

The other third shift?
Women's emotion work in their
sexual relationships

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Overview of talk

- What are emotional labor and emotion work? How do these apply to sexual relationships and intimate contexts?
- Applying sociological theories of work to women's sexual relationships
- Methods (qualitative thematic analysis on 20 women from community sample, ages 18-59)
- Four areas of emotion work: 1) Faking orgasms; 2) Tolerating sexual pain; 3) Defining sexual satisfaction based on a partner's pleasure; and 4) Narrating sex they call 'bad sex' acceptable because of a partner's satisfaction
- Implications for heterosex, gendered aspects of sexual satisfaction, entitlement/expectations of pleasure, and diverse interpretations of orgasm are discussed

What is emotional labor?

- Arlie Hochschild (1989): Emotional labor is “labor that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”
 - This labor is defined by friendliness, deference, positive outlooks, and emotions that support others’ happiness and well-being
 - Some examples: Flight attendants, teachers, customer service agents
 - Theorized “first shift” (working outside of the home), “second shift” (additional domestic labor women overwhelmingly carry), and “third shift” (time women weigh, balance, and reconcile these two shifts)

What is emotion work?

- Emotion work often applies to caring for their partner and children's emotional needs such as comforting them when distressed, caring for them while sick, and managing the emotional needs of the household
 - Within marriages and partnerships, this emotion work may appear as offering encouragement and affirmation, showing empathy, demonstrating affection, or putting the partner's needs above one's own needs.
 - Married women expected to perform more sexual desire than they truly felt (Elliott & Umberson, 2008), felt anxious and distrustful when expressing desires to partners (Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010), and engaged in emotional labor to manage partner expectations (Cacchioni, 2015).

Surface versus deep acting

- Surface acting
 - Women behave in friendly and “nice” ways even if they feel bored, angry, or frustrated
 - Awareness of the feeling of acting
- Deep acting
 - Women go beyond surface performance and try to convince themselves that they *really* are feeling the emotions required of them
 - Lack of awareness of acting

Sexualized emotion work

- Performing as satisfied or not labeling coercion as “rape” (Fahs, 2011)
- Engaging in unwanted sex in exchange for housework (Elliott & Umberson, 2008)
- Feeling obligated to orgasm or faking orgasm (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010)
- Basing sexual satisfaction on partner’s approval (Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2015)
- Managing menstrual blood while having sex during menstruation (Fahs, 2011)
- Engaging in “relational sex work” to monitor and manage partners’ desires (Cacchioni, 2007)
- Expressing uncertainty that one is deserving or entitled to pleasure (McClelland, 2010)

Research questions

- In what ways do women's narratives about sexual (dis)satisfaction, orgasm, and pleasure contain stories about the performance of emotion work?
- What does “emotion work” in the context of sex look like, and how does it connect to patterns about gender and power?
- How do women manage their own, and others', emotional experiences of sex, and what toll, if any, does this take on women?
- Finally, how does emotion work around “bad sex” (variously defined) appear for women engaging in sex with men, and how do these descriptions map onto issues of sexual entitlement and reciprocity (Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003)?

Methods

- 20 adult women (mean age = 34, SD = 13.35) recruited in 2011 in Phoenix, AZ from a community arts listing and from Craigslist volunteers section
- Participants were selected only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age (paid USD \$20.00 for participating)
 - Sexual minority and women of color oversampled purposefully
 - Age: 55% 18-31, 25% 32-45, 20% 46-59
 - Race: 55% white, 45% women of color (3 African American, 4 Mexican American, 2 Asian American)
 - Sexual Identity: 60% heterosexual, 30% bisexual, 10% lesbian
- Semi-structured interviews with 36 questions about women's sexual histories, practices, and feelings
- Responses analyzed using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis that draws from poststructuralist feminist theory and gender theory (Braun and Clarke 2006)

Question asked

- Several of the prompts addressed issues relevant to this study on emotion work in sexual relationships.
 - “There are many different definitions and motivations for sex. What do you consider to be satisfying sex?”
 - “What are your experiences with faking orgasm or with faking your experience of pleasure?”
 - “Women often report conflicted emotions about different sexual acts they have tried. Can you talk about your experiences with anal sex, oral sex, intercourse, and other acts that you would consider to be ‘sex?’”
 - ...plus several follow up questions and probes.

