

**Let's Talk About Sex:
Sexual Ethics, Agency, and Justice Beyond Consent**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation is about sexual pleasure and good, ethical sex. It is also about the ways women's pleasure is routinely marginalized in (cis)heterosex, and the gendered and heteronormative social norms and scripts that lead to such routine marginalization. Through the lens of pleasure, this dissertation highlights dimensions of sexual ethics, sexual agency, and sexual (in)justice that are often overlooked in philosophical conversations dominated by the concept of consent.

Chapter 1 concerns the “pleasure gap”: the fact that in (cis)heterosex women report experiencing significantly less pleasure than men report (and significantly less pleasure than women having queer or non (cis)heterosex). I examine how the pleasure gap has been socially misunderstood and miscast as a “women's problem” in ways which essentialize and pathologize women's sexuality. I argue that pleasure gap is a social-structural problem, a phenomena arising out of the fact that the practice of (cis)heterosex is structured by social norms and expectations that reliably and routinely lead to the marginalization of women's pleasure.

Chapter 2 examines how *social scripts* for (cis)heterosex shape women's relationships to sexual pleasure. I suggest that the culturally dominant script for (cis)heterosex both constrains women's sexual agency, and plays a role in producing women as particular kinds of sexual agents and subjects who relate to pleasure in (cis)heterosex primarily as something to perform and provide rather than pursue or experience. As such, we must understand the script as productive as well as repressive with respect to women's sexuality in the context of (cis)heterosex.

Chapter 3 pivots to focus on good, robustly ethical sex. I introduce the *reciprocal self-regulation* model of sexual agency to describe how sexual partners co-determine the nature and content of their shared sexual experiences. I introduce this model as a means of thinking about what is actually involved in good, ethical sex and in sexual “flow”, and as an alternative to “ongoing enthusiastic” consent models which are increasingly and, I think, mistakenly cast as a new standard not only for permissible sex but also for sex that is robustly ethical and pleasurable.

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To teenage girls everywhere - know that you deserve pleasure, joy, and justice in whatever intimate lives you choose to have.

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Introduction

This dissertation is about sexual pleasure, sexual enjoyment, and good, ethical sex. It is also about the ways women's pleasure and enjoyment are routinely marginalized in cis-heterosex (sex involving a cisgender man and a cisgender woman¹). I'm interested in what sexual pleasure and enjoyment (and their absence) can tell us about ethical sex, sexual (in)justice, and the exercise of sexual agency. I think there are two interconnected reasons focusing on pleasure and enjoyment can be helpful in illuminating these issues. First, sexual pleasure arguably constitutes a kind of *ethical good* (Morton 2019, 19), something that can add meaning and value to human lives. Second, pleasure is, to quote Adrienne Maree Brown (2019), "a measure of freedom" (3). Who gets to experience pleasure and who is denied it, who is thought deserving of pleasure and who isn't, whose pleasure is valued and whose is degraded or commodified: these are all questions concerning social oppression, personal freedom, and interpersonal and social power. As such, thinking about sexual pleasure - thinking about who experiences pleasure in sex and who doesn't, and thinking about what goes on in sex that *is* pleasurable or enjoyable for all involved - can tell us something about sexual agency, sexual ethics, and sexual (in)justice. In particular, the lens of pleasure and enjoyment can, I think, reveal and illuminate dimensions of these issues and the routine marginalization and subordination of women's experiences in "normal" cis-heterosex that have escaped attention in much mainstream philosophy (and in social discourse more broadly).

¹ Many feminists have used the term "heterosex" to refer to sex, usually heteronormative sex, between a man and a woman. In this dissertation, I use the term "cis-heterosex" to refer to sex between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman. I make this qualification for two reasons: 1. The heterosex I'm discussing tends to be both cisnormative and heteronormative: social expectations and norms for heterosex, and the scripts for heterosex, tend to presuppose that the men and women having sex will be cisgender, and trans bodies and experiences often don't conform to these expectations, norms, and scripts. 2. One of my main concerns in this dissertation is the fact that cis-women report significantly less pleasure during the sex they have with cis-men than cis-men report during the sex they have with cis-women. Data exploring trans sex is significantly less abundant than that for cis-heterosex, but the data that does exist suggests that in sex between a trans man and a cis-woman, or a trans woman and a cis-man, or a trans woman and a trans man, women's pleasure tends to fare better than it does in cis-heterosex. Distinguishing clearly between heterosex that involves cis-gendered people and heterosexual sex involving one or more trans persons is, as such, important here.

We, within philosophy and without, tend to view sexual ethics, sexual (in)justice, and sexual agency primarily through the lens of consent. In recent decades, much philosophical ink has been spilled debating what constitutes genuine sexual consent and how sexual consent connects to sexual agency and autonomy (see e.g. Bromwich & Millum 2018; Dougherty 2013; Wertheimer 2003; and Westen 2004). Feminist philosophers have long been interested in women's refusal of sex and the ways the social world makes it very difficult for women to successfully refuse sex (or makes men not take women's refusals seriously) and so interferes with possibilities of genuine consent (see e.g. Hesni 2018; Hornsby & Langton 1998). In social discourse more broadly conversations about sexual consent are also becoming more prevalent, especially since the beginnings of the #metoo movement: college campuses across America increasingly promote various forms of consent education (see e.g. Nash 2019), some governments have released consent educational videos to inform the public², and educational videos about sexual consent have gone viral on social media (Fischel 2019, 12).

These conversations and debates about sexual consent and refusal are, no doubt, deeply important as we continue to work to understand and address the still overwhelming amount of sexual assault and routine sexual violence towards women. But, as some philosophers (and academics from other disciplines) have recently argued, the tendency to center consent can limit us and distort our thinking in recognizing and understanding sexual ethics, sexual agency, and sexual (in)justice more broadly. Quill Kukla (2018) (writing as Rebecca Kukla) has argued that the “near-exclusive” focus on consent and refusal in mainstream philosophy obscures that “sexual negotiation” is an important dimension of sexual communication and exercise of sexual agency. Ann Cahill (2014, 2016), building on the work of psychologist Nicola Garvey, has focused on “unjust sex” - sex wherein one partner's (in heterosexual, typically the man partner's) agency and desires predominate in shaping the sexual encounter, while the other partner's (typically the woman's) agency and desires aren't, or aren't enabled to be, effective in the same way. Even though unjust sex may be consensual, it clearly still involves the subordination of women's desires

² See e.g. N. Zhou, “‘Confusing’ milkshake consent video pulled from campaign that cost Australian government \$3.8m.,” *Guardian Australia*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/apr/20/milkshake-video-sexual-consent-education-campaign-cost-australian-government-38m>

and experiences in favor of men's. Joseph Fischel (2019) argues that the extreme focus on consent can "obscure, rather than clarify, what is wrong about wrongful sex" (22). Jenifer Nash (2019) argues that we too hastily and mistakenly frame consent as the sexual ethic that "can produce sex as a territory free of violence" (198).

I agree with many of these arguments. One effect of the "near-exclusive" focus on consent that I wish to highlight in particular (and one that has motivated much of this dissertation) is that we rarely talk about *sex itself*. In addition to being about sexual pleasure and enjoyment (and their absence), this dissertation is also about how we talk and think about - and how we fail to think and talk about - sex. Within mainstream philosophy and academia, and in mainstream social discourse more broadly, when we talk about sexual ethics, agency, or (in)justice we mostly talk about sexual consent and sexual refusal. We talk about the conditions under which sex occurs, and about initiating or stopping sex. But we don't talk about the details of sex itself. We rarely talk about some of (what I think are) the most important aspects of sexual interactions, like the fact that sex can involve pleasure and/or pain and the fact that cis-heterosex more often involves pleasure for men and (unwanted) pain for women, the fact that gender norms and social scripts influence how people interact sexually and what they do in sex, or the fact that consensual sex can itself be more or less agential, more or less enjoyable, more or less alienating, and more or less one-sided. We rarely talk about sex itself directly or in any detail, about the "heaving body" (Tolman et al. 2014, 777) in sexual action and expression, about the ways one can be more or less estranged from one's body in sex, about the actions we take to be constitutive of "sex", or about the ways cis-heterosex can differ from non cis-heterosex³. One of my broad aims in this dissertation is to show that these dimensions of sex and this kind of detail can *matter* and can be relevant to understanding how the practice of sex can be more or less ethical, how people can exercise robust sexual agency, and the myriad ways sex can be a site of harm and injustice (even when it is consensual), as well as the ways it can be a site of robust agency and joy.

³ While some disciplines other than philosophy (like sexology, for example) might be more likely to talk about sex itself in detail, other disciplines we might expect to be more direct in talking about sex are also reticent to do so: according to queer theorist Michael O'Rourke (2014), even queer theory involves a deficit of actually talking about sex in detail (1).

This dissertation comprises 3 chapters. Chapter 1, “The Pleasure Gap and the Structure of (cis-hetero) Sex”, focuses on *the pleasure gap*: the fact that in cis-heterosex women report experiencing significantly less pleasure than men report (and significantly less pleasure than women having woman-woman or otherwise non cis-heterosex). I examine two ways the pleasure gap has been accounted for in popular discourse: 1. *Essentialist explanations*, which explain the pleasure gap by appealing to the idea that women just aren’t sexual beings in the way men are or hold that women are just “hard to please”; and, 2. *Pathologizing explanations* which explain the pleasure gap in terms of sexual dysfunction disorders requiring medical or psychological intervention. I argue that both explanations are inadequate as neither can account for the fact that the pleasure gap disappears in non cis-heterosex, and that their inadequacy stems from a set of presuppositions about sex which lead them to immediately frame women as the problem in the pleasure gap and neglect to consider that the *sex* associated with the pleasure gap - cis-heterosex - might itself be the problem. These presuppositions are 1. That “sex” *just is* cis-heterosex; 2. That what “sex” involves is obvious, and 3. That sex is inherently or normally enjoyable. This set of presuppositions leads each approach to treat sex as a kind of fixed or given activity, as something inapt for questioning or critique, such that women appear to be the only variable in explaining the pleasure gap. But looking critically at cis-heterosex reveals that it, as a social practice, is structured by norms and expectations which routinely and predictably lead to the marginalization of women’s pleasure. The marginalization of women’s pleasure emerges as a *normal* part of cis-heterosex, not (just) in the sense that it occurs frequently, but in the sense that *it is the outcome of socially normative expectations or norms concerning what sex is and what it involves*. Recognizing this and detailing some of these norms and expectations gives us the beginnings of a *social-structural explanation* for the pleasure gap, against which the harms of essentialist and pathologizing approaches can be better apprehended.

In addition to illuminating some of the debates around the pleasure gap and defending the claim that a good explanation for the pleasure gap will be a social-structural one, this chapter highlights some of the dangers of *not* talking about sex, of treating sex as obvious, as an activity we don't need to explain or specify in any detail, or as a kind of fixed, unspoken phenomenon inapt for analysis.

Chapter 2, “Sex Scripts and the Marginalization of Women’s Pleasure”, hones in on two aspects of the pleasure gap - 1. the fact that women marginalize their own pleasure during cis-heterosex, and 2. The fact that women report being “satisfied” with sex that doesn’t prioritize or feature their pleasure. I provide a detailed social-structural explanation for these phenomena utilizing the concept of *social scripts*. “Scripts” are here understood as culturally shared and socially normative “blueprints” or templates for particular social interactions. *Sex* scripts can be understood as culturally shared, socially normative blueprints for *sexual* interactions. I argue that the dominant script for cis-heterosex itself marginalizes women’s pleasure, such that “normal” cis-heterosexual interactions don’t center women’s pleasure (or create a very narrow space for it to manifest, one which is incompatible with many cis-women’s needs, bodies, and experiences). For women, to behave “properly” and “normally” in sex, to hew to script, means prioritizing male enjoyment and pleasure and marginalizing their own.

This analysis raises some questions: why would women act in accord with this script when doing so requires them to marginalize their own pleasure? And why would they report being *satisfied* with the sex that results? Working from recent philosophical analyses of scripts (see e.g. Dougherty 2021 ms), I suggest that women might follow the script because they are motivated to coordinate with sexual partners, to behave “normally” in sex (so as to avoid social sanction or because they are invested in certain standards of normalcy), to avoid pejorative stereotyping (such as being labeled a “prude” or sexually dysfunctional), or to meet other obligations (like that of being a “good wife”). The script doesn’t offer a way for women to meet these goals and pursue pleasure, and because the pursuit of pleasure constitutes a deviation from the script, the pursuit of pleasure is often socially costly (or very difficult) for women. Given this, women might marginalize their own pleasure because the script constrains their agency: the script makes it such that there is no, or no easy or cost-free, way for women to pursue their own pleasure in cis-heterosex.

However, while I think that this kind of analysis illuminates some cases of why people follow scripts which disadvantage them, it doesn’t illuminate why women would be *satisfied* with sex in which their pleasure is marginalized. To explore this issue, I examine how women *internalize* the script. I give an account of script internalization that highlights the ways the script shapes and

informs sexual agency and sexual subjectivity (the sense one has of oneself as a sexual being). Because the script (with its gendered roles) is internalized in these ways, it informs how women relate to pleasure and how pleasure figures in women's understandings of themselves within the context of cis-heterosex. Many women come to relate to pleasure not as something for them to pursue or experience in cis-heterosex but as something to *perform and provide*, because they have internalized the script and the role it assigns them. Thus the script doesn't *just* constrain women's agency in the pursuit of pleasure; it also plays a role in *constituting* women as particular kinds of sexual subjects and agents who relate to pleasure in particular ways. This illuminates why women would report being satisfied with sex in which they marginalize their own pleasure (and in which their pleasure is marginalized more generally). It also helps us paint a more complete picture of how the script works, how it works *on* us, and why women might follow it: women following the script won't always be a consequence of their agency being constrained, but will sometimes be a feature of how women discipline and regulate themselves to conform to a culturally learned role in cis-heterosex which undergirds their own senses of themselves as sexual agents and subjects in relation to the practice of cis-heterosex.

In the third and final chapter, "Sexual Agency, Consent, and Good, Ethical Sex", I shift from examining the ways sex can involve the marginalization of women's pleasure to considering the kind of sex we might describe as robustly ethical and good. I aim to understand the kind of agency involved in good, ethical sex. Against views which frame the interactive sexual agency in good, ethical sex primarily in terms of consent, I introduce the *reciprocal self-regulation* model of sexual agency for thinking about robustly ethical engagement throughout sex. The reciprocal self-regulation model describes how, in "good, ethical sex", partners engage with and respond to one another, enabling each other to shape, in an ongoing way, the nature and the content of their sexual encounter such that they *co-determine* the sex they have together. The model reflects and centers the fact that during good, ethical sex, sexual partners are mutually responsive and interdependently motivated.

The reciprocal self-regulation model aims to capture and extend the feminist recognition that consent, even models of "ongoing, enthusiastic consent", cannot do the work of ensuring sex is enjoyable and robustly ethical, and that the near-exclusive focus on consent in social and

academic conversations concerning sexual ethics and sexual agency distorts and obscures recognition of the ways partners can, and often *do*, co-determine good, ethical sexual experiences (see Alcoff 2018, Kukla 2018). I argue that, unlike consent models, the reciprocal self-regulation model recognizes the centrality of “intersubjective attunement” (Alcoff 2018, 128) in good, ethical sex and accords with with what we experience as valuable in sex. I illustrate this by showing how the reciprocal self-regulation model can accommodate and partially account for the fact that sex (sometimes) involves what I will be calling *sexual flow* - positive states of altered consciousness in which persons experience elation, ease, and a sense of losing oneself in the moment.

Two notes before beginning. First, as might be expected by this point, in this dissertation I sometimes write directly and in detail about sex. There are risks in doing so, namely being dismissed as being unnecessarily pornographic, or alienating readers who might, for any number of reasons, rather not read about sex in detail. I think focusing on sex and writing about it in some detail is both methodologically and politically important: often (within philosophy and without), when we write about sex the word “sex” is used without specification, as if we all know exactly what is being talked about or as if the details don’t matter. I’ve suggested above that within this detail there is much to learn about sexual agency, ethics, and (in)justice, and I hope this dissertation shows the value of focusing on sex and writing about in detail. However, I acknowledge that talking about sex in detail can be confronting, and I want to give readers fair warning of what lies ahead.

Second, this dissertation has developed alongside work and study I have been doing in sex education. While this dissertation aims at illuminating philosophically important issues connected to sex, I am, ultimately, hoping that doing so can enable richer understandings of sexual ethics, sexual agency, and sexual injustice which can aid efforts to theorize about *and* work and advocate for a society that isn’t just free from sexual violence, but is also one in which all people are better able to exercise substantive agency in their intimate lives and better able to access the ethical goods the sexual domain can offer.

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1. The Pleasure Gap and the Structure of (cis-hetero) Sex

Introduction

Women report that they experience significantly lower rates of sexual pleasure and enjoyment during sex than men report⁴. This phenomenon is termed *the pleasure gap*, and it pertains specifically to cis-heterosex - women who have woman-woman or other forms of non cis-heterosex generally report high levels of sexual pleasure and enjoyment. How might we explain the pleasure gap? Within the discourse surrounding the pleasure gap, there are two popular kinds of explanation: 1. Explanations which account for the the pleasure gap by appealing to the idea that women just aren't sexual beings in the way men are or hold that women are just "hard to please"; and, 2. Explanations which account for the pleasure gap in terms of sexual dysfunction disorders requiring medical or psychological intervention. I call these *essentialist explanations* and *pathologizing explanations* respectively. Upon examination, both essentialist and pathologizing explanations seem pretty clearly inadequate: neither can generalize in the right way because neither can account for (nor are they even compatible with) the fact that the pleasure gap is widespread in cis-heterosex but disappears in non cis-heterosex. Yet, these explanations persist and carry social influence. Pathologizing explanations, in particular, are socially and institutionally authoritative.

My aims in this chapter are twofold. My first aim is to understand what underlies this explanatory inadequacy, to understand exactly where and why essentialist and pathologizing explanations for the pleasure gap go wrong. I argue that both explanations proceed from a set of presuppositions

⁴ Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation refer to data collected within the last 30 years in the United States, and the social-structural and script analyses I present in these chapters ought to be situated in a specific cultural context: the United States in the early 21st century. While I hope my more general arguments concerning scripts and sexual ideology are applicable to cases outside of this context, it is important to emphasize that these chapters concern certain dimensions of women's experiences of sex and sexuality occurring in a particular social context at a particular historical time.

about sex which lead them to prematurely and wrongly cast women as the “problem” in the pleasure gap and to fail to look critically at the *sex* associated with the pleasure gap (cis-heterosex) or consider whether it might be the problem. I suggest that both explanations presuppose 1. That “sex” *just is* cis-heterosex; 2. That what “sex” involves is obvious, and 3. That sex is inherently or normally enjoyable. This set of presuppositions leads each approach to treat sex as a kind of fixed or given activity, as something inapt for questioning or critique, such that both approaches direct their critical focus onto the women who aren’t enjoying (cis-hetero) sex. As such, neither approach asks or answers the question of why the pleasure gap is a feature of cis-heterosex but *not* non cis-heterosex.

My second aim is to show that a good explanation for the pleasure gap will be a social explanation, specifically, a kind of *social-structural* explanation. Attending to the fact that the pleasure gap is widespread in cis-heterosex but disappears in non cis-heterosex ought to prompt us to interrogate cis-heterosex itself. Building on feminist analyses of cis-heterosex, I argue that cis-heterosex is a social practice structured by culturally shared norms and expectations concerning what sex is and what it involves which routinely and predictably lead to the marginalization of women’s enjoyment and pleasure. These norms and expectations are obscured by the presuppositions made by essentialist and pathologizing approaches, but, dispensing with these presuppositions we see that the marginalization of women’s sexual enjoyment and pleasure emerges as a *normal* part of cis-heterosex, not (just) in the sense that it is a frequent occurrence in cis-heterosex, but in the sense that *it is the predictable outcome of socially normative expectations concerning what sex is and what it involves*. The pleasure gap reflects the reality that “normal” cis-heterosex neglects or isn’t compatible with real possibilities for women’s pleasure and enjoyment. This is the reality we must contend with if we are to more completely understand the pleasure gap (and ameliorate it), and it is a reality we are ill-equipped to perceive or understand if we proceed from a set of presuppositions which directs our critical attention away from sex itself.

Why is understanding the pleasure gap and the ways it is socially (mis)understood important or philosophically interesting? The phenomenon of the pleasure gap has been gaining significant popular media attention in the U.S. (and some places besides) over the last several

years. Essentialist and pathologizing explanations for the pleasure gap have become popular, and they can produce significant harm. I discuss these harms further in section VII, but, in brief, both kinds of explanations reflect and uphold a culture which limits women's sexual agency and marginalizes women's experiences of sex. Given that essentialist and pathologizing explanations are harmful yet popular, it is important to understand how they work - what they presuppose, what implicit claims they operate on the basis of, and what they effectively say about women, sex, and pleasure. This can help us better understand the harms of these approaches and can illuminate where and how we might challenge them. Examining the issue of the pleasure gap and the ways it has been socially (mis)understood can also illuminate some of the more subtle ways heteronormative and gendered sexual ideology functions. In particular, it highlights that "normal" cis-heterosex (including cis-heterosex that is free from coercion and/or violence) still often involves the limitation of women's agency and the marginalization of women's experiences, and that the dismissal, delegitimization, and misdiagnosis of women's experiences of sex is still normalized and widespread.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I detail key data about the pleasure gap (section I), describe essentialist and pathologizing explanations (section II), and show that both explanations are inadequate (section III). I then turn to a closer analysis of essentialist and pathologizing explanations to see where and why they go wrong. In section IV, I consider what makes for a good explanation and how explanatory attempts can fail. In particular, I consider how certain presuppositions can lead inquirers to formulate questions which cannot adequately probe whatever issue is at hand and which direct focus away from important information pertaining to that issue. With this account in place, in section V I analyze essentialist and pathologizing explanations for the pleasure gap. I argue that both explanations proceed from a set of presuppositions about sex which lead them to fail to recognize that the main variable associated with the pleasure gap is cis-heterosex itself. As such, neither approach critically investigates cis-heterosex itself, and neither can account for the fact that pleasure gap is widespread in cis-heterosex and not in non cis-heterosex. In section VI, I show how dispensing with the presuppositions guiding essentialist and pathologizing approaches enables us to critically investigate the social norms and expectations structuring cis-heterosex. I argue that these norms and expectations routinely lead to the marginalization of women's pleasure. Recognizing them,

we get a better and more empirically adequate explanation for the pleasure gap: “normal” cis-heterosex sex marginalizes women’s pleasure and enjoyment. Finally, in section VII, I consider some upshots of my arguments. In particular, I consider how my arguments illuminate some of the harms of essentialist and pathologizing approaches to the pleasure gap, and how they also reveal the deficiencies of overly individualistic responses and “solutions” to the pleasure gap.

I. The Pleasure Gap

Over the last decade there have been numerous studies into sexual satisfaction and enjoyment. Many of these indicate that significant percentages of cis-women who have sex with cis-men don’t experience pleasure during sex, don’t enjoy the sex they have at all, or are dissatisfied with the sex they have in significant respects. The statistics vary depending on the study and the specific population studied, but they reveal a similar trend. Approximately 30% of cis-women having (vaginal) sex with cis-men frequently experience (unwanted) pain during sex (the percentage increases to 72% when anal sex is considered, see Herbenick et al. 2015). Cis-women who have sex with cis-men report orgasming 39-63% of the time (depending on a range of factors, like the sex partner being new or established, or the sex being casual) compared to men’s reported steady 95% orgasm rate (interestingly, there also seems to be a “perception gap” in that men report that the women they have sex with orgasm at a much higher rate than the women report for themselves) (Mintz 2015). Although orgasm has been found to be “the single most important predictor of women’s sexual satisfaction” (Rowland 2020, 54), orgasm isn’t the only indicator of enjoyable sex and it does not guarantee sexual enjoyment: chasing orgasm can make sex too goal oriented to be enjoyable for many people; moreover, it is important to recognize that someone can experience the physiological response of orgasm without finding it or the sexual experience as a whole enjoyable⁵ (see Nagoski 2015, ch. 6). But the “orgasm gap” and the prevalence of sexual pain is reflective of the broader “pleasure gap” - the fact that cis-women

⁵ Relatedly, and as Emily Nagoski explains, many cis-women experience what has been termed “arousal non-concordance” - a state where they subjectively don’t experience or register arousal, but undergo bodily responses typically associated with arousal, such as increased vaginal lubrication and blood flow. Nagoski argues that rather than taking this data to indicate that women don’t know when they’re “really” aroused (as some researchers have done), we should affirm women’s subjective experience of a sexual event rather than infer that she must have enjoyed it (or implicitly consented to it) because of the ways her body responded (see Nagoski, ch. 6).

having sex with cis-men generally report less pleasure and enjoyment than cis-men report (and less pleasure and enjoyment than other demographics report) during sex.

