

“What do you mean when you say that you are sexually satisfied?” A mixed methods study

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Abstract

Not enough is understood about the role of gender norms and sexual stigma in shaping individuals' definitions of sexual satisfaction. The current study aimed to investigate the heterogeneity of definitions of sexual satisfaction in a sample of young adults, ages 18–28 ($M = 22.6$; $SD = 4.78$). Forty US participants (50% females; 45% LGBTQ; 53% white) sorted 63 statements about sexual satisfaction using a Q methodology design (Watts and Stenner, 2005), followed by semi-structured interviews. This mixed methods procedure enabled both a systematic and in-depth examination of the dimensions participants prioritized when determining their sexual satisfaction. Analysis of participants' Q sorts indicated four distinct perspectives on sexual satisfaction: *emotional and masculine*; *relational and feminine*; *partner focused*; and *orgasm focused*. These four factors were further explored using participants' interview data. Findings indicated that individuals interpreted sexual satisfaction using several key dimensions not regularly included in survey research. Existing survey items do not regularly attend to the gendered and heteronormative components of sexual satisfaction appraisals and as a result, important interpretive patterns may be overlooked.

Keywords

Sexual satisfaction, gender, LGBTQ, interview, Q methodology

Introduction

Across the field of sexuality research, investigators have begun to study what terms *mean* to participants, as well as the effects these definitions have on research findings and subsequent applications. For example, the term “have sex” has been

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found to have numerous interpretations in research settings (Edwards and Coleman, 2004; Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007; Sanders et al., 2010; see Crawford and Popp, 2003 for discussion). Similarly, the term “sexual satisfaction,” while quickly becoming integral to sexuality research and sexual function discussions (McClelland, 2011), has been hampered by a lack of theory and empirical research on what is inferred in sexual satisfaction ratings. In addition, existing definitions are often limited by focus on satisfaction within married, heterosexual couples (e.g., Hurlbert, Apt and Rabehl, 1993; McNulty and Widman, 2013).

This study addressed these limitations and examined interpretations of sexual satisfaction among young adults in the USA using an interpretive framework and a Q methodology design (Watts and Stenner, 2005). While most studies that focus on definitional questions often rely on interview-based or other qualitative methods alone, this study paired interview methods with a systematic analysis afforded by Q methodology. Rather than predict sexual satisfaction as an outcome or examine correlated variables, this study systematically examined participants’ interpretations of sexual satisfaction and the priorities individuals described when considering the idea of feeling sexually satisfied.

Research on sexual satisfaction

Sexual satisfaction appraisals are of interest to social scientists working across a number of fields, including sexual health (Meston and Trapnell, 2005), sexual function (Brotto, 2010; Graham, 2010), relationship quality (Heiman et al., 2011), and quality of life in clinical settings (Ganz et al., 1998). While some have argued that sexual satisfaction is “a universal human experience” (Štulhofer et al., 2010: 258), descriptions of sexual satisfaction as a universal phenomenon overlook a number of important factors, including those related to gender and sexual minority status. Given that sexual experiences and relationships are deeply lodged within socio-political contexts (Fahs and Swank, 2011; McClelland, 2010; Rudman and Phelan, 2007), it is important to examine whether sexual satisfaction is the same psychological phenomena across individuals who have varying access to power within the sexual domain.

Indeed, Schwartz and Young (2009) argued that there is an important paradox in the literature on sexual satisfaction:

[T]he word satisfaction can be defined in various ways and satisfaction may mean different things to different people, [but] . . . because of a presumption that everyone knows what it means . . . much of the literature on sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction never really defines the word (p. 1).

While the term has many potential meanings, sexual satisfaction has not been extensively examined for its interpretations or how individuals cognitively evaluate their own satisfaction (cf. Daker-White and Donovan, 2002; McClelland, 2011). Perhaps because of this presumption that “everyone knows what it means,” researchers in the field have often relied on single item measures such as

“how sexually satisfied are you?” (e.g., Bridges et al., 2004) or two-item scales which evaluate individuals’ physical and emotional pleasure in sexual relationships, theorized as relevant proxies for sexual satisfaction (DeLamater et al., 2008; Laumann et al., 1994; Waite and Joyner, 2001).

However, researchers have consistently found that social norms and expectations determine how participants interpret terms used in research settings (Carpenter et al., 2009). For example, McCabe et al. (2010) examined participants’ interpretations of “sex” and “sexuality” and found that cultural scripts and gendered expectations influenced how participants answered sexuality-related questions. They noted that the meanings participants relied on were not simply diverse, but reflected gendered norms about what kinds of sex men and women were expected to want. These and other findings indicate the need for feminist research focused on understanding the sociopolitical contexts of sex and sexuality, as well as increased attention to how these contexts affect what we learn in research settings. This question asks that we not simply examine the frequency with which individuals report sexual outcomes, but *how* individuals develop expectations for satisfying sex and how these expectations differ for groups who have less access to power and fewer rights in the sexual domain.

