm is "an innovative sexual practice that makes viable a mode of feminine self-production in a constrained field of possibility" (2010, p. 530). Within this line of reasoning, we contend that the women who participated in our study not only navigated the dilemma of faking but crafted exaggeration as a discursive and material possibility, and indeed, "an innovative sexual practice". This practice enabled them to step outside of the authentic orgasm discourse and acknowledge that a degree of pleasure was experienced. Like the troubling of intercourse as "real" sex (e.g., Braun et al., 2003; Frith, 2013a), participants' articulations of exaggeration trouble the notion of orgasm as "real" pleasure. Expanding on Frith's statement – "How orgasm is recognized as an orgasm by both partners and by the self involves a large degree of interpretation" (2015, p. 122) – not only is orgasm up to a "large degree of interpretation" by the self and the partner, their interpretations are tied to the collectively shared understanding of what is recognized and thus experienced as real orgasm. If we challenge the existing parameters of understanding, explaining, and interpreting orgasm, exaggerating can be approached as another way of disrupting the socially established understanding of the real versus fake orgasm dichotomy.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined women's accounts of feigning sexual pleasure in the context of heterosex. The findings of our research expose the layers and complications involved in women's navigations of the current cultural hegemonic constructions of sexual pleasure and orgasm. The existing constraints are revealed in participants' formulation of the dilemma associated with faking. One of the primary reasons for faking is to protect partner's feelings and ego. The positioning of female sexuality as possible primarily in relation to male sexuality highlights the privileged position of heterosex as the natural, and indeed compulsory, sexual

configuration where gender inequality is continually reinforced (Bartky, 1988; Braun et al., 2003; Cosma & Gurevich, 2020). As the dilemma indicates, gender inequality is reinforced even further by the deceitful, and hence problematic, nature of faking. Thus, the current discourses of sexuality constrain women's ability to negotiate sexual practices and sexual pleasure on equal terms and honestly with their male sexual partners. Yet, women's articulation of exaggeration represents an agentic possibility for troubling and contesting the cultural bounds of female sexuality. Even though the current discourses do not offer women readily available means of articulating non-orgasmic degrees of pleasure, women are expanding outside those narrow parameters of the orgasmic imperative. In examining their "out-of-bounds" discursive undertaking, we get glimpses of the disruption between what is and what is not a "real" pleasure.

Our analysis of the participants' accounts provides a snapshot in the area of pleasure and female sexuality. However, we need to be cautious in interpreting our findings beyond the scope of our sample. The interviewed participants were younger cis-women, most of whom identified as heterosexual. All were students at an undergraduate liberal university. Thus, while the research extends the existing scholarship in the area of heterosex and female sexuality, future research needs to include and attend to diverse groups with respect to sexual orientations, gender identifications, age, race, ethnicity, and education. Future research directions may involve the examination of how the dilemma of faking translates across the intersection of multiple cultural locations and social identities (Fahs & Swank, 2011; Farvid, 2010). In addition, participants' articulations of exaggeration and the discernment between faking and exaggeration require further scholarly attention. For example, what are the various functions that exaggeration may fulfil such as enhancement of pleasure, navigation of the dilemma of faking, and as a form of sexual communication? What are the connections between embodiment and exaggeration? And how can we continue probing the discursive accountings of pleasure, (dis)honesty, and dissonance in the context of exaggeration? These and other questions regarding the possible meanings of this sexual behaviour or practice are worthy of future exploration.

In closing, the findings of our research speak to the pervasive ways in which heterosex, pleasure, and orgasm are configured along the lines of gender power dynamics. With our attention to power as an organizing impetus in the construction of sexualities, we join other feminist scholars in challenging the phallogocentric discourses that incessantly and vigorously draw on the coital and orgasmic imperatives. As our research suggests, hegemonic discourses of heterosex position a woman who does not experience orgasm as being in a dilemma of "damned if you do and damned if you don't". Taken together with the articulation of exaggeration as a means of disrupting the dilemma, we argue that binary understandings of orgasm (as either real or fake) are fundamentally problematic, providing too narrowly defined ways of what is considered "real" pleasure. Feminist examinations of pleasure and orgasm may consider continuous troubling and expansion beyond the established ways of explanation and interpretation. In line with critical

sexuality studies (Fahs & McClelland, 2016), we need to question the foundational concepts of authentic and fake orgasms themselves, in addition to exposing the oppression of the existing hegemonic discourses. At this level of conceptual analysis, we can challenge and disrupt the existing power organization at the fundamental level of language. As feminist researchers and educators, we must continue to trouble and expand discourses of pleasure. For example, increased emphasis on exploring pleasure outside of intercourse and attending to women's subjective experiences of joyous sexuality (Fahs & Plante, 2017) can facilitate a journey of re-imagining the words, their meanings, and hence the practices and experiences of pleasure themselves.

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