Of course, pleasure isn't everything in having enjoyable sexual experiences, and some people may enjoy sex for the opportunities for intimacy, self-expression, experimentation, or whatever else it can afford while not necessarily getting anything much in terms of sexual pleasure from the experience (or even while experiencing physical discomfort). But pleasure is an important predictor and dimension of over-all sexual enjoyment, and it is significant that it is so absent in cis-heterosex for women and teenage girls. Many women and girls who report that they value or enjoy the sex they have for intimacy or other reasons still report not enjoying it *in significant respects*, i.e., finding it painful or not finding it pleasurable (Orenstein 2017, 59). While these studies aren't exhaustive of all the sex cis-women (and teen girls) have with cis-men (and teen boys), in all times and all places, they do point to real trends about the reality of "normal" cis-heterosex, trends which begin with early teenage experiences and persist throughout adulthood and relationships⁶.

Studies into sexual satisfaction and enjoyment for LGBTQ+ people, queer sex, or non cis-heterosex are fewer in number than those into cis-men and cis-women having hetero-sex. The research that has been done, however, highlights that while LGBTQ+ people, especially teens and young adults, contend with complexities navigating non-normative identities, interests, sexual activity, and embodiments that cis and heterosexual women and men don't experience (at least not in the same way or to the same degree), the pleasure gap and the related trends accompanying cis-heterosex are smoothed out or negated in much LGBTQ+ sex. The orgasm and more general pleasure gap seem to disappear in sex between two (or, presumably, more) women (cis or trans), for example, and queer teens report higher levels of enjoyment, pleasure,

⁶ Although the data confirming the existence of the pleasure gap is quite extensive, there are some studies into sexual satisfaction in which women are seen to report similar levels of sexual satisfaction to men. Psychologist Sara McClelland conducted further research to understand what the term "satisfaction" signified for women and men (see McClelland, 2014, 2010). She found that for women sexual satisfaction meant sex that didn't involve too much pain and that was enjoyable to their partners; for men sexual satisfaction meant their own physical pleasure and orgasm. This indicates that the pleasure gap can be present even in sex where women report satisfaction. I discuss why and what it means that women accept such paltry terms for sexual satisfaction in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

and a greater sense of freedom and agency in the sex they have (Mintz 2015; Orenstein 2020, 93, 102 Rowland 2020, 13-14). In fact, sometimes the term “the pleasure gap” is taken to refer to the fact that women having cis-heterosex report significantly less pleasure and enjoyment than women who have non cis-heterosex (rather than to the gap in pleasure between men and women having cis-heterosex; sometimes the “gap” also refers to the fact that women orgasm much more frequently from masturbation than they do in cis-heterosex (Mintz 2015)). As such, the pleasure gap is understood as a phenomenon pertaining to cis-heterosex specifically.

II. Explaining the Pleasure Gap: Gender Essentialism and Pathologization

If we want to explain the pleasure gap, what question might we start with? A first attempt at a question might be something like:

- 1) Why do such high percentages of (cis) women not enjoy (cis-hetero) sex?⁷

Two popular answers to this question circulate in the mainstream discourse surrounding the pleasure gap⁸. Throughout this chapter, I refer to these as 1. *essentialist explanations*, and 2. *pathologizing explanations*.

⁷ I put “cis” in parentheses here to indicate the fact that in mainstream discourse about the pleasure gap, this question is usually asked about “women” without explicit recognition of the fact that it is generally only cis-women being talked about. While I think that the pleasure gap reflects broader cultural norms and scripts concerning sex which likely also have a negative impact on trans women’s possibilities for sexual enjoyment (indeed, on everyone’s possibilities sexual enjoyment) the research into trans women's sexual enjoyment and satisfaction is relatively scarce and I, unfortunately, do not have the space to investigate these important issues in this dissertation. Similarly, “cis-hetero-” is in parentheses here because a lot of the discourse surrounding the pleasure gap, particularly in essentialist and pathologizing approaches, frames it as an issue of women not enjoying *sex* rather than specifying that it is cis-heterosex in question. See section V for more detail.

⁸ The pleasure gap is the subject of a lot of sensationalist media and public internet discussions, as well as being a topic academics, especially medical and psychology researchers, are interested in. The two kinds of explanation I discuss in this chapter are the kinds of popular explanation that appear in online spaces and in some academic research.

Essentialist Explanations:

Women don't enjoy sex because *that's just what women are like*. Women are, compared to men, generally naturally sexless, or they value sex less and get less out of it than men, so of course they don't enjoy sex (at least not as much or in the same way that men do).

Another, more subtle, variant is:

Women are just hard to please; they're sexually *complicated* (more-so than men).

These kind of explanations and the general idea that “women are not as libidinous, or desirous, or pleasure seeking as men” have been common in academic research on women's sexuality throughout history (Rowland 2020, 37). Despite the fact that this form of gender essentialism has faced fierce critique, it still has a lot of social traction: some sexuality professionals and therapists still endorse and dispense advice with reference to these kind of claims (see e.g. Potts' 2002 Ch. 2 for a discussion of “self-proclaimed sexpert” John Gray's essentialist sex self-help book: “Men are from Mars, Woman are from Venus”) and research shows that many people endorse this kind of view as “common sense”, sometimes “justified” with appeals to evolutionary psychology, sometimes with appeals to women's (and men's) “natures” (See e.g. Rowland 2020, ch. 2).

Pathologizing Explanations:

If some women, even many women, are not enjoying sex then they likely have medical or physical (sometimes psychological) issues or abnormalities, which constitute the reason they don't enjoy sex. Medical (or psychological) interventions can address these issues.

Pathologizing discourses around the pleasure gap are prevalent, both within medical and psychological research and in popular discourse (Moynihan and Mintzes 2010; Rowland 2020). Within this framework, not enjoying sex, not getting aroused during sex, not experiencing orgasm during sex, and experiencing any pain during sex can be explained with diagnoses of “hypoactive sexual desire disorder”, “inhibited sexual desire disorder”, anorgasmia, and general “sexual dysfunction” (importantly, these diagnoses are *heavily* contested and many do not appear - or appear only in very attenuated forms - in the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

(DSM-5). I discuss this further in section seven; Moynihan and Mintzes 2010; Rowland 2020, 272-273). “Treatment” comes in the form of medical intervention (such as hormone therapy), or, sometimes, psychological intervention and sex therapy. Relatedly, pathologizing explanations get significant support from the pharmaceutical industry - the possibility of addressing women’s (lack of) sexual enjoyment and “function” with drugs (the fabled “female viagra”) is seen by many as an extremely lucrative prospect (Moynihan and Mintzes 2010).

III: Pleasure Patterns and Explanatory Inadequacy

After considering the data on the pleasure gap, it isn’t difficult to see that both essentialist and pathologizing explanations are inadequate. We know that the pleasure gap is a common occurrence in cis-heterosex and that it tends to disappear in non cis-heterosex. This is important background information and an adequate explanation for the pleasure gap will be sensitive to it: it will tell us 1. why the pleasure gap is a common occurrence in cis-heterosex, and 2. why it is *not* a common occurrence non cis-heterosex (or, at least, it will be compatible with these facts). That is, an adequate explanation for the pleasure gap will be able to *generalize in the right way*.

Essentialist explanations effectively suggest that we should expect all or the vast majority of (cis) women to not enjoy sex or not find sex pleasurable. This gives us *a* means of explaining why the pleasure gap is a common occurrence in cis-heterosex, but it comes at the expense of the essentialist’s ability to address the fact that the pleasure gap disappears in non cis-heterosex. Sexual pleasure and enjoyment is reportedly high for women who have sex with other women, for women who have queer sex in general, and for women generally (*including* those that have cis-heterosex) during solo-sex (masturbation). These facts are clearly in tension with the essentialist prediction that all or the vast majority of women don’t enjoy or experience pleasure in sex, and contradicts the ideas that women just aren’t properly sexual beings or that they are just innately difficult to please. In the absence of some convincing, non-ad hoc reason for thinking that women who have cis-heterosex are *essentially* different from women who have non cis-heterosex with respect to their potential for sexual enjoyment (a tall order, especially given the overlap between the two groups), essentialist explanations contradict the patterns we see with respect to women’s

capacity for pleasure and sexual enjoyment and so cannot account for or accommodate the fact that the pleasure gap tends to disappear in non cis-heterosex.

Pathologizing explanations also face problems generalizing in the right way. While they have a means of explaining why the pleasure gap is a common occurrence - they can simply posit that a lot of women have pathologies of sexual function - they cannot easily address the fact that the pleasure gap disappears in non cis-heterosex: if the pleasure gap were attributable to widespread pathologies of sexual function in cis-women, we would expect to see cis-women reporting a lack of pleasure in lesbian, woman-woman, or queer sex. We don't see this. While it is not *impossible* that *only* women who have cis-heterosex happen to be predisposed to these pathologies of sexual function, in the absence of a non-ad hoc reason for this being the case (again, a tall order given the overlap between the two groups), this possibility is extremely unlikely. So pathologizing explanations will also have difficulty generalizing in such a way that accounts for or is compatible with the pattern of the pleasure gaps' occurrence in cis-heterosex and not non cis-heterosex (there is one path pathologizing approaches might take to account for the pattern of the pleasure gap: many women experience sexual violence, assault, and coercion as a routine part of cis-heterosex and in their relationships, and these experiences can produce sexual aversions and "pathologies" which impede sexual pleasure. Plausibly, women who have non cis-heterosex either don't share these experiences to the same degree in their intimate relationships and/or have better access to queer and feminist hermeneutical resources and communities which help them better process and manage experiences of sexual violence and coercion. I discuss this thought more in section VII where I think it will be better contextualized; here, it suffices to note that even if this line of thought is correct, it perhaps accounts for one aspect of the pleasure gap and not the entirety of the phenomena, and, as it ultimately refers to the ways the social world and systems of oppression produce experiences of sexuality, it is not strictly or simply a pathologizing explanation but is, rather, a social one).

Because they are unable to generalize in the right way, essentialist and pathologizing explanations are inadequate. However, I think it is worth saying more about *why* these explanations are inadequate, about what motivates them and where their approaches to the pleasure gap go wrong. Given that these kind of explanations are popular and have, in some cases, significant

social traction and institutional support, analyzing them in more detail can make salient broader cultural presuppositions regarding sex and sexuality, and so can help us better understand the cultural context the pleasure gap (and other social-sexual phenomena) arises in and why it is so frequently misunderstood.

I think both approaches are guided by certain presuppositions about sex which lead them astray and distort inquiry. I turn now to considering a more general account of how explanations function, why some explanations fail to be adequate, and how explanations can be shaped by presuppositions. I utilize this account to illuminate the inadequacy of essentialist and pathologizing explanations for the pleasure gap in section V.

IV: Questions and Explanations

What are explanations for phenomena? Sally Haslanger (2016) (building on the work of Alan Garfinkel) writes that explanations are, effectively, answers to questions. A question is a particular way of framing inquiry into a phenomenon: questions set the *foci* for inquiry and introduce the *foils* the foci will be contrasted against. In this way, the framing of a question sets a *contrast space* which determines the kind and range of answers, or explanations, that will seem suitable. Haslanger borrows an example to illustrate: how might we explain why a particular student, Mary, got an A for her final paper, in a context where papers were graded on a curve and there was one A, 25 B's, and 25 C's given out?

“In the case of Mary’s A in the class, there are several different questions, with different foci and contrast spaces. In uttering:

1) Why did Mary get an A?

We might be asking,

2) Why did Mary get **an A** (as opposed to a B or C)?

Or we might be asking,

3) Why did **Mary** (as opposed to Bob or Susan) get an A?" (4-5)

These different formulations of the first question show how different questions introduce foci and foils, setting a contrast space which determines the range of answers which will be salient and appear suitable: a suitable answer to (2) will focus on the A in question, explaining why Mary's work was strong enough to merit that A and too strong for a B or C (the possible foils set by the question); a suitable answer to (3) will focus on the merits of Mary's work relative to Bob's and Susan's. How we interpret and formulate questions - where we choose to introduce emphasis and contrast - can make a significant difference to how we approach and seek to explain the phenomenon in question. Such framing decisions can influence what we take to be the key variable/s in question, what contextual information and data we notice, whether we take certain contextual information or data to be relevant or irrelevant, and so on.

How do we ask *good* questions, then? How do we ask questions that will introduce foci and foils and delimit contrast spaces which help us build good, strong, revealing, useful, or more complete explanations? We can see that questions (2) and (3) above are, in certain respects, fine questions to ask about Mary's A: these questions will generate answers that give us some degree of information about the phenomenon in question. But they neglect the fact that Mary's grade was awarded within a particular *structure*, a particular system of grading: Mary received her A in a context where papers were graded on a curve and one A, 25 B's, and 25 C's were given out. This is an important background fact concerning Mary's A, and more complete explanations for Mary's A will not neglect it. The contrast spaces introduced in (2), focusing on "A" as opposed to "B" or "C", and in (3) focusing on Mary as opposed to Bob or Susan, delimit a certain range of explanations that aren't sensitive to the workings of the grading system. This is a problem because the grading system is a "structural condition" for the distribution of grades: it plays a major structuring role with respect to how grades, including Mary's grade, are awarded. Asking a good question about Mary's A will involve incorporating this background fact into the formulation of the question, such that we approach the phenomenon and derive our explanations for it with this information in mind. In other words, within our question, this information will delimit the

contrast space our range of possible answers will occur within. Given this, Haslanger writes that “a better representation of the question would be:

4) Given that the instructor is evaluating all...the students in the class on an A-B-C grading system with the A the highest and the C the lowest and a curve that only allows one A, why did Mary get an A?” (5)

This formulation of the question, in particular the clause attached to the word “given”, makes sure that we focus on the fact that there is a particular distribution of grades which Mary’s grade needs to be interpreted in light of. A good answer to this question will explain why out of all of the possibilities that could occur within that distribution, Mary got the only A; the answer will be something like “because she wrote the *best* final in the class”. This is a better explanation for Mary receiving an A than the answers “her paper was too strong for a B or C” or “her work was better than Bob and Susan’s”, because it is an answer to a question (question (4)) which incorporates the relevant background facts though introducing foci and foils which enable us to be sensitive to an important structural condition of the phenomenon and so probe it more completely or in greater depth. The resultant explanation is “adequate”; it “differentiates the actual distribution” of grades “from other possibilities” that could have occurred within that grading system/ contrast space (5).

This example shows us that the background information and awareness of structural conditions we bring to inquiry shapes the kind of questions we can ask about a phenomenon, and consequently, the kind and quality of explanations that are available to us. Conversely, a lack of relevant background information or a lack of awareness of important structural conditions can lead to us focusing on less revealing or inappropriate things or setting our foci against less revealing or inappropriate foils, so importing inadequate contrast spaces - one’s which don’t reflect the important background information or structuring conditions of the phenomenon at hand, and don’t enable us to fully probe the phenomenon.

To this account, I wish to add that presuppositions can play an important role in making us less or more aware of and attentive to important background information and/or structural

conditions. Consequently, certain false or problematic presuppositions can, often without our awareness, guide our inquiry and lead us to form questions which direct inquiry in problematic ways, ultimately resulting in problematic, distorted, or just simply wrong explanations.

Consider someone who presupposes that A+ is always the grade awarded to the best papers in a class. This presupposition will stack and structure inquiry into Mary's A in certain ways, most notably by directing inquiry away from recognition of the important background information and structural condition pertaining to Mary's A (the fact that there was a particular distribution of grades (1 A, 25 B's, 25 C's)). This inquirer might then ask something like:

5) Why did Mary get an A (as opposed to an A+)?

The "A" constitutes the focus here, while "A+" constitutes the foil. This is an inappropriate or problematic foil to introduce, clearly, because Mary's A occurred within a grading system where no A+'s were given out. Foiling Mary's A against the presumed better grade of A+ distorts how we interpret Mary's A: Mary's A comes to be interpreted as a very good grade, but not as the best possible grade it actually is. As such, the contrast space for possible answers/explanations set by (5) is also problematic; (5) doesn't direct us to a contrast space that will be revealing of the phenomenon at hand, but rather to one in which the phenomenon at hand is necessarily distorted. The answer to (5) would be something like: "Mary wrote a good final, but not a great one/ not the best in the class". This is, clearly, a wrong answer, one which stands in clear tension with the background information and structural condition of the grading system. Moreover, the presupposition and the way it frames the question and enquiry will make the actual explanation for Mary's A, the explanation which aligns better with background facts and structural conditions, seem wrong or unlikely: if Mary only got an A (as opposed to an A+), how could she have possibly written the best paper in the class?

The above example illustrates how certain problematic presuppositions can make us inattentive to important background information and structural conditions and guide inquiry in problematic ways. Certain problematic presuppositions can lead us to import problematic foci or foils, relate foci and foils in problematic ways, or distort foci by contrasting them against inappropriate foils,

so distorting our recognition of the contrast spaces and the explanations which are most appropriate or revealing.

In this section, my aim has been to show how the background information and presuppositions we bring to bear on inquiry into a phenomenon determines how we formulate our questions about that phenomenon, which in turn determines the quality and kind of explanation we can produce. Background information and presuppositions influence the foci and foils, the contrast space, we frame a question about a phenomenon around; how we frame the question determines what kind of explanations we can offer and which will be satisfying to us. We've seen that "not all questions are equally good at probing the phenomenon in question to get at a good explanation" and that "this is often because the questioner doesn't have enough information about the events to ask a good question" (Haslanger 2015, 6) and/or because the presuppositions they make direct their focus in problematic ways, leading them to be negligent of (or even hostile to) certain background information and structural conditions. Asking good questions often involves becoming informed of the relevant background information and structural conditions (if there are any), recognizing the presuppositions we bring to an issue, and making sure we don't proceed from problematic presuppositions which stack our foci and foils to misdirect inquiry and distort the phenomenon at hand.

V: Presuppositions and the Pleasure Gap

The discussion in the previous section can help us better analyze essentialist and pathologizing explanations for the pleasure gap and see how they build their guiding questions about the phenomenon, which in turn can help us see how and where they go wrong. In particular, it can help us see what presuppositions each approach is working from and how these guide inquiry.

Women are the Problem:

What kind of question are essentialist and pathologizing approaches starting with? The starting question I posed about the pleasure gap earlier was:

1) Why do such high percentages of (cis) women not enjoy (cis-hetero) sex?

Both essentialist and pathologizing approaches interpret this question in such a way that introduces a focus on “women” or the women in question such that we can infer the kind of question they are asking about the pleasure gap is:

1) Why do such high percentages of (cis) **women** not enjoy sex? (as we will soon see, the “cis-hetero” qualification drops out of view in both essentialist and pathologizing approaches)

or, more explicitly: *what is it about (cis) women* such that such high percentages of them don’t enjoy sex? From this starting point, essentialist and pathologizing approaches refine their questions in particular ways.

Essentialist Explanations:

Implicitly, essentialist explanations are answering something like the following:

2) What is it about (cis) women (as opposed to (cis) men) that such high percentages of them don’t enjoy sex?

We can see that “women” is the focus of the question essentialist explanations purport to answer because essentialist explanations explain the pleasure gap in terms of women: these explanations frame women as the variable and issue that needs to be accounted for in explaining the pleasure gap. They also import a foil to “women”: men. The answers “because that’s what women are like” or “women are hard to please” only make sense as responses to question (1) if we presume a contrast class of “men” who *do* enjoy sex or who *aren’t* hard to please. Within the contrast space this framing sets up, the only possible explanation is one which purports to explain this difference between women and men, which is what we see in essentialist explanations.

From (2) some of the core presuppositions of essentialist approaches to the pleasure gap are evident. In importing a contrast space where women are focused on as that which needs to be accounted for against the contrast class of men who *do* enjoy sex or who *aren’t* hard to please,

essentialist approaches clearly tend to presuppose a form of gender essentialism (expressed in the generic “that's what women are like”) linked to sex and sexuality, bringing background “common sense” assumptions about gender to their interpretation of (1) and their formulation of (2).

Effectively, they presuppose that men and women are, naturally, different when it comes to sex and sexuality, and that men are sexual beings who naturally, easily enjoy sex while women are not and do not (or not in the same way or to the same degree).

Pathologizing Explanations:

Pathologizing explanations are somewhat more complex. Like essentialist explanations, pathologizing explanations also interpret (1) as asking *something* like:

What is it about (cis) women such that such high percentages of them don't enjoy sex?

but unlike essentialist explanations, they effectively position the women who don't enjoy sex as a collection distinct from other people (including women) who *do* enjoy sex. This particular collection becomes the focus, while everyone else becomes the foil. Given that pathologizing explanations effectively give medical diagnoses to this collection of women, we can infer that the question pathologizing explanations are answering is something like:

(3) What is it about *these* (cis) women (compared to sexually functional, healthy people) such that they don't enjoy sex?

“These women”, who are implicitly dysfunctional, are the focus while “sexually functional, healthy people” constitute the foil. Pathologizing approaches only make sense as a response to (1) if we presume a contrast class of sexually functional people who *do* enjoy sex. Within the contrast space set up this framing, the only possible explanations are ones which purport to explain this difference.

The focus on “dysfunctional” women in contrast to sexually functional others reflects that pathologizing approaches operate on the basis of a particular set of presuppositions informed by a disciplinary framework that refers to a standard for “normal” sexual response and experience,

in tandem with long disciplinary histories of pathologizing “deviant” sexuality (Potts 2002, 28). The main presupposition here concerns what “normal” sexuality and sexual response looks like, surmised in the idea that a “normal” sexual response cycle involves arousal, then pleasure and/or enjoyment concluding in orgasm. Anyone who doesn’t exemplify this standard must be, definitionally, dysfunctional or abnormal. Moreover, they must be dysfunctional in a way that can be understood and remedied through a medical/psychological model and through medical/psychological intervention (Rowland 2020, 36)⁹. Pathologizing approaches build these presuppositions about normal and pathological sexuality and sexual experience into their formulation of questions about the pleasure gap; these questions set foci and foils which are designed to help inquirers determine the particular pathologies of the large group of women who don’t enjoy sex.

What about Sex?

So far I have examined the foci and foils of both essentialist and pathologizing explanations to infer some of the presuppositions guiding each approach. But we might also infer the presuppositions guiding essentialist and pathologizing approaches by examining the possible foci and foils both approaches *neglect*. Both approaches interpret

1) why do such high percentages of (cis) women not enjoy (cis-hetero) sex?

by focusing, in different ways, on “women”, and they then build their respective foils by reference to their particular presuppositions (described above) and the particular ways they interpret “women”. But neither approach focuses on *sex*, at least not in any substantive sense. In question

⁹ While psychology, sexual medicine, and sex therapy have historically operated within and perpetuated these frameworks and still, in mainstream practice, do, within feminist psychology and medical research and feminist/queer clinical practice there is increasing recognition of complexity and variance among people with respect to sex and sexuality. Increasingly, these spaces reject the idea of one “normal” kind of sexuality or relationship to sex, and instead approach sexual happiness and health from the perspective of what might be causing distress to a particular person, with the recognition that the social world and gender/sexual ideology has an enormous influence on widespread sexual concerns and well-being. See Gavey 2005; McClland 2010, 2014; Mintz 2015; Nagoski 2015; and Orenstein 2017, 2020 for examples of this approach.