The role of gender

Research on sexual satisfaction has consistently found gender differences when men and women are asked what qualities are associated with sexually satisfying sex (Dundon and Rellini, 2010; Heiman et al., 2011; Sprecher and Cate 2004). One of the most consistent findings has been the role of emotion for women in sexual satisfaction appraisals (Bridges et al., 2004; McNulty and Fisher, 2008). Barrientos and Paez (2006) found that being in love distinguished between female sexual satisfaction and dissatisfaction and women who believed in the endurance of their relationship were more sexually satisfied. This same relationship between positive emotions and sexual satisfaction has not consistently been found for men. In one of the few studies aimed at investigating subjective meanings of sexual satisfaction, Daker-White and Donovan (2002) found that men defined their sexual satisfaction in terms of intercourse frequency and the match between desire for and frequency of intercourse, while women defined satisfaction in terms of intercourse frequency, trust, and mutual enjoyment (see also Haavio-Mannila and Kontula, 1997; McNulty and Fisher, 2008; Nicolosi et al., 2004).

Research on the mechanisms of what links gender socialization with sexual outcomes is key to understanding gender difference findings. For example, Kiefer and Sanchez (2007) found that gender norm conformity affected sexual passivity which in turn was associated with women’s reduced rates of sexual arousal, sexual function, and sexual satisfaction. In addition, research has demonstrated links between gender conformity and increased rates of consenting to unwanted sex with male partners (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras, 2008) and lower rates of sexual pleasure (Sanchez et al., 2005). These findings highlight not only the role

of gender difference, i.e., women and men want different things, but the role of gender ideology in shaping expectations related to sex and sexuality (see Impett and Peplau, 2003; Impett and Tolman, 2006).

There has been less research on the dimensionality of men's sexual satisfaction, perhaps because sexual pleasure and satisfaction have been assumed to be a more straightforward construct for men, as compared to women (Baumeister, 2000; Peplau, 2003). McNulty and Fisher (2008) argued that "men's sexual experiences appear to be less open to interpretation than women's" and that men's sexual satisfaction evaluations "may depend less on the contextual aspects of sex and more on the concrete, physical rewards" (p. 231). While the dimensions of women's sexual satisfaction have too often been assumed to be "complex" or even "elusive" and "mysterious" (see Fishman and Mamo, 2002), it is also essential to not assume that men's satisfaction is simple or necessarily straightforward—or that emotional dimensions are absent from men's evaluations. This gap in the literature points to the need to better understand the meanings and priorities for both men and women, as well as research on within-group differences which have largely been overlooked.

Heteronormativity and sexual minority status

In research on sexual satisfaction, there have been several trends that have resulted in implicit and explicit heteronormative assumptions about the definition and measurement of sexual satisfaction. These have included assessing satisfaction mainly within relationships (Byers and MacNeil, 2006; Hudson, 1998) and the operationalization of sex as heterosexual intercourse (Bridges et al., 2004; Meston and Trapnell, 2005; Philippsohn and Hartmann, 2009). As a result, the bulk of research on sexual satisfaction has concentrated on heterosexual dating or married couples and research with sexual minorities remains relatively slim. Studies with LGBTQ samples have indicated that sexual socialization, sexual stigma, and homophobia may play a role in sexual satisfaction in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals (Bliss and Horne, 2005; Diamond and Lucas, 2004; Henderson et al., 2009; Holmberg, Blair, & Phillips, 2010). In terms of gender differences between lesbian-identified women and gay-identified men, researchers have found high correlations between sexual satisfaction and psychological well-being for lesbians (Bliss and Horne, 2005) and frequency of sexual contact for gay men (Peplau and Fingerhut, 2007).

These examples indicate there are gender differences in how men and women prioritize dimensions of sexual satisfaction; however, this research has been done with largely heterosexual samples and has included a limited number of dimensions participants could use to define sexual satisfaction due to survey design limitations. In addition, there is much less known about how sexual minorities define sexual satisfaction and whether a greater variety of dimensions for participants to consider when interpreting their sexual satisfaction might reveal patterns that help to illuminate the role of gender and sexual socialization in individuals' definitions of sexual satisfaction.

participants' definitions as a primary source of interest (Brownlie, 2006; Darwin and Campbell, 2009; Kitzinger, 1986, 1988). Because Q methodology looks for patterns of interpretation in addition to demographic differences, feminist researchers using this method have been able to explore variability within groups rather than treating demographically similar groups as stable and homogenous (Brownlie, 2006; Darwin and Campbell, 2009). For example, in her study of the concept of lesbianism, Kitzinger (1986, 1988) argued that Q methodology allowed her to examine how participants grappled with their own assumptions about gender, sex, attraction, and sexual politics. She asked 41 self-identified lesbians (ages 17–58) to sort 61 statements and found seven distinct interpretations of “lesbian” within the sample. The seven factors in this study each captured distinct accounts of lesbianism, ranging from seeing their own lesbian identity as a source of self-fulfillment, to those who saw it as a political commitment, and to those who described lesbianism as a personal failure and inadequacy. Kitzinger's study on the variability and social construction of lesbianism was an early and influential example of how research on “homosexuality” was short-sighted and limited in theorizing and assessing the complexity of people's desires, behaviors, identities, and relationships (Diamond, 2003; Epting et al., 1994). The current study sits squarely within this history of feminist research which takes up interpretative questions of gender, sex, and sexual politics.