Four areas of emotion work in sexual relationships

- 1) Faking orgasms
- 2) Tolerating sexual pain
- 3) Defining sexual satisfaction based on the partner's pleasure
- 4) Narrating sex that they call “bad sex” as acceptable because of a partner's satisfaction.

1: Faking orgasms

- 75% said that they had faked orgasm at least once, with 45 % saying that they faked orgasm regularly during their sexual encounters.
- Women wanted to reinforce their male partner's sexual skills and avoid hurting their feelings
 - Shantele (30/African-American/Heterosexual): "I fake my orgasms, I do, yes. Sometimes some guys are very insecure and they feel like if I'm not coming they didn't do their job. They make me feel like if I don't orgasm then I didn't enjoy sex, so sometimes I have to pretend just to perform it. Sometimes I take too long and just tell them I'm about to come and then they come."
 - Jane (59/White/Heterosexual): "I usually have my eyes closed and I just fake it. I felt that my partner was entitled to it, or I wanted to give that to him. I felt it was important because he would be disappointed if I didn't have an orgasm."

1: Faking orgasms (continued)

- Pressure to assist in men's arousal and not disappoint them
 - Hannah (57/White/Bisexual): "I remember he just sulked about it when I straight up said, 'It didn't happen.' He got angry and flipped it around with, 'Why was *she* [referring to her ex-girlfriend] good enough and I can't do it for you?' I felt so guilty."
- Validation of effort or "labor" put *into* women from a partner
 - Cris (22/White/Lesbian): "With guys I faked it all the time. Now, with her, I've faked it occasionally pretty much because I was really tired and I just couldn't do it, and I felt bad because she was trying like really hard and so I didn't want her to think she wasn't doing anything good."
 - Angelica (32/Latina/Heterosexual): "Sometimes just because I want to get it over with, and I know they're trying to wait for me to go, I just make them feel better. Like, 'YAAAAAY,' or whatever. I want them to feel like they accomplished something with me."

2: Tolerating sexual pain

- Engaging in anal sex because a partner wanted to
 - Rhoda (57/White/Heterosexual): “I tried it once or twice. It was painful, not satisfying whatsoever to me. It was more like a chore, but it was kind of like ‘Okay, I’ll do it.’ He requested it.”
 - Tania (25/White/Heterosexual): “Sometimes there’s not enough lubrication and it really hurts. Once it hurts, it’s painful and you don’t feel anything. You don’t feel aroused but you just keep going.”
- Tolerated pain during vaginal sex to please a partner
 - April (27/Latina/Lesbian): “Penetration is uncomfortable. It just hurts, or it feels good for a while and then it’s just like a strain or pressure. I tried to just get through it to save my relationship because he needed sex.”
- Acting out scenes from porn to please a partner
 - Sylvia (23/White/Heterosexual): “He watched a lot of porn, so he wanted to try every little single thing out there that had to do with anything that he’d seen. It went from ropes and gags to meeting people on Craigslist to having sex with couples to anal sex. . . . A lot of times it hurt, but as long as he was happy, then I would try whatever. I think it’s a deep-seated thing that we just want to please our significant others. I just have to get used to it.”

3: Defining sexual satisfaction based on the partner's pleasure

- Valuing a partner's pleasure over their own
 - Shantele (30/African-American/Heterosexual): “I actually don't get off with sex but I do enjoy watching a guy get off, knowing that he's satisfied. The sound of him coming, the look on their face—most men are really quiet when they're doing it, but then when they're about to come they're a little louder and their face is more expressive. It looks like it hurts but it doesn't.”
 - Kelly (23/White/Heterosexual): “I have sometimes done things I didn't really want to do just to please someone else. I often feel like oral sex is a service. You're doing them a service a giving your power away. I feel like if you're not in a trusting relationship you're giving too much power away. You should only do things you don't like in a serious relationship and then it's okay because it makes them happy.”

4: Narrating sex that they call “bad sex” as acceptable because of a partner’s satisfaction.