(1) above, the “sex” part of the equation isn’t probed or treated as something that we might examine and analyze, as something that could be relevant to explaining the pleasure gap. Rather, sex is held fixed and stable, implicitly cast as something not requiring investigation and as something we should expect people to enjoy such that it is the people who don’t enjoy it (high percentages of cis-women) who need to be accounted for. Essentialist approaches don’t question what “sex” is or what the sex in question typically involves, but cast sex as inherently enjoyable for genuinely sexual beings and conclude that many women don’t enjoy sex because, deep down, women (or most women) just aren’t sexual beings in the ways men are (supposed to be). Pathologizing approaches also don’t question what “sex” is or what the sex in question typically involves, but frame not enjoying sex as an abnormality that can be explained through appeals to medical or psychological issues. In both approaches, the facts that the sex in question is cis-heterosex, that this is just one, particular form of sex, and that other forms of sex don’t involve the pleasure gap, drop out of view: “sex” is just...well, sex, and so it’s women who need to be analyzed and examined.

But the data on the pleasure gap suggests we *should* focus on the “sex” part of the equation. After all, not all sex is associated with the pleasure gap - just cis-heterosex. This is an important background fact which should orient inquiry. Just as a good explanation for Mary’s A will be sensitive to the background information concerning the distribution of grades and the contrast space that distribution suggests, a good explanation for the pleasure gap will be sensitive to the facts concerning the pattern of the pleasure gap and the contrast space that pattern suggests: i.e., it will be sensitive to the fact that the pleasure gap is a feature of cis-heterosex and not non cis-heterosex. Taking this background information seriously, then, means inquiring into the sex associated with the pleasure gap and asking why this kind of sex is so frequently unenjoyable for women especially when many of those same women report enjoying other kinds of sex. So why do essentialist and pathologizing approaches fail to focus on sex or to recognize that the pleasure gap is a feature of only cis-heterosex?

I suggest that essentialist and pathologizing approaches share certain presuppositions about sex, presuppositions which lead both approaches to treat sex as a kind of fixed activity not apt for analysis or critique, and so to not even consider probing the sex part of the equation in question

(1). These presuppositions are: 1. The presupposition that sex *just is* cis-heterosex; 2. The presupposition that what “sex” involves is obvious; and, 3. The presupposition that sex is inherently enjoyable. In combination, these presuppositions would account for the failure to focus on cis-heterosex and contrast it against the foil of non cis-heterosex: if “sex” just is taken as cis-heterosex, treated as a something so determinate and obvious that “everyone knows” what we mean by the word “sex” so that we don’t really need to detail or talk about what characterizes it, and as something naturally or normally pleasurable and enjoyable, the fact that the pleasure gap is a feature of cis-heterosex and not non cis-heterosex will be obscured and dismissed as irrelevant in understanding why so many women might not enjoy the sex they’re having. “Women” will come to appear to be the only variable in the question:

1) Why do such high percentages of (cis) women not enjoy (cis-hetero) sex?

and the “cis-hetero” qualification will fall out of view. “Sex” generally, and the sex associated with the pleasure gap specifically, won’t even appear as something to be focused on and probed.

Presupposing that sex *just is* cis-heterosex, that what “sex” involves is obvious, and that sex is inherently enjoyable effectively works to insulate the sex associated with the pleasure gap from analysis and critique, and so stacks inquiry from the outset. In combination with the essentialist and pathologizing presuppositions particular to each approach, these presuppositions leads both approaches to fail to focus on “sex” and so to neglect the fact that the pleasure gap is widespread in cis-heterosex and disappears in non cis-heterosex. As such, both approaches neglect the appropriate contrast space that explanations for the pleasure gap should occur within: cis-heterosex compared to non cis-heterosex.

If, as I’ve argued, we *should* be focusing on the “sex” part of the question, contrasting the focus of cis-heterosex against the foil of non cis-heterosex, what kind of question should we be asking about the pleasure gap? Given the pattern of the pleasure gap, a better interpretation of (1) above is:

4) Given that the pleasure gap is a feature of cis-heterosex (and not non cis-heterosex), *what is it about cis-hetero sex*, as opposed to non cis-heterosex, such that such high percentages of (cis) women don't enjoy it?

Answering *this* question will give us an explanation which accords with and/or explains the pattern of the pleasure gap, one which is sensitive to the contrast space this pattern indicates is appropriate. We will see in the following section that this question will also enable us to be sensitive to important structural conditions pertaining to the pleasure gap and to cis-heterosex, enabling us to probe the pleasure gap more deeply. Neither essentialist or pathologizing approaches are able to interpret (1) as (4) because the presuppositions they make about sex immediately preclude the possibility of focusing on "sex" and being guided by such a focus in inquiry.

So far I've argued that both essentialist and pathologizing explanations for the pleasure gap are inadequate because both approaches operate from a set of presuppositions about sex - that "sex" is cis-heterosex, that what "sex" involves is obvious, and that sex is inherently enjoyable - which automatically directs focus away from "cis-heterosex" and on to "women", immediately casting women as the problem in the pleasure gap. But important background information about the pleasure gap, the fact that it is a feature of cis-heterosex and not non cis-heterosex, suggests that cis-heterosex ought to be the focus of inquiry and that non cis-heterosex ought to be the foil. As essentialist and pathologizing approaches do not operate in this contrast space, they are unable to accord with or account for the pattern of the pleasure gap; hence their inadequacy.

Dispensing with the set of presuppositions shared by essentialist and pathologizing approaches enables us to attend to the pattern of the pleasure gap. Doing so ought to prompt us to think critically about cis-heterosex itself. We need to think about what cis-heterosex is like and what it involves. Given that most women seem capable of sexual enjoyment in other kinds of sex and solo sex, we need to consider the ways cis-heterosex itself might routinely fail to constitute an activity conducive to or compatible with many women's enjoyment and pleasure. In the following

section, I argue that if we interrogate cis-heterosex we can see that it is a social practice structured by norms and expectations which reliably and routinely produce the marginalization of women's pleasure. These norms and expectations can be understood as some of the structural conditions of cis-heterosex. Attending to them, we can begin to answer:

4) Given that the pleasure gap is a feature of cis-heterosex (and not non cis-heterosex), *what is it about cis-hetero sex*, as opposed to non cis-heterosex, such that such high percentages of (cis) women don't enjoy it?

I give the beginnings of a response to this question in what follows.

VI. The Structure of Cis-heterosex

Many feminists have critiqued "normal" cis-heterosex for the injustices it typically, normally involves. The majority of these critiques have focused on the ways "normal" cis-heterosex involves a troubling amount of coercion, violence, and subordination¹⁰. But even when (relatively) free of coercion or violence, "normal" cis-heterosex also marginalizes women's sexual pleasure, expression, and exploration - more generally, their sexual enjoyment¹¹.

In this section, building on feminist work, I detail five social norms and expectations concerning what sex is, what sex involves, and what is "normal" in sex. I suggest that these norms and expectations are (some of) *the structural conditions of cis-heterosex*: conditions which play a major role

¹⁰ Catherine MacKinnon (1989) argues that heterosex occurs under such widespread conditions of gender oppression that it has virtually no prospect of being free from coercion, for example, and Ann Cahill (2016, 2014), building on the research of psychologist Nicola Gavey, argues that we need to recognize the category of "unjust sex" - sex wherein the woman partner's agency is truncated and subordinated, while the man partner's agency dominates and determines the encounter.

¹¹ It's important to recognize that coercion and the marginalization of women's pleasure are not entirely disconnected issues - both connect to viewing women as the gatekeepers of sex and sex as something the man "gets" and enjoys rather than viewing women as independent sexual agents with their own desires and interests, and rather than viewing sex as a collaborative activity centered around mutual enjoyment.

in structuring cis-hetero- sexual interactions. These norms and expectations predictably lead to the marginalization of women's pleasure in cis-heterosex. The marginalization of women's pleasure and enjoyment is thus "normal" in cis-heterosex, not (just) in the sense that it occurs to a statistically significant degree, but in the sense that *it is the outcome of socially normative expectations or norms concerning what sex is and what it involves*. This claim is underscored by women's testimony describing what the sex associated with the pleasure gap is actually like from their perspectives.

The Coital Imperative:

First, there is a normative social expectation that cis-hetero- sexual activity will center penetration. Normal cis-heterosex involves this *coital imperative* to such a degree that "sex" is, socially, nearly synonymous with penetration, particularly vaginal penetration (Potts 2002, 34). Sociologist and cultural theorist Annie Potts (2002) writes that "heterosexual coitus" has come to "figure as *natural* and *proper* sex" such that "the man entering the woman is an almost taken for granted occurrence in heterosexual activity" (187): "proper sex (is) widely defined as a specific version of heterosexual intercourse in which the man's penis penetrates the woman's vagina (and starts with his arousal and finishes with his climax" (198). Research into people's attitudes and expectations of sex confirm the coital imperative: people generally take "sex" to mean "coitus, such that the presence of coitus is the determinant of whether "real" sex occurs or not (McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey 2001), and many feel that vaginal penetration is the "capstone of intimacy" (Rowland 2020, 182). "Foreplay", while nice, is not considered as essential or important.

The coital imperative produces what I will here call a *mechanical problem*: "normal" cis-heterosex is typically centered on activities that don't reliably result in physical pleasure or orgasm for most cis-women (and can often result in pain). Activities that *are* more conducive to cis-women's physical pleasure and freedom from pain tend to be absent or given less attention and importance. The majority (~85-92%) of cis women need clitoral stimulation to experience pleasure and orgasm (Rowland 2020, 59). Clitoral stimulation can also reduce pain during

penetration and can make penetration more pleasurable¹². Sex centered on penetration, where either clitoral stimulation is absent or relegated to a sporadic side dish or the category of “foreplay” rather than being considered part of “proper” sex, is simply not going to be pleasurable or pain-free for many cis-women (although it will be for some). Conversely, “when sex entail(s) more than penetration women’s orgasms [and pleasure] increase dramatically” (Rowland 2020, 63). But the coital imperative holds that only penetration constitutes real, proper, or “full” sex. Even as “foreplay” is becoming socially regarded as more important and central to sex (at least, to good sex), the very idea that the activities more conducive to women’s pleasure are a prelude to the “real thing” marginalizes those activities and centers penetration: that we even divide sex into “foreplay” and “real sex” “promotes the idea that caressing or cunnilingus are polite precursors to the main penetrative event, which is where time and expectations get piled on” (Rowland 2020, 183). As many cis-women experience penetrative sex as painful (especially in the absence of clitoral stimulation or other forms of touch), the coital imperative not only marginalizes women’s pleasure, both practically and conceptually, but serves to normalize women’s (unwanted) sexual pain.

The influence of the coital imperative and its consequences for women’s pleasure is reflected in research about the pleasure gap. In much of the sex women describe, there is a central focus on penetrative sex (predominately penis-in-vagina (PIV) sex, sometimes anal sex with the woman as the receptive partner). Fellatio is also often present and semi-central (especially in the sex teenage girls are having), though not as central as PIV. Cunnilingus, while not entirely absent, is scarce compared to fellatio - especially in more casual encounters and in teen- and college age sex, where fellatio is quite standard (Orenstein 2017). Focused attention on the clitoris is scarce, or when it occurs it is relegated to the category of “foreplay” - a prelude to “proper” sex (i.e., penetration).

¹² Some current hypotheses suggest that indirect, internal stimulation of the inner parts of the clitoral complex (the large structure of sensitive tissue of which the external clitoris is only a small part) is what results in pleasure and orgasms for people who *do* experience pleasure and orgasm during PIV alone (Foldes and Buisson 2009).

The Orgasm Imperative:

Sex = orgasms. At least, that is the expectation borne out of the *orgasm imperative*, another expectation Potts argues is a part of social expectations concerning “normal” sex (Potts 2002, 38). The orgasm imperative holds that normal sex makes people orgasm, or that orgasm is a predictable outcome of normal sex. This imperative combines with the coital imperative to produce an *imperative to orgasm from coitus*: the peaks of sexual pleasure are expected to occur during penetration. This imperative sits in tension with the fact that there is a kind of ambivalence about women’s orgasms in “normal” cis-heterosex. I discuss this more in the second chapter of this dissertation, but here I will note that research into the pleasure gap shows that many people, including women, feel as though male orgasm is essential to sex in a way that female orgasm is not (I argue in Chapter 2 that male orgasm is one of the defining “beats” of dominant sex scripts). Nonetheless, women are still expected to orgasm, ideally during penetration. Given the reality of what most cis-women need to orgasm, the combination of the orgasm and coital imperatives results in sex in which women’s real possibilities for pleasure are limited but women are still expected to perform pleasure and orgasm.

The orgasm imperative (particularly in combination with the coital imperative) contributes to what I will here call the *presence versus performance problem* of cis-heterosex: feeling as though one needs to perform in sex takes away from bodily presence and is shown to reduce sexual pleasure and enjoyment. In the sex associated with the pleasure gap, women often report feeling under pressure to perform and not feeling present in their bodies or in the moment (Rowland 2020, 205, 306). Many women describe the shame they feel when having sex: shame about many things (like their body and desires) but also, significantly, about, about their lack of physical pleasure or the presence of pain. Many women report feeling that there is something wrong with them because they don’t orgasm during penetration. Combined with the expectations and pressures of male partners, this leads many (67-80%) to fake orgasm or enjoyment (Rowland 2020, 105). To do so convincingly, many engage in a form of bodily self-surveillance, disciplining their bodies, movements, expressions, and vocalizations so that their performances are adequate. We might understand many of these women as undergoing bodily *alienation*, or an “estrangement from (their) bodily being(s)” in which they experience their own bodies “overwhelmingly from the outside” (LeBoeuf 2019, 4, 11).

The orgasm imperative and the pressure to perform is also reflected in research and testimony on the pleasure gap. Describing a sexual experience relayed by one of her interviewees, Katherine Rowland (2020) (a pleasure gap researcher) writes:

Along with the pain and discomfort, she remembers feeling embarrassed, worrying that she was not sophisticated enough, and feeling angry. She also felt unable to express herself, anxious about the experience not being pleasurable, and worried that he would think less of her for not enjoying it. She didn't want to be a downer. As a result, that night was the first time she pretended to orgasm: she just wanted to end an unpleasant situation... That night set a new precedent that would last for several years. Part of it was the acute pain she had experienced. In later encounters, anticipating hurt, she would tense up, which sadly meant that sex tended to hurt more. Nevertheless, she remained sexually active, even though she didn't always like it. "I got into the habit of faking it," Christine said. "I would start making noises before even realizing I was doing it. Initially I didn't want to feel the pain, so I would fake it to hasten (93-94).

For those women who don't fake it, their lack of pleasure often gets interpreted and internalized as the idea that they (or perhaps women generally) are just hard to please (fueling and reflecting essentialist ideas about women and pleasure). This then sets up an expectation, for the women themselves and from their partners, that they just *can't* enjoy sex. Rowland (2020) writes of another interviewee:

She'd enjoyed kissing and the feel of his skin on hers, and she'd always enjoyed his excitement. But her own pleasure had not really been a part of it. "I was hard to please," she told me. Then, "Maybe we both just stopped trying" (463).

No Sex Talk:

Many sex educators and academics have highlighted the importance of sexual communication and negotiation in creating sexual experiences that are enjoyable to, or desired

by, all parties involved and in exercising sexual agency (see e.g. Kukla 2018, Nagoski 2015). It is widely agreed upon by sexuality experts that good sexual communication and robust sexual negotiation makes for sex that is more ethical, more enjoyable, and more agential than it would otherwise be. But many people (especially those having cis-heterosex) are reticent to communicate and negotiate about sex, especially during sex. In their research on the social meanings of consent, Mark Cowling and Paul Reynolds (2004) found that talking during sex was generally considered weird and awkward, constituting an “interruption” in the “normal” sequence of events that are taken to constitute sex or a hook up (kissing-touching-fellatio-PIV). In fact, talking in sex is so weird that “talking and sex (are) antithetical to each other” (Cowling and Reynolds 2004, 210). Clearly, expectations of minimal talk have a deleterious impact on sexual communication and negotiation: while some sexual communication and negotiation *can* be non-verbal and subtle, communication about pleasure, desire, safety, expectations, and preferences is much more difficult when talking is considered “antithetical to sex”. It is likely even more difficult when communicating about or negotiating sexual activities other than PIV, which will already be a delicate and fraught process due to the coital imperative.

This norm produces multiple *communication problems*. Again, we can see these reflected in women’s testimony. Many of the women interviewed in research on the pleasure gap report that they cannot, or feel as though they cannot, communicate well with their sexual partners and that their partners don’t try to communicate with them about likes and dislikes, pleasure, desires, and so on. Many report that they wouldn’t know how to communicate that they would like to change or to focus on different activities during sex. Robust sexual negotiation is absent in much of the sex described, and many women report feeling pressured (although not necessarily coerced) into performing activities they weren’t particularly interested in and didn’t enjoy sometimes simply because talking about it and negotiating something else was perceived as too weird and awkward, or because they were worried that talking “too much” would lead them to be perceived as weird or incompetent by their partner/s. These difficulties in or neglect of sexual communication have been shown to greatly reduce the likelihood of sex being pleasant or enjoyable (Rowland 2020, 483). As one interviewee says of her sex life with her long-term boyfriend:

He never asked, Did that feel good, are you happy? ...I don't remember enjoying it, physically. I don't think we even ever talked about that (Rowland 2020, 87).

Gender roles:

There are also socially normative expectations concerning the different ways men and women will or should behave in sex. Generally men are expected to be more driven and desirous than women, and are expected to take the lead: it is considered normal for men to “assume authority and control over the sexual agenda” (Potts 2002, 172). Women are expected to be more passive and responsive to men's actions. They are also expected to be *sexy*, to be visually enticing throughout sex, looking attractive and moving sensuously, and are tasked with ensuring men's pleasure and orgasm (to a greater degree than men are tasked with ensuring women's pleasure and orgasm). Culturally, these gender roles are often framed as being essential to arousal and sexual validation: men are regarded as “visual creatures” who need sexy visual input to enjoy sex; letting men take the lead is considered validating for men, while women taking the lead too often is cast as threatening to men's sense of masculinity, and is thought to threaten women's sense of being desirable.

Research on the pleasure gap suggests that expected gender roles in sex contribute to and compound the mechanical, communication, and performance problems. That women aren't meant to direct action makes it difficult for them to negotiate or communicate about sex on equal footing, and makes it difficult for women to redirect action when something isn't working for them or lead sex towards non-penetrative activities. The idea that men should take the lead and just know what to do makes communication harder still (as directing them is threatening or unsexy). Pressure to be sexy and move in sexy ways takes away from focus on bodily presence and pleasure and leads to alienation. Many women report feeling objectified by their partners, and they also self-objectify during sex, aesthetically appraising and critiquing their own bodies, worrying that they don't meet attractiveness standards (Rowland 2020, 185). Moreover, many women report being predominantly concerned with their partner's pleasure and enjoyment over their own (Orenstein 2017). Rowland (2020) writes of another interviewee's experience of sex in her marriage:

She placed such pressure on herself to please, to come across as a sexy, open-minded lover, that she didn't speak up about what she actually wanted or needed, for fear that her partner would judge her (284).

Spontaneity:

Sex is supposed to be spontaneous, an expression of spontaneous desire. The idea of planned or scheduled sex is often met with derision or lamentation. But the expectation of spontaneity conflicts with how many women (and men) experience sexual arousal and desire, especially (although by no means exclusively) in longer term relationships. Sex educator and sexuality researcher Emily Nagoski (2015) argues that many women experience *responsive* sexual desire, rather than spontaneous sexual desire¹³. If someone predominately experiences responsive desire, it takes them time and build up to form sexual desire, become aroused, and enjoy sexual activity. For many women, then, expectations of sexual spontaneity (combined with a rush to get to the “main event” of penetration) means that “normal” cis-heterosex doesn't give them enough time or space to become fully aroused and to experience pleasure or connect with their embodied experience. Expectations of spontaneity thus contribute to performance problems. They also connect to the mechanical problem and communication problems. Successful collaborative “spontaneity”, especially in the absence of explicit communication, requires defaulting to a common understanding of what sex is and what it centers: penetration. If sex is meant to be spontaneous, then negotiating about what exactly sex might involve or deliberating about what kinds of activities it might center, especially if those activities are not PIV or require preparation and planning, is even more awkward and fraught.

The Structural Conditions of Cis-heterosex:

In section IV, I discussed Haslanger/Garfinkel's example of a student, Mary, getting an A for a paper and described the fact that the grades were distributed on a curve (with 1 A, 25 B's, and 25 C's given out) as a structural condition, a condition that structured the range of possibilities Mary's A could occur within. The coital and orgasm imperatives, norms against “sex

¹³ It's important to note that the distinction between responsive and spontaneous desire is not as absolute as it might seem: even “spontaneous sex” and desire often involves anticipation, fantasizing, and degrees of planning and expectation before sex takes place.

talk”, gender roles, and expectations of spontaneity aren’t formal structural conditions enforced through institutional policy in the way the structural condition of Mary’s A is. But they form part of the wider sexuality-gender ideology that shapes and informs how people experience, do, and conceptualize sex and sexuality. As they constitute (some of) the structural conditions for cis-heterosex, these norms and expectations are not just individual expectations for (or actions in) sex, but are culturally shared and socially normative expectations about what sex is and what it involves.

The preceding discussion shows the ways these structural conditions routinely and predictably marginalize women’s pleasure, such that the marginalization of women’s pleasure is a normal part of normal cis-heterosex: the activities more likely to bring women pleasure are typically sidelined or relegated to a perfunctory “foreplay” category while men’s pleasure and orgasm is central; performing pleasure and meeting men’s expectations is felt to be more important than feeling pleasure; shame and self-objectification (and being objectified by male partners) results in bodily alienation rather than bodily presence; and the kind of communication that could lead to a more pleasurable time is absent or is experienced as awkward, difficult, embarrassing, or impossible. All of these factors, independently and in tandem, negatively impact and marginalize possibilities for women’s pleasure (and for intimacy, self-expression, experimentation and creativity, and sexual joy)¹⁴.

That these are the structural conditions of cis-heterosex doesn’t mean that *all* cis-heterosex accords with these norms and expectations, and it doesn’t mean that all cis-heterosex involves the marginalization of women’s pleasure or enjoyment. Plenty of people who have cis-heterosex find ways of centering activities that bring all parties pleasure, of communicating and negotiating, and of inviting presence rather than performance. But it is worth noting that sex that centers

¹⁴ These norms and expectations are frequently bad for men also: they limit the forms of sexual expression available and place certain kinds of performance and bodily pressures upon men, particularly marginalizing queer and disabled men. However, generally these norms and expectations have more of a negative impact on women in terms of opportunities for physical pleasure and the exercise of agency. These norms and expectations are more compatible with (non-disabled, heterosexual, etc.) men’s sexual pleasure and enjoyment than they are most women’s.

women's enjoyment and agency alongside men's is, culturally, framed as something of a personal achievement - something some people achieve as they learn and grow more experienced, as they learn skills of sexual communication (and, for women, assertiveness and confidence), as they learn about women's pleasure, and, crucially, as they *unlearn* the cultural expectations described above and disinvest from such norms and narratives. And, ultimately, research and testimony shows that a significant percentage of cis-heterosex *is* characterized by the marginalization of women's enjoyment and pleasure.

Non cis-heterosex involving women is *not* influenced by these structural conditions, at least not with any where near the same frequency and not to the same degree. Non cis-heterosex involving cis-women tends to avoid the mechanical problem, involving an array of different activities with penetration constituting only one option on a menu of possibilities, and more attention to the clitoris (Orenstein 2016). It also tends not to be delineated in terms of "foreplay" and "real sex", at least not as predictably as cis-heterosex is. Communication and negotiation tends to be more robust, even in sex between teenagers and college-age people, and LGBTQ+ interviewees report, on the whole, less pressure to perform and more space to discover and explore (Oreinsten 2016). This is, I think, in part due to the fact that many of the norms and expectations structuring cis-heterosex *can't* apply to non cis-heterosex. By virtue of not being able to follow these norms from the outset, people having non cis-heterosex have to do things differently and question how things are "normally" done. Non cis-heterosex often has to involve more thought and communication, as there is no culturally ubiquitous default template of what sex is, and no default roles determined on the basis of gender or anatomy that applies to non cis-heterosex. There is, in certain respects, a greater freedom to figure out how to have sex in ways that better produce pleasure and are enjoyable for all involved. Further, queer communities develop their own norms and expectations, and many of these tend to involve a greater emphasis on communication and on negotiating mutual pleasure. Of course, non cis-heterosex can still involve the marginalization of one partners pleasure - people who have non cis-heterosex may still behave selfishly or not know how to promote their own or their partner/s' pleasure in bed - but non cis-heterosex will not be structured by the same norms and expectations structuring cis-heterosex, norms and expectations which reliably lead to the marginalization of women's pleasure (although it is

important to note that many queer people still navigate the messaging of the hetero mainstream, see e.g. Rowland 2020, 14).