Current study

While much of the research on sexual satisfaction has focused on “how frequently” or “how much” someone reports feeling satisfied, the current study examined how participants prioritized and defined dimensions of sexual satisfaction in a diverse sample of young adults using a mixed methods design.

Sample and methods

Participants were recruited from an undergraduate college in New York City. The final sample of 40 participants was diverse by gender (women $n=19$; men $n=20$; transgender $n=1$), sexual identity (LGBTQ $n=18$), and race/ethnicity (white $n=21$). See Table 1 for demographic characteristics of sample. The mean age of the participants was 22.6 years ($SD=4.78$; range: 18–28 years). Potential participants responded to an on-line ad for a study concerning “dating and relationships.” The call for participants explicitly named LGBTQ and heterosexual relationships and stated that participants did not need to be in a current relationship to be eligible to participate; masturbation was considered a relevant form of sexual expression in this study. All participants completed the University's IRB approved consent forms before beginning the study. Participants were asked to complete a Q sort, a semi-structured interview, and several paper and pencil scales of sexual satisfaction, sexual subjectivity, and internalized homophobia. The current study concerns only the Q sort and interview data (for discussion of survey results, see McClelland, 2011).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of sample.

	N (%)
Age	
Mean (SD)	22.6 (4.78)
Range	18–28
Gender	
Women	20 (50.0)
Men	19 (47.5)
Trans	1 (2.5)
Sexual identity	
Heterosexual	22 (55.0)
Lesbian/gay/bisexual/queer	18 (45.0)
Race	
White	21 (52.5)
Latino	7 (17.5)
Asian/Asian Pacific Islander	5 (12.5)
Mixed race/ethnicity	4 (10.0)
Black/African American	3 (7.5)
In relationship	
Partnered	28 (70.0)
Not partnered	12 (30.0)

Q sort

The Q sort contained 63 cards with statements concerning a wide range of descriptions concerning possible behaviors, feelings, and experiences associated with sexual satisfaction. The cards were handed in a random order to each participant along with a prompt that asked: *What is important to you in determining your own sexual satisfaction? Distribute the statements from those that you most agree with to those you most disagree with.* Participants were asked to sort all of the cards along a nine-point scale ranging from *most disagree* to *most agree*, with a mid-point of *neutral*. Participants were instructed to sort the cards using a quasi-normal distribution which restricted how many cards they could place in each of the nine categories. This decision was made in order to create an iterative ranking process: each card was evaluated in relationship to the other 62 cards.

Special attention was given to assembling a set of statements that was diverse in content and appropriate for a wide range of sexual relationships, identities, and genders. Psychological, clinical, and medical literatures were searched for measures of sexual satisfaction, as well as feminist and critical sexuality theories of the last two decades (e.g., Bancroft, 1997; Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Kaschak and Tiefer, 2001; Lloyd, 2005). These steps guided the writing and organization of the

final 63 statements included in the Q sort procedure. Generally speaking, a total of 40–80 statements is considered satisfactory in Q method studies (Watts and Stenner, 2005). The final statements were written on individual index cards to allow for each one to be considered and sorted separately by participants. Example statements included, “After sexual activity is over, I know I am sexually satisfied when my genitals feel relaxed” and “The emotional closeness I feel to a partner is what makes sex satisfying for me.” For all steps of the procedure, the researcher was present, although at a distance from the participant during the sorting procedure which allowed for privacy since the researcher could not see how the cards were sorted.

Interview

Immediately following the sorting procedure, participants completed a 25–35-min semi-structured interview with a female researcher (the author). The interview questions did not ask participants to elaborate specific sexual experiences, but instead, to describe how they distinguished satisfactory from unsatisfactory sexual experiences and their definitions of sexual satisfaction. The interview protocol included questions about criteria participants used to decide if they were sexually satisfied, how these differed over time, and whether these decisions differed for partnered and un-partnered sex. Interview transcripts were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Analysis

After each participant completed the sorting procedure, the placement of each statement was recorded and later entered into a dedicated software package which enabled analysis of the correlations amongst the 40 sorts (PQMethod 2.11; Schmolck and Atkinson, 2002). The placements of each participant’s statements were examined for patterns, specifically to see whether there were groups of individuals who placed statements in similar positions during the sorting procedure (see Figure 1). Principle components factor analysis was used to determine how many distinct groups of sorts (e.g., factors) there were in the sample and to subsequently extract these factors for further analysis. Varimax rotation was used to rotate the factors in order to maximize statistical differences between the factors. As a result, each factor represents a shared subjective interpretation of sexual satisfaction: participants included in each factor placed the statements in the Q sort in a similar location, meaning that they consistently highly agreed or disagreed with the same statements.