- Not telling a partner they’re unsatisfied because they want to please partner
 - Leticia (41/Latina/Bisexual): “I often just lay there, and they’re thinking they’re doing the greatest thing on earth and it’s not, so I had to fake my orgasms just to make him stop. I always want the guy to think that they did their part, just to make them feel good. I don’t know. I should probably say something more but it’s just like I don’t see the point. There are not a lot of men that will sit there and listen to what you want. Or they’ll listen but they won’t do it, so there’s no point. I would like for a man to pay attention to my breasts and some men don’t really do that, or I’d like kissing on my neck, but I can’t ask for that. I don’t really have orgasms through the actual intercourse part.”
- Enduring bad sex as “normal”
 - Jean (57/White/Heterosexual): “Sometimes I just go blank. It happens mostly because you’re doing it on somebody else’s timeline and somebody else’s demand. You’re performing, and sometimes you can perform well. But you’re still thinking, ‘When is this going to be over so I can be who I really am?’ I just endure it I guess.”

Making sense of these narratives

- These stories raise the question of what it means to have sex outside of pleasure, and what is at stake in continuing to have unpleasurable (or less pleasurable) sex.
 - Emphasis on what their partners want to feel: dominance, power, sexual skillfulness, attractiveness, ability (etc.).
 - Both hetero and bi/lesbian identified women described emotion work, though bi/lesbian women who had had male partners described more instances of emotion work with men than with women
- Is this a hyper-realized version of women's social roles, or an aberration?
 - If women are expected to be “givers,” is emotion work a manifestation of this? How can they be givers *and* expect to receive from partners? Can women express their sexual needs/desires with partners, and if so, what is at stake in doing so?

Reassessing sexual satisfaction

- Building on the work of scholars who have already questioned women's sexual satisfaction scales and how the construct is measured (particularly Sara McClelland), this study found two major ways that emotion work occurs:
 - 1) Performance around desire for sex (“wanting sex”)
 - 2) Satisfaction during sex (“feeling satisfied”)
- There was a strong emphasis on putting up with, trying, enduring, and tolerating sex that women did not find particularly physically or emotionally pleasurable beyond pleasing their partners.
 - In many cases, the line between shallow and deep acting is blurred– for example, for faking orgasm, if women get sexually aroused by faking orgasm, is this shallow or deep acting?
 - Further, men (through women's eyes) are often seen as low in self-esteem, fragile, and needy rather than hard, tough, secure, self-sufficient, and sexually skilled.

Limitations and future directions

- Many other examples of potential emotion work than included in this study (for example, managing messy or leaky bodies, dealing with birth control, acting out a partner's sexual fantasies, altering the body).
 - Interviews more easily tap into surface acting rather than deep acting as it is harder for people to assess internalized expectations of bad (or worse) sex
- Did not assess men's perceived experiences of emotion work; studying the couple might be interesting, or men specifically (if we can stomach it).
 - How aware are men of partners' emotional labor? Do they do emotional labor too? What kind?
- Connections between emotional pain and physical pain could be interesting to look at explicitly
- Quantitative work that could better assess patterns across social identity lines (intersectional identities in particular) would be fascinating for this topic.
- Also, looking at more casual sex and hookup sex for traces of emotional labor would be useful as well.

Looking to the future

- Why are women having bad sex? *Which* women are having more or less bad sex? Why are some women more inclined to fake orgasms or prioritize their partners' pleasure over their own?
- What kind of interventions would help to minimize women's perceived need to engage in emotion work? And, what are the costs of emotion work for women?
 - Is the “stalled revolution” (England, 2010) also applicable to women's sex lives?
- How can researchers adequately assess the emotion work of sexuality and, on a more positive note, the impact of feminist identity and feminist politics on sexual satisfaction?

Final thoughts

- Perhaps the sexual revolution inadvertently “freed men first” from the constraints of traditional gender and sexuality roles (English 1983), or allowed women to *be desired* rather than *have desire* (evoking “cathexis,” or the gendered characteristics of sexual desire [see Connell 2005]), leading to some complicated quagmires of how to effectively sexually liberate women in today’s culture.
- The study of emotion work helps us to better assess complications around women’s sexual agency, empowerment, and entitlement.

THANK YOU!

To read this article in print, see:

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