The above discussion gestures towards a kind of *social-structural explanation* for the pleasure gap, an explanation which accounts for and illuminates a certain “significant regularity” (Haslanger 2015, 15) - women not enjoying cis-heterosex - in terms of the social structures or structural conditions that regularity gets produced by or occurs within (here, the social norms and expectations that shape how we conceive of and do cis-heterosex). A more developed social-structural explanation would give more detail about how to conceptualize these structural conditions and about how these structural conditions actually work to produce certain behaviors and the practice of cis-heterosex (the second chapter of this dissertation provides one version of a more detailed social-structural explanation). For my purposes here, it is enough to see that this kind of explanation tells us that the pleasure gap is not a consequence of women being hard to please, or of women's pathologies of sexual “function”. The pleasure gap is a consequence of the fact that the social norms and expectations structuring cis-heterosex reliably and routinely produce sex characterized by mechanical problems, communication problems, and performance problems, i.e., sex in which women’s pleasure is marginalized¹⁵.

Although essentialist and pathologizing approaches tend to dominate the mainstream discourse on the pleasure gap, several other feminist commenters (including researchers, clinical professionals, and activists) have also, in various ways, argued that the pleasure gap is a function of the social world. Different accounts might highlight that most sex education in the United States (and elsewhere) neglects to talk about female pleasure (often the clitoris is never mentioned in sex education), that mainstream heterosexual pornography increasingly is producing false expectations in men (and women) about female pleasure, or that women are taught to be

¹⁵ In the second chapter of this dissertation, I go into more detail about how exactly these kind of expectations work and how they influence behavior and agency. Specifically, I describe how they come together to produce (and be reproduced by) a particular *script* for sex wherein women’s enjoyment is marginalized and women marginalize their own enjoyment. Here, it is enough to see that these normative social expectations structure a limited and limiting range of possibilities for what the practice of cis-heterosex can be and lead to “normal” cis-heterosex being the kind of activity in which women’s enjoyment is marginalized.

ashamed of their bodies, needs, and desires, for example (see e.g. Orenstein 2017, 2020; Nagoski 2015; Rowland 2020). With a social-structural analysis in place, we can better contextualize these kind of arguments. Factors like mainstream heterosexual pornography, inadequate sex education, and the ways women are taught to be ashamed of their bodies and desires can be understood as reinforcing or upholding the norms and expectations structuring cis-heterosex (and they can also be understood as products or effects of those norms and expectations). These factors and phenomena reflect and transmit the dominant heteronormative sexual ideology, reinforcing that “normal” cis-heterosex involves the coital and orgasm imperatives, relatively rigid gender roles, norms, and expectations of minimal sexual communication and spontaneity, leading to the marginalization of women’s pleasure.

Let’s briefly retrace the steps involved in getting to the conclusion that the pleasure gap is a consequence of the fact that the social norms and expectations structuring cis-heterosex reliably and routinely produce cis-heterosex as a practice in which women’s pleasure is marginalized:

Attending to the fact that the pleasure gap is widespread in cis-heterosex and disappears in non cis-heterosex ought to prompt us to interpret

1) Why do such high percentages of (cis) women not enjoy (cis-hetero) sex?

as:

4) What is it about (cis-hetero) sex such that such high percentages of (cis) women don’t enjoy it?

This question directs focus onto the “sex” part of the equation, and prompts us to contrast cis-heterosex against the foil of non cis-heterosex. Doing so enables us to pay critical attention to cis-heterosex and recognize that it is a kind of social practice structured by certain norms and expectations which routinely marginalize women’s pleasure and enjoyment. I hope I have shown that this leads to deeper awareness of the context of the pleasure gap and to a better

understanding of why and how the phenomenon is produced and persists. The marginalization of women's enjoyment and pleasure in sex is normal, not just because it frequently occurs but because it is the outcome of socially normative expectations concerning what cis-heterosex is and what it involves. The pleasure gap is the predictable outcome of the fact that "normal" cis-heterosex involves the marginalization of women's enjoyment and pleasure. This kind of explanation reveals the pleasure gap as a collective, structural, social problem. It allows us to see how the practice of cis-heterosex is shaped by the social world, and shaped in a way that limits women's agency and sexual enjoyment.

Presupposing that "sex" just is cis-heterosex, that what sex involves is obvious, and that sex is inherently pleasurable obscures the fact that cis-heterosex is shaped by the social world in these ways, structured by norms and expectations which produce cis-heterosex as an activity that routinely involves the marginalization of women's sexual pleasure (the presuppositions themselves are, arguably, also a consequence of these norms and expectations, notably the coital and orgasm imperatives). In inquiry into the pleasure gap, we can trace how this set of presuppositions leads inquirers to focus on the women who don't enjoy the sex they're having rather than on the sex itself, such that they (the inquirers) fail to be sensitive to relevant background information about the pleasure gap (the fact that it is widespread in cis-heterosex and disappears in non cis-heterosex), fail to inquire into what the sex associated with the pleasure gap is actually like, and fail to recognize the expectations and norms structuring cis-heterosex.

VII. Upshots and Illuminations

Finally, I want to highlight some of the upshots of a social-structural explanation for the pleasure gap and describe how such an explanation can help us better see the stakes involved in the social debates around the pleasure gap. I first discuss some of the harms produced by essentialist and pathologizing approaches before discussing how my arguments push against a kind of individualistic quasi-explanation for the pleasure gap which frames the pleasure gap in terms of individual people and individual instances of bad sex.

The Harms of Essentialism and Pathologization:

Against (the beginnings of) a social-structural explanation for the pleasure gap and an analysis of the structural conditions for cis-heterosex, we can better assess some of the pernicious consequences of essentialist and pathologizing approaches and see that both approaches ultimately risk further entrenching the pleasure gap. Both essentialist and pathologizing (though especially pathologizing) discourses have enormous discursive power, power to shape people's understandings (and experiences) of sexuality, gender, and pleasure. In reproducing and working from the presuppositions that "sex" is just cis-heterosex, that what "sex" involves is obvious, and that sex is inherently enjoyable, and in obscuring the structural conditions of cis-heterosex, both approaches normalize - with all the authority of "common sense" or the disciplinary authority of psychology and medicine - a particular, heteronormative and male pleasure/penetration centric conception of "sex" as fixed, "natural", and not apt for questioning. This conception then informs a culture in which we tend to regard any difficulties anyone has with sex as reflective of wholly individual, personal problems rather than as reflective of the ways social expectations and norms construct - and limit - the practice of sex. Within this culture, if sex isn't working for some (even many) women - if it's painful, not pleasurable, boring, traumatizing, or whatever else - women are encouraged critique themselves and discipline their bodies and psyches to conform to (and learn to enjoy or tolerate) "normal" cis-heterosex. This occurs at the expense of thinking critically about sex and asking how it could be made *better* for women, as individuals and as a social group.

The normalization of the sexual status-quo plays out in different ways in essentialist and pathologizing approaches. Within the essentialist set up, women not enjoying sex is naturalized and the possibility that sex might change or become better for women is foreclosed. When sex is shaped by the norms and expectations described in section VI above, many women *are* "hard to please". But this is not because there is something sexually deficient or difficult about women - it's because the norms and expectations for sex are not conducive to (and often inhibit) most women's pleasure. In presupposing that sex just is cis-heterosex, that what sex involves is obvious, and that sex is inherently enjoyable (to properly sexual beings), and in casting most women as essentially and inherently "hard to please", essentialist explanations effectively naturalize the pleasure gap and work to normalize the kind of "normal" cis-heterosex associated with it. If we

accept essentialist explanations, we cannot *expect* women to enjoy sex, and we are led see this as the result of women's natures rather than of the quality or kind of the sex in question. This functions to protect cis-heterosex from analysis and critique, limits our ability to conceive of different, better sex, and so further entrenches the pleasure gap. It also places pressure on women to become, or act like, atypical instances of their kind, to be "not like other girls", and to try to learn (or force themselves) to like normal cis-heterosex: within the essentialist framework, it's the rare, "sexually adventurous" or "liberated" woman who likes sex (i.e., normal cis-heterosex) as much as a man, and this kind of woman is a particularly valuable kind of woman and sexual partner (although, of course, she risks being vilified for this too).

The pathologization of women not enjoying sex also functions to protect cis-heterosex from critique and limits our ability to conceive of different, better sex. Medical-sexual discourses determine what is widely taken to constitute "healthy" and "normal" sexuality and sexual response, and, within this framework, not enjoying sex has itself been defined in terms of dysfunction and pathology: to not enjoy sex *is*, definitionally, *to be* sexually dysfunctional. But in many cases, there is nothing medically or psychologically "wrong" with women who don't enjoy the cis-heterosex they are having. The diagnoses these women are given - like sexual dysfunction or hypoactive sexual desire disorder - are deeply contentious in the medical and sexuality studies communities, and many clinical professionals and researchers argue that they pathologize normal sexual behavior and predictable, normal responses to sex that is itself not enjoyable¹⁶. Locating the problem of the pleasure gap in women who don't enjoy sex and giving them an authoritative sounding medical diagnosis both reflects a failure to critically examine cis-heterosex, and functions to further protect cis-heterosex from critical investigation generally, entrenching cis-heterosex as it currently is - structured by norms and expectations that are deleterious to women's pleasure - as "just sex", or as "normal" sex, as something which is or should be normally enjoyable. This hinders any further inquiry into the pleasure gap and the cultural context in which it occurs. This then functions to discipline women to conform to the standards of

¹⁶ See for example "The New View Campaign", a grassroots network started by research psychologist and sexuality expert Leonore Tiefer. The New View Campaign challenges "the distorted and oversimplified messages about sexuality that the pharmaceutical industry relies on to sell its new drugs", <http://www.newviewcampaign.org/>.

“normal” sex (or deal with the psychic damage of thinking that something is wrong with them), and forecloses options of doing sex differently, in ways which might work better and be more enjoyable for them.

Further, a failure to interrogate sex and treating a lack of sexual enjoyment as a pathology (or as symptomatic of one) often cannot do full justice to those who *are* managing medical or psychological issues around sex and sexuality. While there are very real medical issues and bodily changes which can disrupt sexual pleasure and make certain forms of sex, especially penetrative sex, difficult, pathologizing discourses also tend to presume that women who *are* experiencing these kind of issues want, or *should* want, to get to a place of “normal” sexual functioning so that they enjoy (or at least can tolerate) “normal” cis-heterosex (i.e., PIV sex). Pathologizing discourses also tend to fail to make adequate space for the fact that other forms of sex - sex which doesn't center penetration, for example, or sex in which touch is exploratory and communication is extensive - might work better for these women's bodies and needs. If penetration is very painful for someone, as it often is when women are diagnosed with vaginismus or vaginal atrophy due to menopause, for example, a pathologizing approach will treat these conditions as what needs to be “fixed” so that women who have them can be properly “functional” and have “normal” sex (i.e., PIV sex). PIV is often a sexual option that many people do *want* to have access to, but assuming that it is or should be *the* goal and bench mark for whether a person can be sexual or have “real” sex forecloses thinking about other ways people might be sexual and have sex that don't involve pain or penetration.

These points also connect to the ways pathologizing approaches can be detrimental to properly understanding, contextualizing, managing, and remedying the kind of sexual trauma which can inhibit people's ability to enjoy sex. The social world inflicts significant sexual violence and trauma upon women. Many women have histories of sexual abuse and rape, and many experience everyday, routine objectification and unwanted sexualization. These experiences, from the extreme to the mundane, can take a psychological toll, producing sexual aversions, PTSD, anxieties, and bodily disconnect, all of which can inhibit the ability to enjoy sex. This inhibition of the ability to enjoy sex is amplified further by the fact that a lot of “normal” cis-hetero sexual experiences themselves will be objectifying and unpleasant. Research suggests that women who

have non cis-heterosex and non cis-hetero relationships may be better equipped to mitigate or avoid some of these effects: queer and LGBTQ communities often have different narratives and hermeneutical resources for understanding women's sexuality, and so women within these communities are likely to have more resources to combat heteronormative, patriarchal, and objectifying ideas about women's sexuality. These communities can also provide support in dealing with - and, to a degree, escaping - some of the myriad ways women are sexually objectified and violated, and queer women are more likely to have positive, pleasurable experiences of sex informing their expectations, desires, and responses (see e.g. Rowland 2020, 13-14, 185).

If accurate, this research can help us better understand certain aspects of the pleasure gap: it is possible that at least *some* women who have cis-heterosex are, in fact, more likely to have prolonged experiences of certain aversions and psychological difficulties with sex than *some* women who have non cis-heterosex. This is an important dimension of the pleasure gap (although given that many women have both cis-heterosex and non cis-heterosex and enjoy the latter but not the former, it doesn't account for the *whole* issue of the pleasure gap): it intersects with the fact that "normal" cis-heterosex is structured by norms and expectations that marginalize women's pleasure, and describes how non cis-heterosex, and queer communities more generally, better enable women's pleasure and sexual well-being. However, these claims shouldn't be read as supporting pathologizing approaches to the pleasure gap generally, and pathologizing approaches risk distorting what these claims suggest and reveal.

While attending to individual women and the ways personal histories of sexual violence and objectification have influenced their experiences of sexuality is, no doubt, important, pathologizing approaches reduce this task to one of looking at how individual women can achieve a certain normative form of sexual "function". This means that pathologizing approaches face problems understanding - and helping - women who have trauma or who have experienced histories of sexual violence. Treating sex as a given inapt for analysis and critique and linking enjoyment of "normal" sex to sexual "function" directs focus away from asking about how people might manage trauma and histories of sexual violence in whatever ways are best suited to them and their needs: perhaps penetration should be off the table for a while for some

people, if it activates their PTSD; perhaps partners should discuss and alter gender roles and dynamics so as to avoid those connected to trauma; perhaps approaching sex and sexuality in a more exploratory, thoughtful, considered way will be more affirming and less triggering for some. The fact that pathologizing approaches reinforce the “normal” standard for sex is often what hinders people in determining personalized conceptions of sex and personalized ways of managing complex mental (and physical) health issues in sex.

Further, framing the problem as one of returning traumatized individuals to “normal” sexual function shifts focus away from recognizing that experiences of sexual violence and abuse are themselves routine and normalized by gender and sexuality norms and structures, and from thinking about how we might intervene in these processes at a structural level. Many of the psychological difficulties women have with sex are clearly not *just* individual issues but are produced by the social world, by the structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy and the gender and sexuality norms these systems produce. The psychological difficulties and sexual aversions, and the resultant inability to enjoy sex, here are a symptom of the problem, not the cause of problem itself. Similarly, the psychological advantage that women who have non cis-heterosex might have with respect to sexual pleasure is also a consequence of the social world, of the ways queer communities and practices might enhance women’s sexual well-being and better provide genuine possibilities for their pleasure.

Finally, in foreclosing critique of cis-heterosex and in reinforcing the “normal” standard for sex and sexual function, both essentialist and pathologizing approaches hinder us in developing *collective* understandings of sex and sexuality that are more amenable to women’s pleasure and enjoyment and the robust exercise of sexual agency. Ameliorating the pleasure gap won’t involve getting women to enjoy or tolerate “normal” cis-heterosex. Rather, it will involve destabilizing and critiquing the structure of “normal sex” so as to empower women and enhance their sexual agency, helping women form more positive relationships with their bodies and sexualities, and giving them the knowledge that they get to determine what “normal” (and good) sex is for them. It will also involve enabling the development of better collective understandings of and expectations for sex.

Individualism:

There is another kind of common response to the pleasure gap I want to touch on briefly, a kind of individualistic quasi-explanation. The fact of the pleasure gap is often met with the claim that some women don't enjoy the sex they're having because the individual men they're having sex with are just bad, selfish lovers (the implication being the women would enjoy sex with "generous", skilled men), or that claim that some, perhaps even many, individual women lack the confidence and assertiveness to have enjoyable sex. These kind of responses to the pleasure gap are individualistic in that they suggest that that sometimes sex is just *bad* for the woman partner because of the traits, inclinations, or behaviors of the individuals involved. This kind of individualistic bent can be found in the ways the pleasure gap is often speculated about. There is a tendency to treat the pleasure gap as just reflective of many instances of bad sex, and to see bad sex as the result of the behaviors, traits, motivations, and so on of individuals: some commenters pin the pleasure gap on selfish and entitled men, or on insecure women, for example, and some "sex coaches" run (lucrative) workshops teaching individual women to become more sexually assertive and individual men to be more empathetic and more sexually "generous", often framing these forms of individual intervention as solutions to the pleasure gap (Rowland 2020, 45). Of course, sometimes individual people *are* sexually selfish or insecure, and often they *can* learn to improve their sex lives through workshops or sex coaching. But it is a mistake to cast selfish men or insecure women as the ultimate cause of the pleasure gap, and it is a mistake to cast individual empowerment as the solution.

I've argued that cis-heterosex is structured by certain norms and expectations which result in the marginalization of women's sexual pleasure and enjoyment. This analysis tells us that people don't have the kind of sex characterized by the mechanical problem, or by communication and presence versus performance problems, simply because they, individually, are sexually selfish or insecure. They have sex characterized by these problems because they are acting (and thinking) in accord with the social norms and expectations structuring cis-heterosex. Individual men don't focus on PIV at the expense of all else *just* because they are selfish - they do so because the coital imperative means that the cultural conception of sex is centered around PIV and that cis-heterosex is structured by the expectation that PIV will be central. Individuals fail to sexually communicate not *just* because they personally lack the skills, but also because talking is socially

considered "antithetical to sex". Women feel the pressure to perform not just because some of them are sexually insecure, but also because the orgasm imperative means the performance of pleasure is a socially normative expectation for cis-heterosex. Even people who consciously try to move away from these norms and expectations find it difficult to do so: research shows that even when women and men want to move away from understandings of sex centered on PIV, many struggle to imagine or connect with other ways of having sex (McPhillips, Braun, and Garvey 2001). Looking at the ways individual "bad actors" can behave less than ideally in sex and speculating about their motivations, or their personal psychological reasons, for doing so doesn't really get at the heart of the pleasure gap: the fact that the pleasure gap is a predictable if not inevitable product of a culture which has these expectations and norms around sex and sexuality. Moreover, even as it is true that many men *are* sexually selfish and that many women *do* lack sexual confidence, these facts are themselves the result of social norms and expectations concerning sex and gender: the norms and expectations for cis-heterosex (alongside other gender norms) effectively enable and promote a kind of sexual selfishness in men and a reticence in women.

Focusing on individuals also hinders amelioration. At best, a focus on individuals leads to an ameliorative framework of personal, individual intervention and empowerment. This moves us away from treating the pleasure gap like a social-structural issue that needs a collective, social solution. It also risks making fulfilling, enjoyable, pleasurable sex an option only for women who have had the privilege and means to access "empowering resources" (and, indeed, it is predominantly wealthy, white women who typically attend empowerment workshops and hire sex coaches). When "empowerment...becomes not a social project but a personal achievement... the onus of responsibility" is placed on the "individual woman, contracting her vision and guiding her attention ever-more 'intensively inward'" rather than outward towards other women and the cultural norms shaping women's experiences of sex and sexuality (Rowland 2020, 358). Further still, individual empowerment doesn't, by itself, constitute a challenge to the norms and expectations which structure cis-heterosex and which produce the pleasure gap in the first place. Even for those lucky enough to be "empowered", there's only so much personal empowerment can achieve when the marginalization of women's pleasure is still the cultural norm.

Individual accountability and empowerment aren't necessarily *bad* - in the context of an individual's life, they can be deeply important. But with a social-structural analysis in place, we can see that individualistic approaches *by themselves* are not enough to probe how the pleasure gap functions, or indicate how to ameliorate it. If we are to more completely understand the pleasure gap, we need to go beyond individual action, individual psychologies and traits, individual accountability, and individual empowerment and look instead at how the structural conditions of cis-heterosex influence the ways individuals interact in sex and shape what we collectively imagine sex can be.

Conclusion

I hope this chapter has shown that the pleasure gap isn't a consequence of women being "hard to please", of particular pathologies of sexual function, or even of individual's men's sexual selfishness and individual women's lack of sexual confidence, but of the fact that a lot of "normal" (cis-hetero) sex is *bad* for most women, focused on activities and centered around dynamics that make it un-pleasurable, painful, uncomfortable, and disempowering. Normal cis-heterosex is like this because it is structured by social norms and expectations which themselves marginalize women's pleasure. Treating sex as a given, or as fixed and inapt for analysis, and presupposing that "sex" just is cis-heterosex, that what "sex" involves is obvious, and that sex is inherently enjoyable obscures that the pleasure gap is a social-structural injustice. Because they proceed from this set of presuppositions, essentialist and pathologizing explanations for the pleasure gap are, from the start, poorly positioned to recognize the structural conditions of cis-heterosex and so to understand the social context the pleasure gap arises in. Without recognizing these structural conditions, inquiry is limited and cannot produce a complete explanation for the pleasure gap, one which accounts for the fact that the pleasure gap is widespread in cis-heterosex and disappears in non cis-heterosex. If we fail to recognize these structural conditions, continue to treat sex itself as inapt for questioning, and refuse to talk candidly and critically about sex, the reason for the pleasure gap will appear mysterious and the problem will continue to be misunderstood and misdiagnosed.

Although this chapter has focused on the pleasure gap and the ways it is socially (mis)understood, I think that it contains a lesson for theorizing about sex and social-sexual issues more broadly. The inadequacy of essentialist and pathologizing approaches to the pleasure gap highlights that when we neglect the details of what sex is and what it involves, we risk missing information that is philosophically, ethically, and politically important. The centering of consent in recent conversations about sex, sexual ethics, and sexual justice often means detailing the events surrounding and leading up to sex - initiation, refusal, consent - but not sex itself. “Sex” is left unspecified, its details implicitly cast as irrelevant to the ethical or philosophical questions at hand. But what “sex” is can vary, drastically, and the detail often matters in thinking about the ethical and political dimensions of sex, and about sexual agency. I hope that in arguing that treating sex as an obvious activity inapt for analysis leads essentialist and pathologizing approaches astray, I’ve highlighted the importance of thinking and talking about what we mean by “sex” itself.

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2. Sex Scripts and the Marginalization of Women's Sexual Pleasure

Introduction

Women's sexual agency and capacity for sexual pleasure has long been the subject of scrutiny, suspicion, and pathologization, from Freud's ranking of clitoral orgasms as "inferior" to still widespread stigma and silence concerning female masturbation. Over recent decades this trend has, in certain respects, been challenged, and a new image and ideal for women's sexuality has proliferated (Rowland 2020, 42-43, 303-304). This new image is one of woman as a desirous, active sexual agent who thoroughly enjoys sex and is capable of multiple orgasms, and it has developed alongside a more general increased interest in women's pleasure in media (in magazine articles purporting to teach men how to be good, generous lovers who have perfected "foreplay", for example). Yet research shows that in cis-heterosex women, especially young women and teenage girls, routinely marginalize their own sexual enjoyment and pleasure. Women report prioritizing male arousal, pleasure, and orgasm, regarding male pleasure as of central importance in sex while regarding their own arousal and pleasure as less important or not important at all. Many women don't even *expect* sex to be pleasurable for them, and don't expect that sex will be free from (unwanted) pain. Perplexingly, many of these same women report high levels of sexual satisfaction, on a par with those reported by men. What's going on here? Why do women marginalize their own pleasure in sex in these ways? And how can we account for the fact that they are "satisfied" with sex in which their pleasure isn't a priority or feature?

In this chapter I argue that socially dominant *sex scripts* lead women to marginalize their own sexual pleasure during (cis-hetero) sex. "Scripts" (of the kind I'm interested in here) can be understood as culturally shared and socially normative "blueprints" or templates for particular interpersonal interactions¹⁷. *Sex* scripts can be understood as culturally shared, socially normative blueprints for *sexual* interactions. I argue that the dominant script for cis-heterosex itself

¹⁷ There are multiple different uses of the term "script" in philosophy (and other disciplines). I'm using a conception of scripts as the blueprints for social interactions. I detail this conception and discuss how it differs from some other conceptions in section III.

marginalizes women's pleasure, such that "normal" sexual interactions don't center women's pleasure (or create a very narrow space for it to manifest, one that is incompatible with many cis-women's needs, bodies, and experiences)¹⁸. For women, to behave "properly" and "normally" in sex, to hew to script, means prioritizing male enjoyment and pleasure and marginalizing their own.