Results are presented and discussed for each factor. Interview material from participants whose sorts were included in each factor was also examined to better understand the perspective of each factor. Gender and sexual minority demographics are also presented for each factor; these demographic details should not be used to generalize these findings to the population since that is not the aim of Q methodology. Rather, they are presented to allow for further

analysis of patterns concerning interpretations of sexual satisfaction. In other words, the concern of Q methodology is not with *how many* people believe something, but rather to examine the *ways* that phenomena are interpreted. This requires an important shift in perspective from thinking that we already know everything about a phenomenon and need a large enough sample size of *participants* to represent diverse perspectives. Instead, the Q methodological approach assumes that we do not yet know enough about a phenomenon and need a large sample of diverse *ideas* about the phenomenon in order to better assess how it is understood.

Findings

Analysis revealed a four factor structure that accounted for 29 (70%) of participants' sorts, meaning that four distinct interpretations of sexual satisfaction were found to be present. Q sorts that did not load significantly on any factor or those that loaded significantly on two or more factors were excluded from further quantitative and qualitative analysis. As the goal of the Q analysis is to identify patterns in the sample, rather than account for all the sorts, the loss of these data did not negatively impact the findings. In order to examine the meanings that each factor represented, two types of qualitative data were subsequently examined. These included the statements that were ranked as most or least important by the participants in each factor (see Tables 2–5), as well as interview data provided by participants whose sorts were included in each factor. The four factor structure that emerged from the Q factor analysis meant that those individuals who sorted the cards similarly were grouped together as a means to better understand the subjective interpretation offered by each group. Factors A, B, C, and D are discussed in more detail below, with particular attention to the statements that each factor *most* or *highly* agreed and disagreed with as a means to assess each groups' priorities when interpreting sexual satisfaction.

Factor A: Emotional and masculine

Factor A's sexual satisfaction appraisals prioritized the role of emotional security, feeling masculine ("Sex is satisfying when I feel more masculine"), and the importance of a same-sex partner (see Table 2). Factor A highlighted specific emotional states such as feeling safe, letting one's guard down, and trusting a partner in order to feel satisfied, signaling specific types of emotional security related to sexual satisfaction. In addition to endorsing masculinity, this factor also reported that feeling more feminine was not at all important. This was the only factor that positively endorsed having a same-sex partner as important to their satisfaction and perhaps not surprisingly, six of the seven participants included in this factor identified as LGBTQ, with a majority being male-identified individuals.

In the interview data, it was possible to more closely examine participants' descriptions of masculinity and how it related to sexual satisfaction. Descriptions

Table 2. Distinguishing statements for Factor A.

Factor A: Emotional and masculine	
Most or highly agree	Most or highly disagree
Sex is satisfying when I feel more masculine	Sex is satisfying when I feel more feminine
I have to feel safe during sex in order to feel sexually satisfied	I like to feel somewhat unsafe during sex
In order to feel sexually satisfied, I have to trust a partner during sex	Feeling physically satisfied is more important than feeling emotionally close with another person
I know sex is sexually satisfying when I let my guard down with another person	Feeling dominated by a partner during sex is important for me to feel sexually satisfied
The emotional closeness I feel to a partner is what makes sex satisfying for me	If I had to choose feeling loved or having an orgasm during sex, I would pick the orgasm
Having sex with a partner who is the same sex as me is most satisfying	

Note: Factor A ($n = 7$); female ($n = 1$); male ($n = 6$); LGBTQ ($n = 6$); heterosexual ($n = 1$).

included feeling “in control” of the sexual dynamic, feeling equal to a partner, and masculinity was often seen in opposition to femininity. Participants in Factor A described a definition of sexual satisfaction that emphasized being the more active, often insertive sexual partner, as well as being the one to initiate and pursue sexual partners. As one participant explained:

I definitely don't want to be the person that has to be the feminine person in a relationship, so I guess if the other person wants that, then it's not going to work out. I don't, I don't find it satisfying, in any sense of the word, to play, you know, the girl in the relationship [male, gay, 18 years old].

Aspects of emotional security prioritized by Factor A often included emotional connections to sexual partners that served to protect individuals from a partner's judgment and allowed for greater physical exploration during sexual encounters. The one female participant in this factor reported that her relationships with men often involved fears of judgment, while her sexual relationships with women allowed her to “let [herself] go” and as a result, she reported that sex was more satisfying when this was able to occur:

You need to be relaxed and like, really let your mind go and sort of climax to an orgasm, and I think that if you had that connection with somebody, you're not so much nervous, like, “oh my God, is he looking at me” or “oh, does he notice my flaws,” but more relaxed and enjoying the situation as a whole [female, bisexual, 22 years old].

In addition to enabling participants to relax, elements of emotional security allowed participants to explore aspects of eroticized aggression in sexual encounters. This element of being able to “let go” with a partner was elaborated in several interviews with LGBTQ male participants who described their sexual past as inhibited and often closeted; they described their adult sexuality as more “masculine” and often aggressive as a means to respond to this earlier time in their lives.