But *why* would women go along with such a script and neglect their own pleasure? And why would they report being "satisfied" with the sex that results? Working from Tom Dougherty's (2021 ms) recent account of how scripts explain behavior, I suggest that women might follow the script because they are motivated to coordinate with sexual partners, to behave "normally" in sex (so as to avoid social sanction or because they are invested in certain standards of normalcy), to avoid pejorative stereotyping (such as being labeled a "prude" or sexually dysfunctional), or to meet other obligations (like that of being a "good wife"). The script doesn't offer a way for women to meet these goals *and* pursue pleasure, and because the pursuit of pleasure constitutes a deviation from the script, the pursuit of pleasure is often socially costly (or very difficult) for women. Given this, women might marginalize their own pleasure because the script constrains their agency: the script makes it such that there is no, or no easy or cost-free, way for women to pursue their own pleasure in cis-heterosex.

However, while I think that this kind of analysis illuminates some cases of why people follow scripts which disadvantage them, it doesn't illuminate why women would be satisfied with sex in which their pleasure is marginalized. To explore this issue, I examine how women *internalize* the script. I give an account of script internalization that highlights the ways the script shapes and informs sexual agency and sexual subjectivity (the sense one has of oneself as a sexual being). Because the script (with its gendered roles) is internalized in these ways, it informs how women

¹⁸ The script is also incompatible with the enjoyment, bodies, and experiences of many men, especially queer men, disabled men, men who cannot or do not want to penetrate women during sex, men whose sexuality is not centered on their penis, and so on. My point in general is that script privileges the enjoyment of men who enjoy and can perform "typical" (i.e., penetrative) cis-heterosex. This is still a narrow space for sexual enjoyment to occur in, but it is more compatible with many men's bodies and their possibilities for physical pleasure and orgasm than it is women's.

relate to pleasure and how pleasure figures in women's understandings of themselves within the context of cis-heterosex. Many women come to relate to pleasure not as something for them to pursue or experience in cis-heterosex but as something to *perform and provide*, because they have internalized the script and the role it assigns them. Thus the script doesn't *just* constrain women's agency in the pursuit of pleasure; it also plays a role in *constituting* women as particular kinds of sexual subjects and agents who relate to pleasure in particular ways. This illuminates why women would report being satisfied with sex in which they marginalize their own pleasure (and in which their pleasure is marginalized more generally). It also helps us paint a more complete picture of how the script works, how it works *on* us, and why women might follow it: women following the script won't always be a consequence of their agency being constrained, but will sometimes be a feature of how women discipline and regulate themselves to conform to a culturally learned role in cis-heterosex which undergirds their own senses of themselves as sexual agents and subjects in relation to the practice of cis-heterosex.

There are three significant upshots of my arguments. First, they illuminate key aspects of why the *pleasure gap* (the fact that women report experiencing significantly less pleasure than men report during cis-heterosex, and significantly less pleasure than women report in non cis-heterosex) exists and persists. Second, they highlight some of the more subtle ways gender and sexual ideology (of which sex scripts are a part) plays out in interpersonal interactions, intimate relationships, and in the subjectivities and bodies of individuals. Often in discussing gender ideology and sex, we are concerned with sexual coercion and violence and understandably so (see e.g. Sharon Marcus (1992) for a script analysis of rape and sexual violence). I take my arguments to highlight that even cis-heterosex that is free from interpersonal violence or coercion often involves gender and sexual ideology playing out in a way that subordinates and limits women, devaluing women's experiences and enjoyment or rendering them of secondary importance.

Finally, my arguments also have an upshot for contemporary philosophical work on social scripts more broadly. Recent philosophical work on scripts has, largely, focused on the ways pernicious scripts constrain agency, hindering people in their efforts to achieve their goals by making those goals socially costly, difficult, or incompatible with other goals like social coordination. My arguments highlight that alongside agency constraint, we need to consider the complex ways

(some) scripts can become internalized such that they shape agency and subjectivity, and so condition persons' goals, values, and sense of self in relation to certain social practices. While culturally dominant sex scripts do constrain women's sexual agency, they are also taken up and internalized by women: dominant sex scripts play a role in constructing and shaping sexual agency and subjectivity, such that they can come to be embodied and inform emotions, desire, and imagination. This kind of analysis originates in a long tradition of philosophical work, particularly feminist work, concerned with the ways culture and power (in the Foucauldian sense) shape people's agencies and subjectivities, such that people discipline or regulate themselves - their bodies, their behaviors, their thoughts - in conformity with social norms or ideology (see e.g. Beauvoir 1949, Foucault 1975, 1978, Bartkey 1988, Butler 1990, Cornell 1995, Haslanger 2020, among many others). That culture gets "taken up" in this way means that oppressive or pernicious social arrangements don't need to be enforced through social punishment or sanction to persist, and action in accordance with such social norms can't just be understood as a consequence of agency constraint. I think contemporary analytic work on scripts has much to gain by considering this kind of analysis: the ways scripts are taken up and internalized constitute important dimensions of how (at least some) dominant scripts can work, and recognizing this is necessary for painting a more complete picture of how scripts explain behavior, how they connect to agency and subjectivity, and how they help produce and sustain certain social realities.

In section I, I briefly detail some of the research which shows that women routinely marginalize their own pleasure and enjoyment during sex and that women still, nevertheless, report high levels of sexual "satisfaction". In section II, I describe recent philosophical work on social scripts. In section III, I give an account of sex scripts as the socially normative blueprints for sexual interactions and describe the current and culturally dominant sex script. I argue that within this script women's pleasure is marginalized, and that women marginalizing their own pleasure is an effect of women following the script and behaving "properly" within its terms. I then explore how the notion of scripts can help explain this behavior and the data on satisfaction, probing the reasons why women stick to script even when doing so results in non-pleasurable (and often outright unpleasant and painful) sexual experiences. In section IV I argue that we may be

motivated to follow scripts for several reasons: to coordinate, to behave “normally”, to avoid pejorative stereotyping, and to meet certain obligations. Because the script offers women no, or no easy or cost-free, way of meeting these goals *and* pursuing pleasure, it constrains women's agency. This analysis constitutes part of the answer to the question of why women might follow the script, but, by itself, it cannot explain women's reports of sexual satisfaction. To account for such sex being “satisfying” for women, we must also consider how sex scripts are internalized such that they play a role in producing sexual agency and subjectivity, and inform women's relationship to pleasure in cis-heterosex. I examine these processes of script internalization in section V.

I. The Data

Section I of Chapter 1 described some of the key data concerning the pleasure gap - the discrepancy in orgasm and pleasure between men and women in cis-heterosex (and the discrepancies in orgasm and pleasure for women during masturbation vs cis-heterosex, and between women who have cis-heterosex and women who have non cis-heterosex). One dimension of this data I left unexplored in Chapter 1 is the degree to which women devalue and marginalize their own pleasure and orgasm during cis-heterosex while placing central importance on the orgasm and pleasure of their male partner/s. As with the more general phenomenon of the pleasure gap, women marginalizing their own sexual enjoyment in favor of men's is predominantly a trend seen in cis-heterosex, and not in non cis-heterosex. As such, the data and discussion that follows specifically concerns cis-heterosex and cis-women who have cis-heterosex.

Starkly illustrating that many women devalue their own pleasure in sex are studies concerning the sexual satisfaction of women and men who have cis-heterosex. Despite the pleasure gap, women generally tend to report high levels of sexual “satisfaction”, on par with those reported by men. However, ambiguity is at play here in the notion of “satisfaction”. Research by feminist psychologist Sara McClelland (2010, 2014) has revealed that cis-women's definition of sexual “satisfaction” frequently differs from that of cis-men: for cis-men “satisfaction” is primarily connected to fun and their own physical pleasure and orgasm, while women are “satisfied” with sex in which they feel close to their partner and don't experience “too much” pain, and in which

their male partner experiences pleasure and enjoyment. As psychologist Peggy Orenstein (2017) notes, while there is nothing inherently problematic about valuing a sense of closeness to one's partner/s and giving one's partner/s pleasure, and while pleasure is not the only marker of sexual enjoyment, minimal (unwanted) pain is a "very low bar" to judge the quality of one's sexual experiences by and pleasure is, generally, a major aspect of overall sexual enjoyment (59). Moreover, it is significant in and of itself that so many women don't judge their own pleasure as important in sex. Yet, these are, according to research, the terms with which many women are satisfied. These rather paltry terms of satisfaction reflect the fact that many women don't expect sex to be pleasurable (or even to be free from unwanted pain) or enjoyable for them, but they *do* expect it to be pleasurable and enjoyable for men (men similarly expect sex to be pleasurable and enjoyable for themselves).

That women marginalize their own pleasure during sex and don't expect that sex will be pleasurable or more generally enjoyable (for them) is evidenced by a *lot* of the data concerning women and their sexual experiences. Much of the research into women's sexual experiences and satisfaction focuses on teenage girls and college-aged women, and it indicates that this phenomena is prevalent in this group. Orenstein (2017) (who interviewed hundreds of teenage young women and young men across the U.S. about their sexual experiences) describes how many young women, while generally happy to talk candidly about multiple dimensions of their sexual experiences, seemed surprised and confused when asked about whether they actually enjoyed any of those experiences. During one interview, Orenstein asks her interviewee "did you enjoy [sex with that guy]?" In response, the interviewee "seemed startled, as if [Orenstein] had broken an unspoken rule." Finally, the girl replied "No. No I didn't. Not particularly" (60). This kind of sentiment is echoed frequently in Orenstein's interview research. Many of these same girls and women who report not enjoying their sexual experiences still reported being sexually "satisfied", so long as they didn't experience "too much" pain and their male partner *did* enjoy the experience.

But this phenomena isn't confined to teenage girls and young women. Research also shows that many women devalue or marginalize their own enjoyment during sex throughout their lives, in casual sex as well as in short and long term relationships. Women of all ages tend to view male

orgasm as of central importance in sex, for example, while devaluing the importance of their own. As one “forty-something” woman in a long term marriage said of sex with her husband:

[My orgasm is] nice when it happens. But it’s not, how do I say this? It’s not like the main thing. When my husband can’t come, which does happen these days, for whatever reason, then it feels like sex wasn’t complete, like we prematurely stopped the show. Whether I orgasm - it’s nice, we both enjoy it - is kind of irrelevant. I think I’m more concerned with him (Rowland 2020, 97)

Another echoed this sentiment:

Let’s be real. We can have sex, and if I come, wonderful, we’re all happy. But if I don’t come... Well...? But if we’re having sex and he’s not finishing, then that’s another story (Rowland 2020, 97-98).

These sentiments connect to the ways women *practically* prioritize male enjoyment and marginalize their own during sex. Teenage girls, for example, regularly report that they perform and offer oral sex at much higher rates than they receive or request it (Orenstein 2017, 41-46). Many women conceive of sex as primarily for the benefit of their male partner/s and have sex to benefit their male partner/s, rather than because they think it will be a positive experience for themselves (Orenstein 2017, 32). It is estimated that ~67-80% of women frequently fake orgasms and pleasure during cis-heterosex, overwhelmingly for the sake of their male partner/s’ enjoyment and sense of masculinity (Rowland 2020, 99). While the reasons for “faking it” can be varied (boredom, wanting the encounter to end, wanting to be sexier to one’s partner/s), overwhelmingly the reasons for faking it are tied to a form of “caretaking” wherein women value men’s comfort and happiness in sex over their own enjoyment and pleasure: women fake it because they take it “upon themselves to preserve their partners from feeling as though they had failed to deliver” (Rowland 2020, 107). In Katherine Rowland’s (2020) interviews on the pleasure gap, one interviewee said of her frequently faked orgasms:

He’s just so sad if it doesn’t happen.

Another said:

It's easier than making it into a thing. Guys are real touchy.

And another added:

Men need to believe it's all gone the way it should (107).

Another interviewee described a painful experience being digitally penetrated during a one night stand. Her male partner took her yelp of pain in response to the “stabbing” sensation of his fingers as one of intense pleasure and asked “Hasn’t anyone ever got your G-spot before?”. Feeling as though it would be awkward and difficult to correct him, not wanting to be a “downer”, feeling embarrassed and unsophisticated for not enjoying the experience, and wishing it was actually enjoyable, this woman performed pleasure despite the pain and faked orgasm, recasting the experience “as an erotic interlude in which she played the grateful recipient to the male’s dexterous generosity” (Rowland 2020, 93-98).

It’s important to note that many women have sex explicitly for reasons other than their own enjoyment and pleasure. Many women have survival sex or do sex work. Many have sex as a part of “marital duties” or as a way of bargaining with their partners (“if I just do this he’ll stop bothering me” or sex in exchange for their partner performing childcare, for example). Many have “maintenance sex” (sex for the sake of intimacy or harmony within a relationship). In these kinds of case, it’s somewhat obvious why women marginalize their own pleasure in sex: sex is something you just have to do to get by in some form, or to achieve some other valuable end, and prioritizing male pleasure is a way of getting it done. But the data above speaks to cases that are meant (at least in theory) to be cases of sex undertaken for the purposes of enjoyment and

pleasure (at least in part), cases where survival or bargaining aren't at issue¹⁹. Women marginalize their own pleasure in early teenage exploration, in cis-hetero no-strings-attached one night stands, in friends-with-benefits arrangements, and in (relatively) equitable and egalitarian romantic relationships. Women frequently marginalize their own pleasure in cis-heterosex across the board, including in the kind of sex we would expect to be enjoyable or undertaken for the purposes of pleasure and enjoyment (again, at least in part). In cis-heterosex *generally* women “assume a second class position in their sexual interactions” (Rowland 2020, 37). But why is this the case? And why do women accept such paltry terms of sexual “satisfaction”?

In Chapter 1, I argued that to understand the pleasure gap more broadly, we need to regard cis-heterosex as a social practice structured by social norms and expectations concerning sex, sexuality, and gender. In what follows I zoom in on one dimension of these social norms and expectations - the interpersonal *scripts* for cis-heterosex - to look in detail at exactly how they structure cis-heterosex. Recognizing these sex scripts, these culturally shared, socially normative, and gendered blueprints for how to behave and what to expect during sex, illuminates why women marginalize their own pleasure during sex: “normal” sex, as defined by the script, doesn't make adequate space for women's pleasure or enjoyment and effectively directs women (and men) to marginalize it and instead prioritize male pleasure (it is also important to note that although men's pleasure is the priority in the script, the script provides an oppressively narrow space for possibilities for men's enjoyment too and especially marginalizes queer men and disabled men).

¹⁹ It's important to note that the boundaries between strategic or pragmatic sex and sex ostensibly undertaken for the purposes of pleasure and enjoyment aren't always clear cut. Maintenance sex might often fall somewhere in the middle, and a lot of casual teenage hook ups involve significant social pressure and normative “hook up” scripts which make it difficult to stop sexual activity before penetration, resulting in sexual experiences in which teenage girls prioritize male pleasure to end the experience as quickly as possible (see e.g. Orenstein 2017). The point I wish to make here is that women marginalize their own pleasure across all forms of cis-heterosex, including sex wherein women marginalizing their own pleasure isn't linked to achieving specific strategic goals (including the goal of ending the encounter as quickly as possible).

II. Scripts

Before discussing the scripts pertaining to cis-heterosex, it will be useful to get the broad idea of scripts on the table. The concept of “social scripts” is employed in multiple disciplines (philosophy, sociology, and psychology, to name a few), and can refer to different social phenomena in different research. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1994), for examples, uses the term “scripts” to refer to “collective identities”, or “narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories” (159). Natalie Stoljar (2015) uses the term “scripts” to refer to the social conceptions of group identity which can influence persons’ self-conceptions (352). Within this work, the term “scripts” encompasses the narratives, group identities, “norms, stereotypes, and expectations that pervade dominant ideology” and that condition the shared social expectations concerning particular groups (Hesni 2020 ms). “Gendered motherhood scripts”, for example “prescribe that women should adopt certain gendered norms of motherhood”, and “portray childless women as failures and unable to attain true self-fulfillment” (Stoljar 364); “heterosexual scripts” proscribe that “cis-gendered heterosexual men partner monogamously with cis-gendered heterosexual women, marry, cohabit, have 2.5 children, co-own property, merge finances” and “co-parent” (Hesni 2020 ms). Hesni (2020 ms) refers to these kinds of social scripts as *structural* scripts. As I understand it, the category of structural scripts encompasses connected but varied and distinct social phenomena (norms, stereotypes, and collective identities, for example). While we would do well to keep this in this mind, I follow Hesni here and use the term “structural scripts” to collectively refer to these kind of phenomena (reflecting the the some of the common ways philosophers have used the term “scripts”).

Hesni (2020 ms) distinguishes structural scripts from what they call *interpersonal* scripts - “blueprints” or templates for particular social interactions. Interpersonal scripts effectively direct our behavior in social interactions, “specifying the ‘normal’ way for a social interaction to go” (Dougherty 2021 ms, 30). The interaction between a patron of a fancy restaurant and a waiter, for example, is scripted in this sense. The waiter will greet the patron, welcome them to the restaurant, and ask how they are. The patron will likely return the greeting. The waiter will offer menus, ask for drink orders (perhaps making a suggestion), the patron will give their order. And so on. In this frequently used example, patron and waiter share a template for how to interact.

This template specifies roles for both patron and waiter, and directs each to inter/act in a certain way. The template offers a normative and predictable way to coordinate and have a “normal”, successful restaurant interaction (Hesni 2020 ms). Because interpersonal scripts specify normalcy in this way, scripts also specify what actions would count as deviant or uncooperative in certain contexts: it would be uncooperative for the patron to make the waiter try to guess their order, for example, or refuse to sit at their table. It would be abnormal or deviant if the patron stripped down to their underwear in response to being asked for their order. Interpersonal scripts thus have both a behavioral component - they tell us how to act and interact in certain contexts - and a cognitive component - they furnish our expectations of one another in certain contexts (Hesni 2020 ms). In this sense, interpersonal scripts (alongside structural scripts) undergird and stabilize many of our social practices, directing us how to coordinate and organize to aid mutual or complimentary goals²⁰.

The interaction between a restaurant patron and waiter occurs in a formalized setting, with explicit roles and semi-explicit to explicit rules and guidelines, but interpersonal scripts direct less formal interactions and social practices also. Some of these scripts are simple and govern short interactions, such as the scripts governing greetings (one person says “hello!” and smiles at their colleague, the colleague smiles and nods or verbalizes a greeting back). Some are more complex and govern lengthy or multi-step interactions, such as the traditional scripts governing heterosexual dating (man asks woman out, man picks woman up, man pays for dinner, man makes first moves towards physical intimacy, and so on). Countless other social interactions are similarly script-governed, and learning how to act in accord with such scripts is a core part of developing social agency. We are educated, often implicitly, about how we should and shouldn’t behave socially from infancy (e.g. “it’s rude to not say thank you!” “Say hello when people say hello to you!”), and becoming proficient in this social normativity (i.e., in interpersonal scripts) undergirds learning how to interpret a given social situation and how to behave in it. Because they are such a foundational and often implicit part of our social learning, we generally don’t

²⁰ Material conditions, structural scripts, shared concepts and beliefs, and so on, all play roles in undergirding and stabilizing social practices also. I consider interpersonal scripts to be one important component of how social practices are stabilized

deliberate on interpersonal scripts consciously (although sometimes we can), but form our expectations and act in accord with them semi-automatically and unreflectively.

III. Sex Scripts

Multiple scholars have written about sex scripts. As noted earlier, some feminists have used a concept of scripts to understand rape and sexual violence (see Marcus 1992), but non-coercive, non-violent, consensual sex has also been understood through the concept of scripts: the recognition that the activity of sex and the domain of sexuality is scripted is where much early script theory began (Wiederman 2015). The notion of “sex scripts” that I am using here refers specifically to interpersonal scripts rather than structural scripts (though, as we will see, interpersonal sex scripts intersect with certain structural scripts in important ways). This notion stems from the recognition that sex is an activity governed by a specific set of social norms and expectations. As I argued in Chapter 1, despite the still popular “common sense” idea that the actual activity of sex is intuitive, natural, and instinctual, social norms and expectations concerning sex, sexuality, and gender influence how we think of sex and how we behave in sex.

In Chapter 1, I focused on the norms and expectations connected to the coital imperative (the expectation that sex must involve penetration, typically penis-in-vagina (PIV) penetration), the orgasm imperative (the expectation that sex should always result in orgasm or significant physical pleasure), gender norms concerning sexual behavior, the expectation that sex be spontaneous, and the taboos and awkwardness around sexual communication (especially *during* sex). The framework of interpersonal scripts offers a way of conceptualizing how these norms and expectations socially function and influence persons’ behavior. These norms and expectations come together to produce a culturally shared blueprint for sexual interactions that “define(s) what counts as sex, how to recognize sexual situations, and what to do in...sexual encounters” (Kim et al. 2007, 146). Like other scripts, sex scripts are predictable, normative, and facilitate a kind of coordination: they direct an “unspoken sequence” (Orenstein 2017, 48) of action, describing the roles different people will or should take in that unspoken sequence, and inform the basic expectations people will have concerning how one another will act in sexual contexts, the actions

they should perform, the sequence in which they should perform those actions, and when they should stop.

Dominant sex scripts:

While there is a great deal of diversity in sexual practices, the coital imperative, the orgasm imperative, gender norms, the expectation that sex be spontaneous, and taboos around sexual communication mean that certain sex scripts are dominant and mainstream, setting the standard for “normal” or “typical” sex. According to the most recognizable and dominant sex script, a “typical” sexual encounter looks something like this:

Man (typically) initiates sexual activity; activity “escalates”, probably incorporating some combination of kissing, intimate touching, genital touching, fellatio, and *maybe* cunnilingus, although cunnilingus is far less likely to occur than fellatio. This is usually designated the “foreplay” part of sexual activity, the “lead up” to sex itself. “Sex itself” happens when the man penetrates the woman, usually vaginally, perhaps anally. Penetration continues until the point of male orgasm, after which sex is finished.

In addition to directing a particular path of activity, this script also has other features which define a “typical” or “normal” sexual interaction. First, the script makes sexual activity difficult to “cut short”, or stop before “completion” - penetration ending in male orgasm (Dougherty 2021 ms). Second, sex and the “escalation” of sexual activities towards penetration is generally meant to be spontaneous and occur without communicative deliberation or too much negotiation. “Scheduling” sex, or planning what will happen in it with our partners is considered a bit weird or undesirable, and as “everybody knows” how sex is meant to proceed, “escalating” from one activity to the next generally occurs through more subtle communication or by one partner (usually the man) making moves towards or starting that activity. “Too much” talk, conversely, disrupts the “normal sequence of events”. Research indicates that some men find talk so disruptive to the “normal sequence of sexual events” that “talking and sex (are) antithetical to each other” (Cowling and Reynolds 2004, 210). Third, the script defines gender-dependent roles and expectations: men lead, women follow; men initiate, women “give in”; women are meant to

do their best to be visually appealing and sexy throughout sex, while this expectation is not as strong for men²¹. Finally, the sequence of activities comprising sex is meant to be pleasurable and produce orgasm. This, combined with PIV being the “main event” in the script, means orgasm from penetration is the end and ideal within the script.

Some elements of the script are more central than others. Penetration is central and must be present for sexual activity to count as “real” or “proper” sex. Foreplay, conversely, can be more or less of a focus: although foreplay is often cast as being part of a *good* sexual partner, especially for men, it’s not culturally considered “sex” in the way penetration is. Someone might say that they didn’t have sex if they received fellatio, for example, and be judged as speaking truthfully by most people, (“jokes” asking how lesbians even have sex illustrate the same idea). Factors like expected spontaneity, minimal explicit communication, and gender roles are elements of the script that make for “normal” sex, though sex is likely to still be considered “full” sex without them. If someone fails to act in accord with these dimensions of the script, their behavior will likely be judged as abnormal, awkward, or like they’re not doing sex “properly” or well, but so long as enough penetration occurs, they will still be following the defining beat of the script.

How necessary pleasure and orgasm are to the script and to “normal” sex is complex. Men’s pleasure is quite central in the script - men are expected to orgasm (ending sex when they do), and if men don’t experience pleasure or orgasm, something has gone seriously wrong. Moreover, PIV as the “main event” in the script is an activity compatible with many men’s pleasure and orgasms. Women’s pleasure, like foreplay, isn’t central to the script in the way men’s is. While women’s pleasure and orgasm are desirable and while women are expected to show or perform pleasure (and face derision for failing to do so), sex is still “normal” sex if women *don’t* experience pleasure or orgasm; foreplay and women’s orgasm are “nice” but not essential in the script, and the absence of them doesn’t make things abnormal (I discuss women’s pleasure and the script in more detail in the next subsection).

²¹ Some accounts of sex scripts suggest men and women operate from different scripts, that there is a distinct script for men and a separate one for women. Others hold that there is one shared social script which defines different gender roles (Kim et al. 2007). I follow this second option.

Identifying this culturally dominant sex script doesn't mean denying that there is much variance in what people do sexually, nor does it amount to claiming that all cis-heterosex is like this all the time. Not everyone having sex, and not everyone having cis-heterosex, follows the script exactly every time they have sex. But the script is what is recognizable to most people *as* sex, as what typically happens in sex, or as the "standard" template for sex from which variants emerge²². This is especially the case for teenagers and young adults, but research indicates that this kind of script informs mainstream understandings of sex in all age groups and is the kind of script widely depicted in film, television, literature, and other media. Research also suggests that these understandings do translate into how people actually have sex: the script influences how people actually behave in sex and what they actually expect in (and from) sex (Kim et al. 2007)²³.

Sexual pleasure in the script:

Generally, sex is expected to be enjoyable and pleasurable, and people are expected to behave in ways that showcase pleasure and enjoyment during sex. Orgasm especially is expected in sex. However, how and when women's pleasure and orgasm is meant to occur is left unspecified by the script, and the script hinders actual possibilities for women's pleasure and orgasm. We can specify three interconnected ways it does so.

²² One interesting feature of the script is how it builds in "acceptable" spaces for a kind of faux "deviancy" which ultimately serves to reinforce the script as the "normal" way of doing things. Some ways of going off script might be accorded a kind of mainstream sexual value in the form of being considered a bit "wild" or "kinky", so long as these socially condoned or celebrated forms of "deviance" from the script don't actually threaten to destabilize it: while it is "normal" for men to initiate, for example, sociology research found that women initiating *sometimes* is regarded (by men) as especially "hot" ("she wants it *that* bad", "she's a bit of a bad girl", etc.). But the fact that women initiating is cast as an acceptable "sometimes" deviance effectively reinforces the centrality of the "normal" script where men initiate; women initiating "too much" or too often is regarded as unappealing, desperate, sexually aggressive, unfeminine, or a slight on the man's masculinity (Dworkin and O'Sullivan 2005). While the script allows for fun, hot "deviance", anything thing *too* deviant, or deviant too frequently or in too many respects so as to threaten the dominant script, is properly deviant, suspect, and abnormal.

²³ As hardcore, mainstream pornography has become increasingly easy to access, other kinds of acts are becoming more central to "normal" cis-heterosex also. Choking and "rough sex", for example, are increasingly seen as standard, especially by young men who are the primary audience of increasingly rough mainstream pornography (see Sales 2021 for further discussion).

First, *the script centers activities more conducive to men's pleasure and orgasm*: as I discussed in Chapter 1, most cis-women don't orgasm from penetrative sex alone, and many find it painful. Although the path to pleasure and enjoyment offered by centering penetration is narrow and isn't compatible with the needs or bodies of *all* men (and in particular excludes many disabled and queer men), this path is, generally, more compatible with cis-men's possibilities for pleasure and orgasm than it is cis-women's: cis-men are much more likely to orgasm from PIV and to experience PIV as generally pleasurable than cis-women are (it goes without saying that fellatio, which is more central in the script than cunnilingus - especially for teenagers and young adults - is more conducive to men's physical pleasure and orgasm than it is women's). Clitoral stimulation is required for most cis-women's orgasms and physical pleasure, and for men being a "good" lover often means "making" the woman orgasm first through clitoral stimulation during those activities grouped as "foreplay" (although culturally there lingers a still persistent Freudian ideal that women "should" orgasm during the "main event" of penetration itself). But often "foreplay" is cast as perfunctory, and the division between "foreplay" and "proper sex" highlights that the main and most important event is still penetration. There is little in the script, then, and even less central to the script, that promotes or enables women's enjoyment and pleasure in actual terms.

Second, *the script makes it very difficult for women to advocate for activities that might be more conducive to their pleasure*. Combined with with the behavioral directives and expectations that sex be spontaneous and involve minimal verbal communication, alongside gender roles where men take the lead, the lack of focus on women's pleasure and on activities more conducive to women's pleasure makes the dominant sex script even more inimical to real possibilities of pleasure and enjoyment for women. Advocating for activities or foci other than PIV is hard enough when PIV is the main event in the script; it's harder still when sex is meant to just happen spontaneously, when sexual negotiation and talk is regarded as something abnormal that "interrupts" sex, and when women are expected to follow men's lead rather than direct action themselves.

Third, despite the orgasm imperative and the expectation that sex be pleasurable, *men's pleasure and orgasms are more central in and important to the script than women's*. Men's pleasure is built into the script in a way women's is not: male orgasm is the end point of sex, what sex leads up to; female orgasm, while nice, doesn't *have* to feature, and it's absence doesn't constitute as serious a failure

as the absence of male orgasm. Moreover, women's main role in the script is arguably to promote men's pleasure by being visually enticing and sexy and through ensuring male orgasm. Men aren't tasked with ensuring female orgasm to the same degree; while giving women pleasure garners a kind of social praise and bolsters some men's sense of masculinity, women's pleasure and orgasms aren't central to sex (according to the script) in the way men's are.

In these ways, the dominant sex script describes and normalizes a template for "sexual interactions [which] continues to prop up male pleasure while obscuring female erotic agency" (Rowland 2020, 91). The script makes little real room for and actively impedes women's pleasure in sex. Nonetheless, women are still, in a way, *expected* to enjoy sex and to find it pleasurable, and their enjoyment is expected to occur within the terms set by the script. Despite impeding women's actual possibilities of pleasure, then, the script tasks them with *performing* pleasure (regardless of whether or not they actually feel it), both because pleasure is expected and because displaying pleasure is a part of the role of being "sexy" for men. In short, women's pleasure is fetishized.

Hewing to script:

What does all this mean for women's behavior during sex and for their expectations of sex? For women, to act "properly" and "normally" within the terms of the script means prioritizing male pleasure and orgasm and centering activities more conducive to one's partner's pleasure and orgasm than to one's own. It means accepting that activities more conducive to one's own pleasure (and freedom from unwanted pain) are relegated to the foreplay category, the "warm up" to the "main event" (if one is lucky that is, and has a "generous" partner - a rarity especially for teenage girls). It means following men's lead and not trying to direct activity too much oneself. It means not speaking up if something is unenjoyable and not explicitly discussing what is enjoyable and what isn't. Moreover, the script also means women don't *expect* sex to be about them and their pleasure, but, due to the orgasm imperative and the fetishization of women's pleasure, many women learn that they have to *perform* pleasure and enjoyment.

If this is how the dominant sex script directs women's sexual behavior and sets their expectations no wonder women marginalize their own enjoyment and make a show of pleasure they don't

feel: the script demands a display of pleasure but doesn't make adequate space or provide adequate conditions for actual pleasure. No wonder we see such high rates of women faking orgasm, performing oral sex without (and without the expectation of) reciprocation, and not advocating for their own pleasure (especially if they find pleasure in activities other than PIV). These are the behavioral consequences we would expect from the script. Women marginalize their own enjoyment in sex because the script directs them to. It directs women to focus on male pleasure and to make a show of pleasure, but provides no directives and limited options for making sex genuinely enjoyable or pleasurable for women. This is compounded by norms enforced by the script like "no sex talk", men taking the lead, the "spontaneity" of sex, and so on. The script marginalizes women's pleasure and active enjoyment, and, in hewing to script, women marginalize it also. This also offers us some insight into women's reports of sexual satisfaction: women's conception of satisfaction seems to result from what outcomes are possible within the terms of the script. In this context, the bar for "satisfying" sex will indeed be the presence of male pleasure and minimal pain for women.

But *why* would women follow this script? And why would they accept these terms of satisfaction? In the follow two sections, I provide accounts of why women might follow this script even as it directs them to marginalize their own pleasure, and of why women might accept such paltry terms of satisfaction as the script provides.

IV. Scripts and Agency Constraint

Tom Dougherty (2021 ms, 19-20) describes four ways scripts can explain people's behavior: 1. People might be motivated to coordinate for mutual benefit and utilize a script to do so; 2. People might be motivated to behave "normally" (i.e., follow script), because doing otherwise risks social sanction and/or because being "normal" sometimes personally matters to people, 3. Deviating from script is often likely to be interpreted according to pejorative stereotypes, and 4. Sometimes some scripts intersect with "independent social obligations", such as meeting others' expectations, being polite, or doing one's duty, for example. To illustrate, consider two colleagues following a "friendly greeting script": upon seeing each other, one colleague nods, smiles, and says "hello", the other smiles in return and says "how are you?" and

so on. They both might follow the script so that they can coordinate successfully as colleagues on good terms. As scripts describe “normal” behavior in certain social contexts, both colleagues might also follow the script because they are motivated to behave “normally” either to avoid social sanction for behaving “abnormally” or because they personally care about being a “normal”, amicable colleague. If one of them is a woman, she might also be motivated to follow script because she is aware that deviating from script and refusing to return the greeting will likely result in her being interpreted according to the “bitch” or “stuck up” stereotype. Finally, either or both colleagues might be motivated to follow script because they regard being polite or amiable in the workspace something of a social obligation more generally.

Dougherty (2021 ms, 20-22) further argues that scripts can constrain agency by making it impossible, difficult, or costly for an agent to act towards certain goals. This offers a way of explaining why people may act in accord with scripts which disadvantage them or which are contrary to their goals. The script might render someone’s personal goals incompatible with coordination as described by the script, or with behaving “normally” and avoiding pejorative stereotyping, or with meeting (what one perceives as) one’s social obligations, such that there is no substantive option of acting towards certain goals while successfully coordinating, behaving “normally”, avoiding pejorative stereotyping, or meeting social obligations. Alternatively, the script might make certain goals very difficult to achieve while coordinating, behaving “normally”, avoiding pejorative stereotyping, or meeting social obligations such that one has to do a lot of extra work to act towards their goals *and* coordinate, behave “normally”, avoid pejorative stereotyping, or meet social obligations. Finally, the script might make acting towards one’s goals very costly: if acting towards one’s goals means deviating from the script, one might have to trade off between coordinating, behaving “normally”, avoiding pejorative stereotyping, or meeting social obligations and acting towards one’s goals. Moreover, deviating from the script can prompt social sanction.

Take the greeting example again, but this time add that the colleague to initiate the greeting and bring the “friendly greeting script” into play is a man who is often inappropriate towards the other colleague, a woman, but always covertly and with plausible deniability. Presuming the woman would like to avoid engaging with creepy men, the script offers limited ways for her to act

in accord with that goal while still sticking to script: there is no evident, easy, or cost-free way of coordinating and having a “successful” social interaction while also avoiding engaging with her colleague; refusing to engage is to fail to behave “normally” according to the script and is likely to result in social sanction, so there is there is no substantive option of behaving “normally” (i.e. sticking to script) and refusing to engage in conversation with him and there is no cost-free way of refusing to engage with him in general; refusing to engage is likely to result in the woman being interpreted as a “bitch” so there is no substantive option for avoiding engaging and simultaneously avoiding pejorative stereotyping; and, finally, there is no substantive, easily accessible, or cost-free option for meeting certain social obligations (such as, for example, the obligation of promoting harmony in the work place) while refusing to respond. In short, there is no substantive way for the woman to refuse to engage that isn’t, by the terms of the script uncooperative, abnormal, rude, or likely to be interpreted as “bitchy”. Acting towards her goal is likely to be costly and involve social sanction (the bitch stereotype, but also possibly the anger of her colleague and a degree of social condemnation from others), and attempts to act towards her goal and avoid this cost will be difficult (perhaps she could try to gently talk to the man about his behavior, but that would involve significant emotional labor as well as risk, an unfair burden given the situation). Hesni (2020 ms) shows that this kind of situation can result in an unjust double bind - cooperate and follow the script (even just as a means to get out of the situation quickly) but be, in a sense, complicit in your own oppression, or break the script and refuse to be complicit, which can be cognitively difficult and risk social sanctions like the indignant, angry, or violent responses of others

This account of why people follow script and how scripts constrain agency such that people act in accord with scripts that are contrary to their own goals can help us begin to understand why women might follow a sex script that requires them to marginalize their own pleasure (although, as I argue in section V, we need to say more to understand why women accept terms of sexual satisfaction which marginalize their own pleasure).

Coordination:

In some cases, following the dominant sex script offers a way to coordinate for mutual benefit. Following the script might actually be useful or strategic for some women, depending on their

reasons for having sex or their goals. Women having survival sex or having sex for bargaining purposes, for example, might find the defined, predictable blueprint and the ways it facilitates coordination and cooperation helpful in getting things done and achieving their ends. In these cases, the man's goal of sexual pleasure, arousal, or orgasm is complimentary with the woman's goal of getting her partner to perform childcare, for example. Similarly, some women find that the script offers a way to end an unpleasant or undesired/ no longer desired sexual encounter as quickly as possible: since, according to the script, the encounter ends with male orgasm, the script offers a way to coordinate which facilitates the woman's goal of ending sex. Although the script requires women to marginalize their own pleasure, pleasure or enjoyment isn't really among the reasons women have (or continue with) sex in these kinds of cases. Following the script and prioritizing male pleasure enables a form of coordination in which women can achieve other goals.

But, and as noted earlier, the data suggests that women marginalize their own pleasure in cis-heterosex across the board, including sex ostensibly undertaken for the purposes of mutual fun and pleasure. In these cases, following the script seems to disadvantage women with respect to those purposes. The script doesn't offer women a way to easily coordinate *and* prioritize their own pleasure: the blueprint described in the script describes a form of coordination much more directed at and compatible with men's pleasure than it is women's. Given this, even women who *would* like to be enjoying themselves more in sex might prioritize coordinating over their own pleasure, because the script doesn't offer a salient or easy way of doing both. Perhaps the woman could figure out a way to coordinate and prioritize her own pleasure, but doing so is likely to be difficult (if not impossible) given the normativity of the script and the way the script obscures other options for sexually engaging and makes talking or negotiating sex difficult. Moreover, deciding to prioritize one's own pleasure over coordinating can be costly: it can provoke social sanction, prematurely end a desired experience, or prompt confusion, hurt, or anger from one's partner/s.

“Normal” Sex and Sexual Stereotypes:

Women might also follow script because they are motivated to behave “normally”, both because they risk social sanction for behaving abnormally in sex, and because they might themselves value

being sexually “normal” and getting sex “right”. Relatedly, they might follow script to avoid being interpreted according to pejorative stereotypes.

Like other interpersonal scripts, the cis-heterosex script is socially normative: it describes how “normal” sex should proceed and so distinguishes normal from deviant behavior. People thus face significant social pressure to follow the script in (cis-hetero) sexual contexts. While deviating from dominant or prominent scripts in general can risk social sanction and cost, deviating from dominant *sex* scripts carries an especially significant risk. Sexual deviancy, socially and historically linked to queerness and “degeneracy”, is, in certain respects, the archetype for social deviancy in general. People are thus particularly motivated to avoid being regarded as sexually deviant: being labeled sexually “weird”, sexually incompetent, or sexually dysfunctional risks big costs to social status and to relationships more generally. Relatedly, salient stereotypes mean that deviating from script is liable to be interpreted in certain pejorative ways: women who take the lead are likely to be interpreted as sexually aggressive or “slutty”, for example, while women who don’t show pleasure at the “right” time and in the “right” way might be interpreted as prudish or frigid, labels which can have significant social consequences for how particular women are perceived and treated both by their partners and, to a certain extent, in wider social groups (we can see this especially in how sexual behavior (or perceived sexual behavior) influences social standing and reputation in teenagers (Orenstein 2017, 2020)). The social pressure to follow sex scripts and behave “normally” in sex is, then, especially high, and often there is no real or easy way for women to pursue their pleasure *and* behave “normally” by the terms of the script. Recognizing this goes some way in explaining why women would follow a script that requires them to marginalize their own pleasure: women might conclude that it is impossible, or too difficult or costly for them to prioritize and advocate for their own pleasure, and, in this sense, the script constrains women's sexual agency.

The pressure to be normal and the lack of options women have to pursue their pleasure and behave “normally” also arises due to the fact that *structural* scripts “inform” interpersonal scripts such that interpersonal scripts are acted out “in accordance with the cultural messaging or

dominant ideology” conveyed by structural scripts Hesni (2020 ms)²⁴. When we deviate from an interpersonal script, we are often also behaving deviantly by the terms of normative structural scripts. We can see this in traditional heterosexual dating scripts: the man is meant to pick the woman up, pay for the drinks/meal, make the first moves towards physical intimacy etc²⁵. In certain eras and certain social contexts, a man who doesn’t do these things is failing to act in accord with the script, even behaving deviantly. Moreover, this bears on his masculinity more broadly and the structural gender scripts he is expected to behave in accord with and is interpreted in light of. So in this case, the roles specified by the interpersonal script depend on the structural scripts pertaining to the persons involved.

This interweaving of interpersonal and structural scripts means that flouting script in an interpersonal interaction can constitute a challenge to socially normative structural scripts also²⁶. A man failing to do the “normal” thing on a date - for example, failing to offer to pay - both flouts the heterosexual date script and flouts gender and heterosexuality structural scripts more broadly. Some structural scripts - like those to do with gender - are deeply socially normative, and failure to conform to them risks strong social condemnation. The structural scripts at play in particular interpersonal scripts will also influence salient stereotypes for breaking script: as we’ve seen, a woman who doesn’t return a greeting in a friendly way is often interpreted as a “bitch”, which both reflects condemnation for not following the interpersonal script and for flouting more structural femininity scripts (being affable, “nice”, smiling etc). Similarly, a man not acting “properly” on a date might be interpreted as a player, or, conversely, as effeminate and queer. The interweaving of interpersonal and structural scripts thus produces often particularly condemnatory stereotypes, which further compound the social pressure agents face to act in

²⁴ We might also add that interpersonal scripts can work to inform or (re)enforce structural scripts, see Hesni 2020 (ms).

²⁵ This script has undergone significant change in recent decades, and the roles are no longer as rigid as they once were (in many places at least). But elements of this script still remain: many people expect men to pay for a date or to do the asking out or pick the restaurant for first dates, and many people still expect the man to make the first moves towards physical intimacy.

²⁶ See Hesni 2020 (ms) for a discussion of how disrupting interpersonal scripts can challenge structural scripts.

accord with certain interpersonal scripts and work to reinforce the interpersonal script's constraint of people's agency in the domain governed by the script.

From my description of dominant sex scripts in section III, it is already evident that structural gender scripts inform the dominant sex script, as do structural heterosexuality scripts. Acting like a "proper" man in sex means taking the lead, producing an erection, and so on; acting like a "proper" woman in sex means showing pleasure at the right times, giving the man pleasure, being "sexy", being led, and so on. These notions of "proper" masculine and feminine behavior are here linked to gender and heterosexuality structural scripts: "hotblooded" heterosexual men wouldn't take a more "passive" role in sex, and truly sexy and feminine women wouldn't be too aggressive or demanding, for example. Deviating from structural gender and heterosexuality scripts in general risks heavy costs and strong social sanction, and sex is a domain where gender and heterosexuality is *extremely* socially significant and normative: not performing one's proper role in sex is often tantamount to not performing ones gender or heterosexuality in a very socially significant way.

Further, deviating from script doesn't only threaten one's *own* gender and heterosexuality performance. Because the gender-defined roles in the script are complimentary, each person successfully performing their role (or doing their gender and doing heterosexuality in sex properly) requires the cooperation of their partner, or requires that their partner perform *their* role properly. Because of this, a woman deviating from script in sex and, for example, taking an assertive role risks emasculating the man because she makes it harder for him to successfully perform his (masculine) role. The risk of wounding or destabilizing one's partner in these ways, the risk of rendering one's partner "deviant" by the standards of the script, increases the costs of

“deviation” and can compound the desire to be normal and social and interpersonal pressure to stick to script²⁷.

The dominant sex script is also informed by structural scripts for (heterosexual) romantic relationships. While the script governs the spectrum of casual sex through to sex in long term monogamous relationships, structural scripts for heterosexual romantic relationships generally include sex, and sex - especially PIV sex - is regarded as a hallmark of “serious” relationships and the “apex of nuptial intimacy” (Rowland 2020, 112). Many people also enter into romantic relationships through first having a sexual relationship. In these senses, following the script for “normal” sex is important for both increasing the chances that sex will lead to a relationship, and for doing a core part of romantic relationships “right”. Failure to follow script and have “normal” sex can threaten the possibility that a relationship could begin, and it can also threaten the stability and seriousness of a romantic relationship that is under way.

The social normativity of dominant sex scripts, then, in combination with salient stereotypes and the fact that these scripts interweave with socially normative structural gender, heterosexuality, and relationship scripts, creates strong social pressure to stick to script in sex. The script itself offers no substantive or readily accessible options for women to prioritize their own pleasure in

²⁷ It can also mean that one partner may actively enforce the gendered roles of the script for the other because they don't want to risk being made deviant or cast as not performing their own gender or heterosexuality properly. Many women report that their male partners get upset and feel emasculated when they (the women) don't or cannot orgasm through penetrative sex, or require a sex toy like a clitoral vibrator to orgasm; many of these women also report that this pressure leads to them faking orgasm, performing pleasure, or seeking to reassure their partner of their masculinity by letting him take control of the sexual encounter. This holds in reverse, too - women can enforce the masculine role onto men: a man who doesn't want to engage in PIV, for example, is a threat to many women's sense of femininity and sexual desirability. However, the script in general gives more authority to men, and so women generally cannot enforce and compel gendered/heterosexual performance to the same degree or as easily.

cis-heterosex and behave “normally”, “properly”, or well in the terms set by the script and in the terms set by structural gender, heterosexuality, and relationship scripts²⁸.

The desire to behave “normally” in sex doesn’t just arise due to *external* social pressure and sanction, however. We’ve seen that performing one’s “normal” role according to the dominant sex script often amounts to doing one’s gender or sexuality “right”, or doing romantic relationships “right”. This produces added layers of fear of social sanction, as discussed, but it can also produce complex personal investments in the sex script: people can be invested in performing to the dominant sex script, in part, because they are invested in their gender and sexual identity. Failing to act in accord with the script can threaten someone’s *personal* sense of being a masculine, sexually normal, heterosexual man, or a feminine, sexually normal, heterosexual woman. Similarly, people can be invested in performing to the script because they are emotionally invested in their relationship and in being a “good” partner. Here, it isn't simply the case that people follow script because of a fear of social sanction for behaving "abnormally". Getting sex “right” or having "real" sex *matters to them*, because getting sex “right” and having “real” sex is an important part of acting in accord with their identities or relationships which they personally value. Likewise, many people are often personally concerned with being sexually competent and normal in general, and this is often not necessarily just about fear of social sanction: feeling sexually “abnormal” can have a significant and negative impact on persons’ self-esteem and self-image. Again, this adds to the cost of deviating from script in sex: the script offers no substantive or readily accessible way for women to be a “good partner” or a sexy feminine lover - things many women personally value - *and* to prioritize their own pleasure in sex.

²⁸ The script constrains the agency of both men and women - it is costly or difficult for men to deviate from script also. But, arguably, the script has a greater negative impact on women. While the space made for men’s pleasure and enjoyment in the script is oppressively narrow and makes it difficult or costly for men to take anything but a masculine role and center penetration (excluding how queer men or disabled men, for example, might experience or want to experience sexual enjoyment), the space the script has for women's actual pleasure is more narrow and unrealistic still. In placing women in the subordinate role and men in the active, dominant role, the script also gives men more space to exercise agency than women.