In short, Factor A highlighted the role of emotional security and being able to “let your guard down” as a *route* to sexual satisfaction (i.e. these things need to be in place in order for sex to feel satisfying). The elements of emotion in Factor A were less related to feeling close to a partner, but more about feeling able to explore oneself in a sexual environment that, for some, may have felt previously untrustworthy. These aspects of emotion differ from those seen in Factor B, described below.

Table 3. Distinguishing statements for Factor B.

Factor B: Relational and feminine	
Most or highly agree	Most or highly disagree
Sex is satisfying when I feel more feminine	Sex is satisfying when I feel more masculine
In order to feel sexually satisfied, I have to trust a partner during sex	I find it difficult to ask partners for things that would sexually satisfy me
In order to feel sexually satisfied, I have to be having sex within a monogamous relationship (you only have sex with each other)	I rarely feel sexually satisfied
After sexually activity is over, I know I am sexually satisfied when my body feels relaxed	I like to feel somewhat unsafe during sex
The emotional closeness I feel to a partner is what makes sex satisfying for me	
Sex is satisfying when I feel “merged” with someone	
In order for me to feel sexually satisfied, my partner has to feel satisfied	

Note: Factor B ($n = 9$); female ($n = 8$); male ($n = 1$); LGBTQ ($n = 4$); heterosexual ($n = 5$).

Factor B: Relational and feminine

Factor B’s sexual satisfaction definition reflected an emphasis on femininity (“Sex is satisfying when I feel more feminine”), monogamy, and feeling connected to a partner (see Table 3). In a reversal of Factor A, Factor B prioritized feeling feminine and ranked feeling masculine as not at all important. Eight of the nine participants included in this factor were women and four identified as LGBTQ. Factor B prioritized trust and emotional closeness, as well as sex within a monogamous relationship and agreed that feeling “merged” with a partner was important when evaluating their satisfaction, signaling that relational connections, as well as emotional ones, were important aspects of sexual satisfaction for this factor.

While Factor A highlighted the role of emotional closeness as a *route* to sexual satisfaction (i.e. these things need to be in place in order for sex to feel satisfying) in contrast, Factor B focused on emotional closeness as a satisfactory *outcome* of sex (i.e. I find the emotional closeness satisfying in and of itself). For example, a female participant exemplified Factor B when she described how she knew when she was satisfied: “It’s the whole connection with that person, like, sometimes you just want to be so close to them, the closest you can get is for like, for them to be inside you, literally” [female, heterosexual, 19 years old]. Another young woman commented on how emotional closeness added an essential element to a sexual encounter and she attributed this to being a woman: “I noticed, then, that being a woman . . . that I like to feel close with somebody more . . . Like sexual satisfaction is more about not just the actual activity . . . It’s kind of the connection with . . . the person and with yourself” [female, bisexual, 23 years old]. Both quotes illustrate that for this factor, an emotional connection was often regarded as the ultimate outcome of a sexual encounter.

The combination in this factor of emotional closeness with the prioritization of monogamy as a desired context for satisfaction and the prioritization of feeling merged with a partner shifts satisfaction in Factor B towards being relationally oriented. These relational investments were sometimes described as the ultimate outcome of a sexual encounter. Of note, this factor also agreed that they knew they were satisfied when their “body feels relaxed.” This highlighting of physical relaxation differs from the focus on orgasm seen in the next two factors.

Table 4. Distinguishing statements for Factor C.

Factor C: Partner focused	
Most or highly agree	Most or highly disagree
I find fulfilling a partner’s wishes most sexually satisfying	I usually rely on myself for my own sexual satisfaction
In order for me to feel sexually satisfied, my partner has to feel satisfied	Having sex with a partner who is the same sex as me is most satisfying
My orgasm is <i>less</i> important than the orgasm of the person I am having sex with	Feeling physically satisfied is more important than feeling emotionally close with another person
Having an orgasm is not at all important for me to feel sexually satisfied	If I had to choose feeling loved or having an orgasm during sex, I would pick the orgasm
I feel most sexually satisfied when I am able to forget my worries	My orgasm is <i>more</i> important than the orgasm of the person I am having sex with
I feel sexually satisfied when I know that I am fulfilling my duty as a partner	
The emotional closeness I feel to a partner is what makes sex satisfying for me	
I usually do not have an orgasm when I have sex with another person	

Note: Factor C ($n = 8$); female ($n = 3$); male ($n = 5$); LGBTQ ($n = 2$); heterosexual ($n = 6$).

Factor C: Partner focused

Factor C focused on several elements related to a partner's experience, including a partner's orgasm, the importance of fulfilling a partner's wishes, the role of emotional closeness, and the lack of importance of their own orgasm (see Table 4). While the other three factors included some elements of a partner's experience as important to their own sexual satisfaction, Factor C prioritized the greatest number of statements pertaining to a partner. In addition, this was the only factor to consistently background their own orgasm in relation to their satisfaction ("Having an orgasm is not at all important for me to feel sexually satisfied," "My orgasm is less important than the orgasm of the person I am having sex with") and reported low frequency of orgasm in partnered sex ("I don't usually have an orgasm when I have sex with another person"). Five of the eight participants included in this factor were men and six identified as heterosexual.