Obligation:

Finally, women might act in accord with the dominant sex script because doing so is part of fulfilling (what they perceive as) certain social obligations more generally. In part, this arises due to the fact that the sex script interweaves with structural scripts, particularly relationship scripts: some women may feel that having “real” sex “properly” and ensuring their partner’s pleasure over their own is a duty or obligation within a relationship, for example, a responsibility of a “good” wife or partner. Even in sex outside of relationships, women may feel that they are obligated to ensure male pleasure (given the responsibility the script places on women to both cause and address male arousal), or to allow penetration if other sexual activity has already occurred (due to the obligation to “follow through” or not start “what you can't finish” and the way the script directs “escalating” activity towards penetration), or to avoid taking charge of their own pleasure if doing so risks threatening their partner/s’ ego (as women are often expected to reassure their partners and make them feel secure, especially in the sexual realm). Again, the script offers women limited means of meeting these obligations *and* prioritizing their own pleasure in sex.

The above discussion can help us get to grips with why women follow the script even as it disadvantages them: they want to coordinate, or be “normal” in sex (due to social pressure and personal investments in the script) and avoid pejorative stereotyping, or meet various obligations, but the script means they cannot (or cannot without difficulty) act towards those ends *and* prioritize their own pleasure. Moreover, they cannot prioritize their own pleasure and deviate from script without risking significant cost in the form of social sanction, whether that is stereotyping, being labeled sexually incompetent or weird, being labeled a “bad” partner or wife, or even the hostile and sometimes violent responses of others. In this sense, the script constrains women’s sexual agency.

I think the fact that the script constrains women’s sexual agency is important to recognize, and I think that this analysis does, to an extent, help explain why women behave in accord with a sex script which requires them to marginalize their own pleasure. However, this kind of analysis

presumes that women clearly or unambiguously have a goal of acting towards their own pleasure in cis-heterosex, a goal which is hindered by the script. Many women's relationship with pleasure in cis-heterosex is more complex and ambivalent than wanting it but being constrained in acting towards it. We've seen that women accept terms of sexual satisfaction which completely elide their own pleasure. This fact isn't illuminated by an analysis that focuses on the ways the script constrains women's agency. Women's testimony further highlights other aspects of women's relationship to pleasure which also aren't accounted for by the idea that the script constrains women's agency with respect to pleasure. Consider the following examples from Rowland's research:

One woman I spoke with, a forty-year-old yoga instructor and grade school education director...routinely became caught up in judging her own actions, or became preoccupied with her male partner's pleasure. She shared that she could give a "great performance," but hardly ever experienced orgasm herself. She placed such pressure on herself to please, to come across as a sexy, open-minded lover, that she didn't speak up about what she actually wanted or needed, for fear that her partner would judge her, not like her, or resent any deviation from his own charted pleasure. She found herself shutting down and not attending to her own body's prompts, such as whether she was actually aroused enough for comfortable penetration (284).

In later encounters, anticipating hurt, [Christine] would tense up, which sadly meant that sex tended to hurt more. Nevertheless, she remained sexually active, even though she didn't always like it. "I got into the habit of faking it," Christine said. "I would start making noises before even realizing I was doing it. Initially I didn't want to feel the pain, so I would fake it to hasten it along. Then it became a bigger thing, like I would default, I would cut myself off." This pattern continued until she became aware that she had started to lose interest in sex. (94)

These examples, and the data on women's sexual satisfaction, highlights that women's relationship to pleasure in the context of cis-heterosex is more complex than one of just being constrained in acting towards it. In the first example, we can see agency constraint (fear of social cost for getting it “wrong”, manifest in fear of judgement or resentment from her partner). But we also can see that the interviewee's sexual agency, her “sexual subjectivity” - her sense of herself as a sexual being (Alcoff 2018, 111), and her relationship with pleasure is influenced by the script in ways that go beyond just constraint: she describes how she judges herself harshly and desires to “come across as a sexy, open-minded lover”. She also describes “shutting down” and disengaging from her body. In short, she expresses a kind of complex ambivalence about pleasure and about the role she feels she is meant to perform in sex. In the second example, the interviewee describes how her body learned to expect pain and how the performance of pleasure became embodied and effectively automated to an extreme degree, affecting her own engagement with her body and relationship to pleasure. Again, the influence of the script on women's relationship to pleasure seems to go beyond constraining their pursuit of it: the script seems to play a role in shaping the interviewee's sexual subjectivity and relationship to pleasure and the practice of sex more generally.

Of course, not every woman having cis-heterosex and following the script has these exact experiences, but research suggests that certain elements of them - namely the complex ambivalence towards sex, pleasure, and the role one is “meant” to perform - are widely shared among women who have cis-heterosex. Many women report really caring about getting sex “right”, for example, even when they don't enjoy it. Many feel shame or pride connected to how well they perform even when it involves faking orgasm, and for some faking orgasm becomes embodied and as second nature, or even as a kind of pleasure and satisfaction itself. Many can't conceive of or feel profoundly awkward at the prospect of having sex which *does* center their pleasure. Many don't have any idea *how* to pursue their own pleasure in sex, or even know that they could or that an array of sexual activities that could bring them pleasure even exists. Many believe and feel that PIV sex is the most intimate and romantic sex act, even when they don't actually enjoy it or find it painful, and many express great sadness or feel “broken” when they don't experience pleasure during PIV (see e.g. Rowland 2020; Orenstein 2017, 2020; Nagoski 2015). Many also describe the ways in which the sex they have negatively affects their sexuality,

alienates them from their bodies, or diminishes their self-esteem. Despite this, and as we have seen, many still claim to be satisfied with their sex lives. These aspects of how the script works and *works on us* evidence that many women's experiences of and relationships to pleasure are more complex than just being constrained in the advancement of one's goals.

I suggest that we can better understand women's reports of sexual satisfaction and the complex ambivalence women express towards pleasure in sex by examining how sex scripts are *internalized*. That people internalize the script and their gendered role in the script means that they develop an understanding of sex and a sense of themselves in relation to the practice of cis-heterosex through that role. As such, the script doesn't just constrain women's sexual agency - it plays a role *producing* women's sexual agencies and sexual subjectivities and in constituting women as particular kinds of sexual agents and subjects. Women's relationship to pleasure in sex is a part of this. Given that women's role in the script is to perform and provide but not necessarily experience pleasure, the script shapes women's relationship to pleasure such that women's sense of agency and self in cis-heterosex features pleasure primarily as something to perform and provide, rather than as something to experience. Recognizing this, we can begin to understand why women would be satisfied with sex that doesn't feature their own pleasure and many women's complexly ambivalent relationship to pleasure described above. Further, I think probing internalization can also give us a more complete analysis of why women follow the script in the first place, an analysis which highlights that following the script isn't just a consequence of the ways the script constrains agency.

V. Script Internalization

To be effective in motivating behavior and aiding interpersonal coordination, interpersonal scripts must be internalized to some degree: following a script without strenuous deliberation and negotiation is a key part of how scripts facilitate smooth social coordination. What more might we say about internalization? Dougherty (2021 ms) writes that "we internalize a script...and hence follow it on autopilot" (5) to describe how scripts influence action. But, as the final paragraphs of the previous section suggest, I think internalizing the dominant sex script and the gendered roles it provides does more than direct us to perform certain actions on autopilot: it also

influences women's experiences of sex and sexuality and their relationship to their bodies and pleasure. That is, it plays a role in shaping women's sexual agencies and subjectivities. There is more to say, then, about script internalization - about how it works and what "internalization" in the context of the dominant sex script means.

Enculturation and Script Internalization:

The dominant sex script is suffuse throughout mainstream culture. Researchers have shown how prevalent dominant sex scripts are in media, in widespread cultural values, and in social "common sense", and children and teenagers are, increasingly, exposed to this kind of script in mainstream pornography (Kim et al. 2007). We develop as sexual agents and subjects swimming in the waters of the script. This means that the script is not just something imposed on our sexual agency from without, constraining and hindering it, but rather informs the development of our sexual agencies and subjectivities from the get-go, shaping how we learn to think, imagine, feel, and act with respect to sex and sexuality. One aspect of this is the way the script practically orients us: it informs how we interpret, perceive, and (inter)act within sexual situations. It also conditions what we take to "sex" to be and instructs us on the gendered role we are "meant" to play in sex. This means the script (alongside other cultural norms, values, beliefs, and narratives, and alongside personal experiences) informs how we learn to be sexual and shapes how we conceive of sex and of ourselves as gendered sexual agents and subjects. The script plays a role in our coming to be, and understand ourselves as, sexual beings. It shapes our sense of our bodies as sexual (and sexualized), and informs the meaning we attribute to and find in our desires and sexual experiences. Thus the script does more than constrain us in acting on our wants or goals. It gets "taken up" by us and influences the development of our sexual agencies and subjectivities such that it is a core part of what *shapes* our relationship to sex and our sexual wants and goals in the first place.

What might it mean to say that the dominant sex script "gets taken up by us"? Jack Balkin (1998) offers a framework for thinking about how culture shapes us. He suggests that we have "innate but inchoate urges" which become "concretized" into specific forms, capacities, and practices by our cultural context and through social learning and "cultural software" or cultural information

and “know how” (69). Describing how culture concretizes our inchoate urges to value and evaluate, Balkin writes:

Cultural software allows human beings to articulate and concretize their values, to put flesh on the bones of their innate but inchoate urge to value and evaluate.

Through cultural software our brute sense of the beautiful is transformed into the many varieties of aesthetic judgment, some of which come into being and fade away at different points in history. Through cultural software the inchoate sense of good and bad is transformed into the many varieties of moral and practical judgment, and the many virtues and vices are articulated and differentiated (70).

Balkin is here focusing on how culture concretizes our *evaluative* tendencies, our inclinations to assess things in moral or aesthetic terms. The general idea of “inchoate urges” becoming “concretized” through culture can, I think, also apply to things like sexual tendencies or other tendencies towards certain modes of interaction with others. Take a toy example: dancing. Plausibly, humans have an inchoate tendency to move their bodies in exuberant ways which are joyful, expressive, meaningful, or aesthetically pleasing, sometimes with other humans and sometimes not. This tendency gets shaped into specific practices and modes of dance by the cultural context one learns to dance in: through social learning, one learns how people dance, what dances to do in what context, the rules for different modes of dance, when and where dancing is (in)appropriate, how to cooperatively dance with others, the roles assigned to different people in different dances, and the roles one is expected to adopt oneself.

Interpersonal scripts can be conceived of as a part of this shaping and social learning, one element of cultural software. Some interpersonal scripts will be rigid and detailed (as for dances like waltzes or in formal settings) and others will be less so (for improvisational or experimental dancing, for example), but people in general will learn how to dance, what kind of moves to do, how to interact with others in dancing contexts, and generally develop a practical orientation towards dancing through these scripts. The scripts will also influence the broader cultural understanding of dance: they will become *how* we dance, how we engage in the joyful, meaningful, or aesthetically interesting movement of our bodies, and how we do so in interaction

and cooperation with others. They become part of how we, culturally, understand and experience dancing; they form our *practice/s* of dancing.

If some of these scripts give roles to individuals based on their membership in certain significant social groups - like gender groups, for example - they will also influence how the individuals in those groups understand themselves in relation to the practice of dance, understand themselves as dancing beings and agents, at least to a degree. In this way, *the scripts can inform a person's sense of self in relation to the practice/s of dancing*, a sense of self as a certain kind of dancing agent and being. The scripts thus influence the development of dancing agency, informing our shared practical orientations towards dancing, *and* dancing subjectivity, informing our sense of ourselves - as instances of certain "kinds" like gender "kinds" - in relation to the practice/s of dance produced and described by the script/s. This is the sense in which the scripts don't just direct and sometimes constrain us, but are also "taken up" by people. The scripts don't just form part of the social blueprints we must follow to coordinate, avoid sanction, or meet our obligations in dancing contexts, but structure our shared practice of dance and become a part of individuals' agency and subjectivity with respect to dancing. In Balkin's (1998) terms, these kind of interpersonal scripts are thus a "cultural tool" or an element of cultural software that plays a role shaping the practice/s of dance and in empowering and constituting us as dancing subjects and agents, a tool that becomes part of us and that influences how we understand ourselves and relate to others in dancing contexts (37).

Sex scripts operate in a similar way, with some important differences. (Many) people have inchoate sexual desires, urges, thoughts, feelings, sensations, and so on²⁹. These are inchoate in that they aren't necessarily directed towards particular objects or particular kinds of activity. Culture shapes how we understand these inchoate urges and where we direct them (at least to a strong degree), and "concretizes" us as sexual agents. We culturally learn what constitutes "sex", how people have sex, what situations count as sexual, the cultural meanings of sex and certain sex acts, the roles assigned to different people in sex, and the role/s one is expected to adopt oneself. The dominant script for sex is a core component of this cultural learning: it practically

²⁹ It's important to recognize asexual people here: not everyone experiences sexuality of any kind, inchoate or otherwise.

orients us in the realm of sex, informing how we interpret and act in sexual contexts. Because the script is culturally shared and defines complimentary roles based on gender (and, in other historical eras, based on social status - see Foucault 1978), it enables us to interact sexually with others (although, of course, it limits us here as well): the script becomes how we do and express sexuality in coordination with others; it determines or significantly shapes the social practice of (cis-hetero) sex. The script thus also influences how we conceive of “sex” and sexuality, and, given the gendered roles the script describes, it informs how gendered individuals understand their role in sex and develop a sense of themselves in relation to the practice of sex. In this sense, the scripts for sex that are dominant within a culture become a part of us, empowering while simultaneously limiting us. These scripts become the flesh on the bones of our innate but inchoate urge towards sexuality, shaping our practice of sex and our sexual agencies and sexual subjectivities, constituting us as particular, gendered, kinds of sexual agents and subjects. In other words, being enculturated with respect to the practice of sex and learning one’s gendered role in sex (i.e., internalizing the dominant scripts for sex) shapes us as sexual agents and subjects and influences the development of our senses of self in relation to the practice of sex.

So sex scripts, like dance scripts, are taken up by us and become part of us and our agencies and subjectivities. But unlike in the case of dancing where there are many, varied scripts, one particular, socially dominant sex script has a disproportionate influence on the development of sexual agency and sexual subjectivity. There is much less accepted variance in what constitutes “normal” sex compared to dance (at least, there is in the mainstream culture of the contemporary United States). There is a multitude of dance scripts people can choose from and engage in, many of which don’t have rigid gender roles, and we generally accept that dancing trends change over time. While certain dancing scripts might be socially normative in certain settings (one wouldn’t dance the same way in a gay club as at a debutante ball, for example), people aren’t limited to one mode of dance irrespective of whether they actually enjoy that mode of dance or not. Yet, for sex, this is close to being the case (in mainstream heterosexual culture at least).

Further, sex is cast as socially and personally significant and meaningful to a degree that dancing is not. Sex is extremely culturally important in relationships, in entering adulthood, and in terms

of important identity categories like gender and sexual orientation. Further still, sex is also moralized and valued to intense degrees, and the mode of sex described by the dominant script is naturalized, cast as a timeless, natural, biological phenomenon we would be mistaken to interrogate, while simultaneously being regarded as the key to intimacy. This serves to obscure the ways the script is culturally produced and the ways sex, sexual agency, and sexual subjectivity get shaped by the script. In tandem, these effects mean that the script plays a large and often uncontested role in shaping persons' sexual agencies and sexual subjectivities: internalizing one's gendered role in sex can significantly shape one's sense of self in relation to the practice of sex or even as a sexual being generally. The dominant sex script is (nearly) all we've got to understand and imagine ourselves as sexual beings and engage sexually with others (at least, it's all many people have got, or have got easy access to - alternative scripts and hermeneutical resources, like those offered by feminist and queer communities, exist but are not as prevalent, accessible, or ubiquitous in mainstream media and pornography as dominant sex scripts are).

Internalizing the Script and Women's Relationship to Pleasure:

That the dominant sex script creates the practice of sex and shapes sexual agency and subjectivity in these ways has some consequences for how we might understand women's goals with respect to sex, and their relationship to pleasure more generally. First, the script precedes and is a core component of any personal deliberation about how to behave, goal setting, or desires with respect to sexually engaging with another person. In this sense, the script conditions and is a component of the "architecture" (Haslanger 2017, 16) for sexual agency. Second, the script also influences persons' understanding of their role in sex and of themselves as sexual beings in relation to the practice of sex. As such, it will play a role in shaping persons' relationships to pleasure (and sex, and their bodies). Together, these points suggest that the script doesn't just constrain women by making coordination, behaving "normally", avoiding pejorative stereotyping, and meeting certain obligations incompatible with the goal of having pleasurable sex, or by making pleasurable sex too costly or difficult. The script (in tandem with broader gender and sexuality ideology) also plays a role in *producing* or constituting women as particular kinds of sexual agents and subjects, and informs their goals, values, desires, and self-conceptions in relation to the practice of cis-heterosex. Given that women's role in the script is to *provide* and *perform* pleasure rather than experience it, the script produces women as sexual agents and

subjects whose relationship to pleasure is primarily based on performing and providing it. Thus the script doesn't just constrain women with respect to prioritizing their own pleasure in their (cis-hetero) sexual encounters: in a significant sense, it *cuts them off* from their own pleasure. The script cuts women off from incorporating substantive goals of experiencing pleasure into their understanding of what is possible for them in the context of cis-heterosex because the role women have internalized in sex, the role which shapes how their sense of self in relation to the practice of cis-heterosex, is a role directed at performing and providing pleasure, not experiencing it.

That the script cuts women off from their own pleasure in these ways has some important consequences for women's experience of sex and sexuality. First, *the script truncates sexual imagination*. For many women, it makes it hard to imagine that pleasure could be something they experience regularly in sex. It also makes it harder to conceive of ways of doing sex differently, ways which better serve women's pleasure. We see this in women who literally cannot imagine what sex centered on women's pleasure would look like (and in the testimony of men who cannot imagine a satisfying sex life without the centering of PIV; McPhillips, Braun, and Garvey 2001). We can also see this in the widespread resistance to counting non-penetrative forms of sex as "real" sex, and in the fact that many people can't imagine that sex could be as meaningful without penetration (McPhillips, Braun, and Garvey 2001).

Second, *the script conditions desires and goals*. Experiencing pleasure might not figure in many women's desires and goals for sex, for example, because the role they have learned and internalized is about performing and providing pleasure. Women might also learn to desire certain forms of sex they don't enjoy physically, because the script determines the salient options for actualizing sexual desire/ the desire to be sexual in general: someone might desire PIV sex, for example, despite not enjoying PIV because PIV sex is one of the only salient options for actualizing a more basic desire to be sexual with another person.

Third, the script can condition emotions. Going off script is, for many people, anxiety provoking and awkward, and many women report finding the idea of sex focused on them and their pleasure anxiety inducing. Relatedly, sticking to script provides the emotional assurance of

knowing what to do, and satisfaction for performing one's role well. When the script and the gendered role it provides is internalized and has played a role in shaping sexual agency and subjectivity, acting in accord with it it can also feel like an expression of one's own sexual subjectivity or identity.

Finally, the script can be embodied. As people gain sexual experience and put the script they have learned into practice, they learn how to have and do sex, physically. They learn how to *move*, how to express, and how to make the right noises and facial expressions. They self-police and self-discipline to make sure their bodies are doing the right things (or that they at least appear to be doing the right things) at the right time and in the right way (Bartkey 1988). This can occur to such a degree that moving in accord with the script can come to feel like "second nature" (Haslanger 2019). Women learn to go through the motions, even when those motions don't involve pleasure (or even involve unwanted pain). Women learn to make their bodies pliant, apt for being led and guided; it comes to *feel* normal and natural *on a physical level* to be physically more passive. Women also learn how to perform pleasure and fake orgasm, with some reporting that doing so becomes a habit, a semi-automatic default, or second nature. Rowland (2020) argues that we can get so used to performing that we become detached from experiencing or attending to the actual sensations present in our bodies, and then attending or responding to those sensations can itself come to feel uncomfortable: we can come to feel *physically* awkward and prone to awkward fumbling at the prospect of going off script because doing so pushes against a series of actions and movements that have become second nature. Moreover, performing well can bring a sense of satisfaction of its own kind, even though the experience may not have been sexually pleasurable in other respects.

The above is not exhaustive of the ways the script, in cutting women off from their own pleasure, influences women's experiences of sex and sexuality. But that the script truncates sexual imagination, conditions desires, conditions emotions, and becomes embodied, highlights some of the complex ways the script takes up residence in women's mental landscapes and bodies, shaping their experiences of cis-heterosex and their sense of self in the context of cis-heterosex.

The preceding discussion gives us a means of explaining why women would accept terms of satisfaction that marginalize their pleasure. The script plays a role in shaping and producing women as sexual agents and sexual subjects: it informs the development of women's practical orientation to sex and sexuality, and shapes the development of many women's sense of self in relation to the practice of cis-heterosex (and, often, in relation to sexuality more generally). In these ways, the script plays a role in determining the goals and desires women have with respect to sex, and informs their experience of sex and sexuality. I've argued that the script cuts women off from pleasure: many women's goals or desires for sex don't significantly feature experiencing pleasure, and many women's conceptions of sex, and of themselves as sexual beings in sexual interactions with men, don't significantly feature their own pleasure. Rather, internalizing the script (and other social norms, narratives, and so on) means that women develop as the kind of sexual agents who prioritize male pleasure and the performance of pleasure, and the kind of sexual subjects whose sexuality is expressed through performing pleasure and promoting male pleasure. This is, I think, a large part of why women would report being "satisfied" with sex in which their own pleasure is marginalized. Many women don't expect sex to be pleasurable for them, in part because the dominant script for sex has produced them as the kind of sexual agents and subjects whose main role is to provide and perform pleasure.

In addition to explaining why women would be satisfied with sex in which their pleasure is marginalized, this analysis also gives us a more complete picture of why women hew to script in the first place. We can see now that the script doesn't just constrain us by effectively making us choose between coordinating and pleasure, or being "normal" and pleasure, or avoiding pejorative stereotyping and pleasure, or obligations and pleasure. It doesn't just constrain us by making the pursuit of pleasure costly or impossible alongside other goals. Because we are enculturated into the practice of sex as described by the script, and because the script also conditions our sexual agencies and subjectivities and informs our goals in sex, we will, largely unthinkingly, discipline and regulate ourselves to act in accord with scripts because the script is part of how we've learnt to engage in the practice of sex, and a part of how we have come to understand ourselves as agents and subjects in relation to the practice of (cis-hetero) sex. It is the case that the script makes coordination, being "normal", avoiding pejorative stereotyping, and

meeting certain obligations incompatible with women pursuing their pleasure (or at least makes it very costly or difficult for women to pursue their pleasure), and this constraint of women's sexual agency does help explain why women follow the script in many cases. But being enculturated into the practice of sex through script also means we will internalize and embody it such that acting in accord with it is a reflection of our internalization of our role in the practice of sex, of how we have learned to be sexual agents and subjects in cis-heterosex. Following the script and marginalizing their own sexual pleasure is, for many women, an expression of (the culturally learned, gendered and limited options for) sexual agency and subjectivity, and not just a consequence of being constrained.

Of course, the sense in which dominant sex scripts produce women's sexual agencies and sexual subjectivities isn't totalizing. It is true that in many current cultural contexts the dominant sex script plays a large role in the development of sexual agency and subjectivity, especially for teenagers and young adults who don't yet have the experience or resources to question or contextualize dominant scripts (and who are increasingly exposed to heteronormative and increasingly hardcore pornography). Even for experienced or older adults, the script has often informed their early sexual experiences and the development of their sexual agencies and subjectivities. Nevertheless, we can gain access to new information and alternative hermeneutical resources which can make us conscious of and question dominant scripts, we can encounter new, different scripts, and we can enter communities where things are done differently. These experiences can expand and enhance our sexual agencies, provide alternative understandings of women's "roles" (and potential) in sex, and enrich certain senses of ourselves as sexual beings. Research shows that when teenage girls gain access to feminist and lesbian communities and resources they begin to question key features of dominant sex scripts (such as the centrality of PIV), for example, and that this has positive effects on women's relationship to pleasure, their bodies, and their sense of and connection to themselves as sexual beings.