The interview data provided further insight into Factor C and two demographically different groups emerged during analysis: one group comprised of heterosexual men who described their own orgasm as consistent, but a focus on their partner offered a new form of sexual satisfaction; and a second group comprised of heterosexual women who described sexual histories that did not include orgasm and described their partners' satisfaction as central to their own.

Factor C included several descriptions from heterosexual men who described a developmental shift in which they discovered that female partners did not regularly orgasm. As a result, a new form of sexual satisfaction had emerged which included a focus on their female partners' sexual experience: "Two years ago . . . I would have been a little more selfish as well, just out of ignorance . . . I'd focus on my orgasm and not so much on hers not knowing that it's selfish to do something like that" [male, heterosexual, 18 years old]. The following quote elaborates a potential motivation for this consistent and primary focus on a partner:

I guess if she had an orgasm I feel like I've "done my job" per se . . . for me that's the best, the ultimate satisfaction or fulfillment, for me is if I don't have an orgasm, yet my partner does and then of course all of the aspects like everybody's happy and there was no fear . . . if those things happen, then that's usually the best because I walk away feel energized and happy and with a better connection with my partner and, so that would be the ideal I guess [male, heterosexual, 26 years old].

In comparison, all three female participants included in Factor C reported that they had never experienced orgasm. One female participant reported that, as a result, her sexual satisfaction came primarily from making sure her partner was satisfied:

Well, right now, like, I've never had an orgasm . . . I don't feel like it's important to me right now . . . I like to know that the person that I'm with that, like, they're satisfied.

You know, at least that they are having an orgasm and that I can satisfy whatever it is that they want [female, heterosexual, 19 years old].

The descriptions offered by female participants of their motivations for focusing on a partner differed from those provided by their male counterparts in Factor C. While the males included in this factor prioritized a partner's orgasm, they each described this focus as increasing their own satisfaction (an increase in energy, an emotional payoff) and that their orgasm happened elsewhere (during masturbation, for example) or would happen in the future. The young women, on the other hand, described a partner's satisfaction, and specifically a partners' orgasm, as a key indicator of their own sexual satisfaction. This differs from the other three factors and perhaps most clearly from Factor D described below.

Table 5. Distinguishing statements for Factor D.

Factor D: Orgasm focused	
Most or highly agree	Most or highly disagree
I feel sexually satisfied when I know that I am fulfilling my duty as a partner	In order to feel sexually satisfied, I have to be having sex within a monogamous relationship (you only have sex with each other)
After sexually activity is over, I know I am sexually satisfied when my genitals feel relaxed	I find it difficult to ask partners for things that would sexually satisfy me
In order to feel sexually satisfied, I have to have an orgasm	Having an orgasm is not at all important for me to feel sexually satisfied
I feel most sexually satisfied when I am able to forget my worries	
In order for me to feel sexually satisfied, my partner has to have an orgasm	
Sex where I can "check out" is the most satisfying	
After sexually activity is over, I know I am sexually satisfied when my body feels relaxed	

Note: Factor D ($n = 5$); female ($n = 1$); male ($n = 4$); LGBTQ ($n = 1$); Heterosexual ($n = 4$).

Factor D: Orgasm focused

Factor D focused on participants' orgasm, a partner's orgasm, aspects of cognitive rest ("I feel most sexually satisfied when I'm able to forget my worries"), as well as both bodily and genital relaxation (see Table 5). The emotional and relational elements of sexual satisfaction that were endorsed by Factors A, B, and C were present, but less prominent in Factor D. For example, Factor D highly ranked the importance of a partner's orgasm and "fulfilling [one's] duty as a partner." Four of the five participants included in this factor were men and four identified as heterosexual.

The most salient difference between Factor D and the three other factors was the prioritization of orgasm as essential to the definition of sexual satisfaction. While two of the other factors ranked bodily relaxation as highly important, Factor D was the only factor to rank orgasm as essential (“In order to feel sexually satisfied, I have to have an orgasm”). Interview data elaborated this perspective. One participant reported that while feeling close was nice, it was not necessary to feeling satisfied:

I mean orgasm is I guess important, and um, is the thing that you feel when you're most sexually satisfied. I guess... having a feeling of closeness with a partner, that might be important for some people, and feel cared about or something like that. That doesn't matter too much to [me]. It's nice to have, but I don't always need it [male, heterosexual, 23 years old].

Even without the relational dimensions prioritized by the other three factors, Factor D endorsed having a “sense of duty” related to their sexual satisfaction. One potential way of interpreting this sense of “fulfilling one's duty” can be seen in the following description of satisfaction being tied to an equal exchange between partners:

Well, having both partners be sexually satisfied is satisfying for me... I don't think there's a point to having sex if you don't satisfy somebody else. That's the main point, at least I feel of having sex. I know some people have sex so they can orgasm and leave, but you know I don't really like to do that myself... I guess that's what the word satisfaction means for me [male, heterosexual, 20 years old].

Factor D highlighted the role of orgasm, as well as other physical dimensions of satisfaction, such as feeling that one's body and genitals are relaxed. In addition, Factor D backgrounded several emotional elements seen in the other factors; however, the endorsement of “fulfilling [one's] duty as a partner” and the importance of a partner's orgasm still suggest a combination of self/other dynamics present in this factor's assessment of sexual satisfaction.

Discussion

The four profiles from this analysis coalesced around several dimensions of sexual satisfaction: two factors highlighted the role of *gender*, albeit it in oppositional ways (A and B); two factors highlighted the role of *orgasm*, although not necessarily for the self (C and D); two factors highlighted the role of *emotional and cognitive* elements of satisfaction (A and D); two factors focused on the *relational* dynamics with an intimate partner, although to varying degrees (B and C); and lastly, the *focal point* of a sexual encounter differed across all four factors and ranged from an exclusive focus on one's partner, to a greater focus on the self. Turning from the four factors, to a closer examination of the five dimensions found salient in this study (gender, orgasm, emotional/cognitive elements, relational dynamics, and focal point), we gain a better understanding of how these dimensions become foregrounded and backgrounded as individuals evaluate their sexual satisfaction.

Gender

The importance of feeling feminine or masculine was found in two of the four factors. While the centrality of gender to sexual satisfaction has been previously explored, researchers have often focused on gender ideals and gender norm conformity (Horne and Bliss, 2009; Sanchez and Crocker, 2005; Sanchez et al., 2012) rather than positive or satisfying aspects of femininity and masculinity. For example, Sanchez et al. (2005) examined individuals' conformity to gender ideals (the "ideal woman" or "ideal man") and found that investment in gender conformity predicted lower sexual satisfaction. The current study adds a somewhat different piece to this story, specifically, the ways that femininity and masculinity provided eroticized elements which contributed to individuals' sexual satisfaction, rather than merely interrupting or diminishing it. This does not mean that gender ideals did not contribute negative aspects to participants' sexual lives; however, the current study's findings indicate that the experience of feeling more feminine or more masculine may be open for erotic (and satisfying) possibilities.

Individuals in this study not only reported the centrality of femininity and masculinity, but also placed them in opposition to one another, indicating a heteronormative organization of gender such that femininity and masculinity were interpreted as mutually exclusive—of note, this was noted in both same-sex and other-sex relationships. In addition, there was a trend of men and women endorsing masculinity and femininity in alignment with their self-identified gender (i.e. men in Factor A endorsed masculinity and women in Factor B endorsed femininity). However, looking at the demographic details of Factors A and B, more details emerge: masculinity was endorsed largely by gay, bisexual, and queer men in Factor A; femininity was endorsed by heterosexual, as well as lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in Factor B. These demographic patterns raise questions about the ways that gender enactment may hold erotic and satisfying potential, particularly for sexual minority men (Schippers, 2007) and for women, regardless of sexual minority status (Sanchez et al., 2006). The relationships between femininity, masculinity, and sexual satisfaction are an area ripe for future research, as is more in-depth examination of how individuals imagine the ways that these affect sexual encounters (Impett et al., 2006).

Orgasm

While orgasm is often assumed to be central to satisfaction (Barrientos and Páez, 2006), others argue that this focus on orgasm is a short-sighted, outcome-driven model that favors some experiences and elides others (Frith, 2013a; Holmberg and Blair, 2009; Potts, 2000). The current study sheds further light on this issue: orgasm was important to some, although not equally weighted by all the factors. It appears not to be a viable proxy for sexual satisfaction since participants weighted the importance of orgasm very differently and orgasm was not always central to satisfaction decisions.

In addition, it is essential to consider who consistently feels entitled to orgasm as a regular aspect of sexual encounters (Frith, 2013a; Opperman et al., 2013; Potts, 2000). Feminist researchers have increasingly focused on critically reading the role of orgasm in maintaining patriarchal privilege in heterosexual sexual encounters (Fahs, 2011a, 2011b; Jackson and Scott, 2007; Nicolson and Burr, 2003; Opperman et al., 2013). For example, Factor C's foregrounding of a partner's orgasm echoes feminist research which has described orgasm as embedded in a "gift commodity" (Fahs, 2011b; Nicolson and Burr, 2003), exemplified by the participant who described that if his partner had an orgasm, he would feel like he had "done his job." Descriptions such as these alert us to the conditions under which a focus on a partner's orgasm is motivated by gender, pleasure, a sense of duty, exchange value (in the world or the relationship), or a combination of these factors.

Emotional and relational dynamics

While emotional and relational elements were important across the four factors, including emotional, relational, and cognitive aspects of sexual satisfaction, there were two basic patterns: psychological dynamics *within the self* and relational dynamics *with a partner*.

Dynamics within the self. All four factors revealed the role of individuals' psychological states as central to their sexual satisfaction. Elements such as being able to "check out," feel safe, or forget one's worries were consistently ranked as important and suggest the importance of psychological elements of sexual satisfaction that have often been left out of most definitions. Different than dyadic elements, these cognitive elements highlight the ways that internal experiences are important aspects of satisfaction appraisals. This also suggests the role of "cognitive rest" as an element of sexual satisfaction (Purdon and Holdaway, 2006). This pattern of findings suggests that sexual satisfaction is not limited to dyadic interactions and dimensions, nor is satisfaction only about physical sensations, but contains elements concerning individuals' internal cognitive experiences.

Dynamics with a partner. Dynamics with a partner included elements of emotional connection, trusting a partner, and wanting to feel "merged" with a partner. Three of the four factors (A, B, and C) prioritized emotional closeness when evaluating their satisfaction, which mirrors previous research on the role of emotional connections in predicting sexual satisfaction (Colson et al., 2006; Simms and Byers, 2009). However, findings from the current study also offer a more nuanced understanding of the role of "emotional satisfaction" (Carpenter et al., 2009; Waite and Joyner, 2001), as well as "emotional connection" and "emotional pleasure" with a partner (e.g., Laumann et al., 1994). Two themes in particular stood out: Factor A highlighted the role of emotional security, letting one's guard down, feeling safe, and other relational elements as *routes* to satisfaction; on the other hand, Factor B highlighted feeling "merged," monogamous, and trusting a partner as satisfactory *outcomes*. These insights offer a more complex picture of the ways that emotional

closeness with a partner can influence feeling sexually satisfied and highlight potentially gendered ways that emotions are interpreted in sexual satisfaction appraisals.

Focal point. The focal point (i.e. who is imagined as the primary benefactor in a sexual encounter) was a distinguishing characteristic for one factor in particular (C), but was highlighted in all four factors. Findings from the current study expand previous research on how individuals' satisfaction may be determined by achieving one's own goals, doing something for one's partner, and/or some combination of these (Štulhofer et al., 2010). Canevello and Crocker (2011), for example, theorized the role of "compassionate goals" in close relationships and found that a focus on others' needs and well-being lead to positive relationships and increased mental health. Other researchers have found that an exclusive focus on the self, or "sexual narcissism," is associated with lower sexual satisfaction (McNulty and Widman, 2013). The current study found that individuals varyingly focused on themselves and a partner – indicating that the focal point of sexual encounters should not be assumed to be the individual. Future researchers would be advised to consider a wider range of self/other dynamics when evaluating sexual satisfaction. In addition, it is essential to pay close attention to the gendered aspects of attending to self and other, as women have been found to attend to male partners more than the reverse (McClelland, 2011; Sanchez et al., 2005, 2012).

Study limitations. Given that the aim of the current study was not to generalize its findings to the larger population, sample limitations are important, but different than studies that aim for generalizability. Findings in the current study may be due to the young age of the sample, the limited number of relationships that 18–28 year olds have had, the urban setting in which the data were collected, as well as cohort-related issues (Carpenter et al., 2009). While the participants were diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and sexual identity, other influential demographic characteristics may have been overlooked. Perhaps most importantly, the 63 statements may have missed important dimensions that future researchers are encouraged to further develop.

Conclusion

This study both replicated and extended prior research on sexual satisfaction. In alignment with prior research, orgasm was found to be an important component for some, but not all (Frith, 2013b); a distinction between focusing on oneself and a partner was found to be an important component (Štulhofer et al., 2010); and the role of emotional closeness was important for most, but not all (Peplau, 2003). In addition, several new dimensions emerged as important: femininity and masculinity were found to signal satisfying sexual dynamics; aspects of bodily and genital relaxation were found to be components to consider alongside (or in addition to) orgasm; emotional security, as opposed to simply emotional closeness, was found to be important as a means to allow for emergent experiences; emotional closeness was found to be both a route to satisfying sex as well as an outcome of satisfying sex, signaling that this dimension is far more complex than previously considered; and lastly, individual, in addition to dyadic,

cognitive dimensions were found to be important, signaling how sexual satisfaction is not limited to dyadic experiences.

Across all of these dimensions, aspects of gender and sexual minority status impacted how individuals described what was important to them when evaluating their sexual satisfaction. This study offers insight into the ways that sexual norms shape what individuals feel entitled to want, and subsequently, to feel satisfied by. If researchers want to include measures of sexual satisfaction as covariates or as outcomes in research designs, these findings indicate a need for more complex assessments than simply *how much* or *how often* someone is satisfied. Because of the socio-political contexts of sexual experiences and attitudes, feminist theory and methods are necessary tools to guide this research. Looking ahead, researchers are encouraged to examine how entitled individuals feel to experiences such as sexual satisfaction as a means to better understand what people mean when they say that they are sexually satisfied.

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