Further, while we embody the script and while it can inform our emotions, desires, and imaginations, it can't *fully* determine our bodily experiences, our emotional responses, or our desires and sexual imaginations. If someone is physiologically unable to orgasm from PIV (as many women are), the script cannot make it such that they do (although it can influence how they

interpret physical sensations, how they tolerate pain, how/if they eroticize certain bodily sensations and experiences, and the satisfaction they feel at performing pleasure). Relatedly, many women report “shutting down” or becoming disconnected from their bodies over time because sex is painful and non-pleasurable; the body rebels against what culture expects of it. Further, while the script can influence what feels awkward, intimate, and safe, many women report also experiencing “outlaw emotions” (Jagger 1989) in sex like frustration, anger, sadness, contempt, or emptiness. These are emotions which, according to the script, are abnormal for the situation, but more accurately reflect the effects of the subordinate role women are given in the script and the marginalized status of their pleasure. And while the script informs sexual desires and imaginations, people of all genders have always had “deviant” desires, ones which transgress the normalcy described by dominant scripts (Oksala 2011).

So while internalizing the script means that women will be satisfied with the sex the script produces, this satisfaction sits uneasily alongside significant dissatisfaction and disconnect. This is, I think, what underlies the complex, ambivalent relationship to pleasure and sex many women express. The script, and our role in it, is internalized and produces us in particular ways, but it cannot do so totally. In embodying the script we are empowered to be physically sexual, and the script animates our emotional lives, our desires, and our sexual imaginations - but it does so in a way that limits us and forecloses other, better and more enriching modes of embodiment, other emotional resonances and responses, other desires, and the possibility of imagining other ways of doing things. In particular, it cuts us women from their own pleasure, from the potential to feel deeply and joyfully in sex and enjoy their own their bodies. For many women, this eventually leads to the body, emotions, or imagination and desires rebelling, such that persistent disconnect and frustration sits alongside the culturally learned and internalized idea that we should be “satisfied” with sex so long as it doesn’t hurt too much and pleases our partners. We might understand the complex ambivalence women have to pleasure, cis-heterosex, and the script as an inchoate form of “yearning” (hooks 1990) for something different - something better - even as the script (and other aspects of dominant sexual ideology) disproportionately influences how women (and men) learn to be sexual agents and come to understand themselves in relation to the practice of cis-heterosex.

Conclusion

That we can internalize scripts, and that the dominant sex script plays a role in shaping sexual agency and subjectivity and so in shaping women's relationship to pleasure, is important to recognize in painting a more complete picture of how the dominant sex script works and works on us, and how it works to produce and sustain certain social realities like the pleasure gap. When we focus on agency constraint alone, we can describe cases wherein women follow script and marginalize their own pleasure because the script makes the goal of prioritizing their own pleasure incompatible with other goals like coordinating, being "normal", avoiding sanction and stereotyping, or meeting obligations, or because the script makes that goal difficult or costly. These kinds of cases *do* happen, and the dominant sex script does constrain women with respect to seeking sexual pleasure. But often, women have internalized the script: many of them have become sexual agents and subjects - and have learned what sex is and what their role in it is - through enculturation into the practice of sex as described by the script. This is, I think, what underlies the fact that women report high levels of sexual satisfaction even as they experience minimal pleasure in cis-heterosex.

Looking closely at script internalization and how the script shapes women's relationship to pleasure highlights that agency constraint isn't all we need or ought to appeal to in explaining women's sexual behavior by reference to the script. Women will often discipline and regulate themselves to behave in accord with the script because the script is how they have learned to orient and engage their agencies and determine their goals in sex, and because the script has shaped their sense of self in relation to the practice of sex. In particular, the script shapes women's relationship to pleasure such that experiencing pleasure isn't a core part of many women's goals in cis-heterosex, nor is it something that fits within their sexual subjectivities, while performing and providing pleasure is.

This analysis highlights that the sexual agencies and subjectivities made available to women in mainstream culture are limited and limiting, often leading to disconnect and self-alienation and a fraught, ambivalent relationship with pleasure. These agencies and subjectivities persist even as newer images of sexually empowered, active, and desirous women proliferate.

Many of these new images of active female sexual agency haven't necessarily challenged the old dominant scripts or provided real resources for women to expand and enhance their sexual agencies or subjectivities, nor have they provided real means to expand our imagination about what cis-heterosex is and what it can be to include forms of sex more conducive to women's pleasure. Rather, they have increased the mandate on women to, somehow, enjoy "normal" cis-heterosex as it is - structured by the dominant script - with ever more performative gusto. These new cultural ideals have tasked women with being active, desirous, and finding pleasure *within the terms of the script*. As such, they have arguably increased the social pressure and sense of personal urgency women experience to perform (and provide) pleasure, even while there is still little real room or opportunity for women's actual pleasure in cis-heterosex, and even while the dominant script for cis-heterosex continues to cut women off from their own pleasure.

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3. Sexual Agency, Consent, and Good, Ethical Sex³⁰

Introduction

The #metoo movement has forced mainstream society to reckon with the widespread prevalence of sexual violence. The ubiquity of not only rape but also of ethically murky sex - cases of ‘grey rape’³¹ where consent may be given (or at least not refused) yet the sex that occurs is unwanted, continues despite *becoming* unwanted, or is experienced as harmful, coercive, violating, or objectifying - has become apparent. It is increasingly recognized that the absence of refusal *or* the presence of one act of consent at the beginning of a sexual encounter is insufficient for making sure sex is ethical and desired by all persons involved. This recognition has prompted the need for a new normative standard for sexual conduct, one which encompasses idea that both (or all) partners involved in a sexual encounter ought to be able to influence how sex goes for its duration and stop at any time. “Ongoing, enthusiastic” affirmative consent - the idea that permissible sex requires explicit, verbal, ongoing acquiescence rather than the absence of refusal or the presence of a singular “yes” - has been widely endorsed as this new standard. But the rhetoric surrounding ongoing enthusiastic affirmative consent isn’t limited to the necessary conditions for merely permissible sex. Ongoing, enthusiastic affirmative consent is widely presented as a standard and practice that will make sex *robustly* ethical and more pleasurable. Sex educators, prominent popular feminist activists, and media sources variously center this form of consent as the main, if not the only, concept that individuals need to navigate their sex lives ethically, and that we collectively need in working to mitigate sexual injustice and to promote sexual flourishing (Nash 2019). The Antioch model, which requires explicit, verbal consent for

³⁰ I borrow the phrase “good, ethical sex” from Quill Kukla (2018). In section 2, I provide cases I take to be illustrative of good, ethical sex and describe the kind of agency characteristic of them.

³¹ ‘Grey rape’ is a controversial term within feminist scholarship. I use it here to indicate cases of sex which aren’t non-consensual but are still experienced by victims/survivors (largely women and girls) as not exactly wanted or as violating or harmful. There is significant empirical data for taking such cases - and victims/survivors’ testimonies concerning their ambivalent nature - seriously. See Gavey 2005.

each ‘micro step of the encounter’ (Alcoff 2018, 129), is an influential version of ongoing, enthusiastic consent models³².

In this chapter, I address the claim that the Antioch model makes for *robustly ethical and pleasurable* sex. I introduce the *reciprocal self-regulation* model of sexual agency as an alternative to the Antioch model for thinking about robustly ethical engagement throughout sex. The reciprocal self-regulation model is intended to provide an alternative to the Antioch model for understanding how, in “good, ethical sex”, partners engage with and respond to one another, how they enable each other to shape, in an ongoing way, the nature and the content of the sex they have, how they *co-determine* the sex they have together. The model reflects and centers the fact that during good, ethical sex, sexual partners are mutually responsive and interdependently motivated: when A and B have sex, A regulates her agency - her sexual actions and sexual self-expression - in response to B’s agency - B’s sexual actions and sexual self-expression - and vice versa. Such self-regulation is creative and self-expressive: A doesn’t forsake her sexual self-expression or subjectivity and take a purely reactive stance to B, but rather finds ways to engage her (A’s) sexual subjectivity *with* B’s. And B does the same.

The reciprocal self-regulation model aims to capture and extend the feminist recognition that consent, even the ongoing enthusiastic consent of the Antioch model, cannot do the work of ensuring sex is good and robustly ethical, and that the near-exclusive focus on consent in social and academic conversations concerning sexual ethics and sexual agency distorts and obscures recognition of the ways partners can, and often *do*, co-determine good, ethical sexual experiences (see Fischel 2019; Alcoff 2018; Kukla 2018). While the Antioch model is also concerned with sexual co-determination, it offers extremely limited means - request and consent - by which partners can co-determine sex. The reciprocal self-regulation model details a kind of interdependent agency wherein partners use varied means - such as verbal negotiation, non-verbal expression, movement, and gestures - to co-determine sex. As such, the reciprocal self-regulation model recognizes the centrality of “*intersubjective attunement*” (Alcoff 2018, 128) in good, ethical sex more fully than the Antioch model is able to, and so accords better with what serves to

³² The Antioch model is named for Antioch College, the first college to institute this kind of consent model as a policy.

make partnered sex ethical and good and with what we experience as valuable in sex. I illustrate this claim by showing how the reciprocal self-regulation model can accommodate and partially account for the fact that sex (sometimes) involves what I will be calling *sexual flow* - positive states of altered consciousness in which persons experience elation, ease, and a sense of losing oneself in the moment. Sexual flow requires a high degree of intersubjective attunement. The Antioch model, in neglecting such attunement in favor of repeated acts of request and consent, can't accommodate and works against the possibility of flow in sex.

Section I sets the scene. I briefly detail some main feminist critiques of consent and describe my approach. In section II, I look to cases of sex that are intuitively good and ethical to build the reciprocal self-regulation model of sexual agency. In section III I discuss sexual co-determination, and argue that the Antioch model fails to recognize some of the key ways in which sexual partners work together to co-determine mutually positive sexual experiences. In insisting on the necessity of explicit verbal consent for every action, the Antioch model neglects how in good, ethical sex partners are, and work to be, intersubjectively attuned, engaged in an interdependent and dynamic form of agency. Such attunement is a key part of good, ethical sex, and a key aspect of what many of us find valuable in all kinds of sex. In section IV, I highlight that intersubjective attunement is a key part of good ethical sex through examining sexual flow, and argue that the reciprocal self-regulation model can accommodate and partially account for flow in sex.

I. Background and Approach

Consent and Critique:

An effect of the #metoo movement has been a greater awareness of “grey rape” and ethically murky, not-clearly-nonconsensual but intuitively problematic cases of sex in mainstream society. These grey cases can be understood as cases of “unjust sex”: sex for which consent is given (or for which consent is not explicitly refused) but which is unjust in that it is not shaped by the desires, boundaries, and agencies of each person involved. Ann Cahill (2014, 2016) coined the term “unjust sex” specifically to reflect unjust dynamics within normalized heterosex and the ways in which women’s desires are often not able to influence the nature of the sex they engage

in with men. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation, there has also been increasing social awareness of “the pleasure gap” - the fact that cis-heterosex tends to center men’s pleasure and orgasms at the expense of women’s, and that women report significantly less pleasure in cis-heterosex than men report. Social conversations in response to rape culture/s, unjust sex, and even pleasure have largely centered consent.

In sex education and popular feminist and sexuality activism consent has become regarded as a kind of panacea for sexual violence and injustice. In particular, a newer standard of consent designed to guide permissible behavior *throughout* sex rather than just at its inception has been promoted. Jennifer Nash (2019) describes the ways “ongoing, enthusiastic affirmative consent” has been institutionalized as a standard for ethically permissible sex in university campuses across the U.S. But the rhetoric around ongoing, enthusiastic affirmative consent doesn’t stop at permissibility. The institutionalization of this standard also promotes the practices of seeking and giving clear, verbal affirmative consent as those which ensure both robustly ethical sex, and sex that is more pleasurable and erotic for all involved. The slogan “consent is sexy!”, emblazoned on badges, posters, and t-shirts given out at workshops and information sessions, has become mainstream. Joseph Fischel (2019, 2-3) similarly describes how some mainstream media and sex education (a *Teen Vogue* guide to anal sex, in his example) rhetorically casts consent as that which guarantees pleasure in sex. For consent to do the ethical and erotic work promised, however, it must be “ongoing and enthusiastic”, frequently checked and unambiguously verbally affirmed throughout sex. As Nash argues, the once mocked Antioch Model, which holds that explicit, verbal consent must be sought and given for every “micro-step of a sexual encounter” (Alcoff 2018, 128), is now held up as embodying the approach one must take to have good, ethical sex. This rhetoric, and the notion that consent can do this ethical and erotic work, isn’t confined to U.S. university campuses. It is ubiquitous in online sex education spaces or blogs, in practical sex education in the U.S. and elsewhere, and in popular feminist books and articles. Arguably, the kind of consent imagined by the Antioch model has become the “common sense” standard for good, ethical sexual conduct in progressive spaces (at a rhetorical level at least).

The instance that sexual consent must be verbally ongoing and enthusiastic to constitute *real* sexual consent can be read as an attempt at ameliorative conceptual engineering. Sally Haslanger

(2006) describes ameliorative analyses as those providing an account of a concept which “enhanc(es) our conceptual resources to serve our (critically examined) purposes”. The “critically examined purpose” for the Antioch model is, generally, to build a resource to combat rape culture. Its more specific purpose is to promote a normative standard and guide for behavior *throughout sex*. Widespread awareness of the prevalence of grey rape, unjust sex, and the pleasure gap has prompted the recognition that the standard for permissible sex should prompt partners to be robustly engaged with one another throughout sex, attentive to each others’ desires and boundaries, aware of the entitlement each has to stop sexual activity at any time, checking-in to make sure sex, or a particular sexual act, is still mutually desired. Building the practice of asking for and giving explicit, verbal consent for each “micro-step” of a sexual encounter into the concept of consent is an attempt to make consent, as the already dominant legal and social benchmark for permissible sex, reflect the recognition that grey rape and unjust sex - paradigmatically devoid of such ongoing mutual responsive engagement - is deeply unethical. The linking of this ethical standard with pleasure and eroticism can, as Nash argues, be read as an attempt to “sell” this newer conception of consent. I think it can also be read as an attempt to bring this conception of consent to bear on issues like the pleasure gap.

Feminists (and queer theorists, disability theorists, and others) have long critiqued the notion that consent should be our benchmark and major concept for analyzing sexual ethics and working towards sexual justice. While these critiques are varied, they can be grouped into two kinds of argument:

- 1) In present and historical conditions of gendered and racial subordination, a focus on consent can mask how sexual violence and subordination actually operate, and can serve to shield certain unjust and harmful sexual experiences from recognition and critique. Catherine MacKinnon (1989) questions how meaningful the concept of sexual consent can be in conditions of patriarchy which significantly reduce women’s bargaining power in sex and eroticize feminine submission, informing the sexual subjectivities and desires of both men and women. Emily Alyssa Owens (2015) argues that attempting to assess sexual relationships between enslaved black women and white slave owners through a consent framework masks the “deep and complex vulnerabilities” enslaved black women faced. Cahill (2014, 2016),

building on the work of psychologist Nicola Gavey, argues that much normalized heterosex is consensual yet still unjust, in that the woman partner's agency and desires are treated as unimportant with respect to the nature and quality of the sexual interaction, and her active, desirous input beyond consent isn't enabled or sought. Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation highlighted how "normal" cis-heterosex that is consensual and non-coercive still involves the marginalization of women's pleasure and enjoyment.

- 2) Consent is a specific kind of practice and a limited exercise of agency, and is insufficient for ensuring an ethical or mutually enjoyable sexual experience. Consent, therefore, is not the framework suited to build an ethics of sex, and focusing so exhaustively on consent obscures the ways people can and do engage with one another to have good, ethical sex. In this sense, the picture of sexual agency arising from consent models is limited, limiting, and unrealistic. Quill Kukla, writing as Rebecca Kukla (2018), argues that the "near-exclusive" focus on consent in philosophy and elsewhere has "narrowed and distorted" our understandings of sex and sexual ethics. They highlight how practices and forms of sexual negotiation other than consent - such as invitations, gift offers, and the establishment of exit conditions - do the work of sexual communication and enhance mutual enjoyment more than the request and acquiesce, or request and refusal, practices of consent. Linda Martín Alcoff (2018) suggests that the ways partners can become "intersubjectively attuned" and respond to one another ethically throughout sex generally don't resemble the repeated, explicit, verbal acts of consent imagined by the Antioch model. Cahill (2016) describes *just* sex as sex in which both (or all) partner's desires and agency play an active and ongoing role in determining the sexual encounter, and describes this process as embodied, relational, and intersubjective (which is at odds with the always explicit and verbal process of the Antioch model). Importantly, these kind of arguments can still allow that consent is an important concept, and that it has an important legal purpose. The claim is not that consent doesn't matter - rather, it is that we over-focus on the concept of consent to the detriment of our understanding of ethical sex and sexual agency, often trying to make the concept of consent do ethical and interpersonal work it is not suited for.

Approach:

In this chapter, I build on the kind of arguments in (2) above. Consent, even the ongoing and enthusiastic consent described in the Antioch model, won't result in a just sexual landscape, and over-focus on consent elides other, better, more rich and realistic possibilities and practices for sexual agency and ethical, pleasurable sex. With the reciprocal self-regulation model of sexual agency, I aim to provide an alternative way of thinking about the agency involved in sex that is *good and robustly ethical*.

In Chapters 1 and 2 I focused on the structural conditions and scripts for cis-heterosex, and argued that they marginalize women's pleasure and enjoyment. In those chapters, I emphasized that the marginalization of women's pleasure and enjoyment is *normal* in cis-heterosex. While this is the case, and while there is, undeniably, an enormous prevalence of unjust sex, plenty of good and robustly ethical sex also goes on in the world; despite heteronormative ideology and pernicious scripts, people *do* find ways of having robustly ethical and pleasurable sex (although doing so is easier in contexts where there are less-heteronormative scripts and other sexual hermeneutical resources to draw upon (Rowland 2020)). This chapter focuses on sex that is good and robustly ethical: the reciprocal self-regulation model aims to capture the agency characterizing these good and ethical, but realistic and non-ideal, cases. On one hand, my motivation comes from the sense that the Antioch model is unrealistic and impoverished, and fails to capture what sex, including good and robustly ethical sex, is like. On the other hand, like those who advocate for the Antioch model, I care deeply about the prevalence of unjust sex and think we *should* advocate for understandings of sexual ethics which promote the idea that throughout sex, partners ought to value one another's enjoyment and recognize and treat each other as active sexual agents, each entitled to influence how sex goes and when it will end. With the reciprocal self-regulation model, I aim to capture this idea and describe a form of engagement that accords with the reality of good, ethical sex better than the Antioch model is able to.

Unlike Chapters 1 and 2, then, this chapter doesn't focus on the structural conditions or scripts for (cis-hetero) sex. Given this, there are central feminist concerns with respect to consent, sexuality, and sexual ethics this chapter doesn't address. As Mackinnon (1989), Alcoff (2018),

Drucilla Cornell (1995), bell hooks (1992), and many others have argued, our sexual subjectivities and agencies - our desires, interests, sense of self during sex, the scripts we have for sexual activity - are shaped in contexts of oppressive gender and race systems. Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation argued that the practice of mainstream cis-heterosex is also shaped by scripts and norms which constrain and shape agency. My approach in this chapter enters not at the structural level addressing how we might change social milieus such that sexual subjectivities are formed under more just conditions, making for more ethical sexual relations, but at the personal and interpersonal level. While I'm interested in the former project, in this chapter I want to look at the ways sexual partners navigate the domain of sex - a domain with potential for richness, intimacy, and joy, but one also fraught with social and personal vulnerabilities - ethically and together. I'm interested in how sexual engagement can look when pernicious scripts *aren't* the determinant of how sexual activity unfolds, in how partners can be ethical to one another and exercise agency despite ideology, and in what agency in realistic good, ethical sex looks like.

Interpersonal interventions in harmful sexual ideology are an important part of social change, as are larger, structural changes. As Cahill (2016) writes:

A feminist sexual politics (and ethics) must be able to account for the possibility of meaningful sexual action not determined by systematic injustice...persons of all genders, functioning under all manner of systematic injustices, nevertheless sometimes find ways of doing sexuality that enhances their flourishing as human beings, and feminist theory must be a vehicle by which that positive resistance, that creative opposition, can be conceptualized and thus rendered ever more imaginable (759).

My hope is that the reciprocal self-regulation model describes a mode of engagement conducive to sexual flourishing and more just sexual relations, even as there are larger structural interventions to be made.

Three final notes on my approach. First, in this chapter I'm concerned with the agency involved in non-financially transactional sexual encounters involving two or more persons. Solo masturbation or other forms of individual sexual engagement are not a focus of this chapter. An individual's more general sexual agency *outside* of sexual encounters is not a focus of this chapter³³. How agency operates in contexts of sex work is also not a focus of this chapter³⁴.

Second, in this chapter "sex" doesn't refer to any one kind of sex act. While in previous chapters I was concerned with how scripts and social structures shape the practice of cis-heterosex in such a way that cis-heterosex tends, by default, to center PIV, in this chapter I want to consider the kinds of sex people can and do have when they aren't beholden to the expectation that PIV or (penetration of some kind) must be central. Despite dominant scripts, many people have sex that isn't PIV sex, or any form of penetrative sex. Some partners engage in mutual masturbation, some use toys, some center oral sex, some engage in a diverse array of sexual acts. "Sex" in this chapter encompasses all the diverse ways people can have sex. Insofar as we fail to substantially recognize the heterogeneity of sex in theorizing how sex can be robustly ethical and good, we run the risk of tacitly importing heteronormative presumptions and failing to attend to reality.

Finally, I am not proposing that the reciprocal self-regulation model could serve as a legal or policy standard for permissible sex or that it should supplant Antioch-like models of affirmative consent where they have been institutionalized. My project is concerned with sexual ethics and realistic good, ethical sex. One problematic effect of the "near-exclusive" focus on consent in conversations about sexual ethics has involved the conflation of legal or institutional standards for

³³ While this dimension of an individual's (or group's) sexual agency, relating to things like access to sexual health care, access to diverse hermeneutical resources, sex education, and so on, is important (and I discuss it in other work), here I'm interested in the agency involved in actually having sex with other people.

³⁴ I do not intend this model to be applicable to sex work. The transactional nature of sex work changes the ethical landscape of sex such that a different kind of analysis is needed to properly think about agency in those contexts. I do think, however, it's perfectly possible to think about how one could engage more ethically with sex workers - see, for example, Jacqueline Francis, *How Not to be a Dick in a Strip Club: A Patron's Guide*. Recent sex worker activism advocating for decriminalization is also a resource for thinking about sex work and agency - see Molly Smith & Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes - The Fight for Sex Workers Rights*, Verso, 2018.

permissible sex with the project of articulating *robustly ethical* and, in the case of the Antioch model, *good* and pleasurable sex. While the Antioch model provides a normative guide for practically adjudicating permissible/legal sex, advocates of the Antioch model also “sell” the model under the rubric that it will make sex robustly ethical and more pleasurable (Nash 2019, 200). But the Antioch model fails to capture what partners can, and often *do*, do in having good, robustly ethical sex, so its’ conflation of permissible and good, ethical sex is distorting and problematic. My aim is to illuminate good, ethical sex and show the inadequacies of the Antioch model through an exploration of sexual agency³⁵.

II. Reciprocal Self-Regulation and Good, Ethical Sex

In this section I describe (fictional, but realistic) cases of sex it is intuitive to describe as ethical and good, and draw on these to describe the agency involved in good, ethical sex. While involving different kinds of sex (queer sex, kinky sex, vanilla sex), and different kinds of relationship (long term relationships, one night stands, teenage romances), the cases all describe the kind of sex in which all partners: have their boundaries and desires taken seriously and taken on as action guiding throughout sex; are able, and enable each other, to influence in an ongoing way how sex goes, what it involves, and when it will stop; treat each other’s - and their own - enjoyment as important; and are practically recognized as active sexual agents. They describe experiences that are positive, on the whole, for all those involved. Reflecting on them illuminates the agency characteristic of good, ethical sex and goes some way to showing that the Antioch model, in insisting on repeated, explicit and verbal acts of consent, obscures and elides many of

³⁵ Some legal theorists have attempted to devise different accounts for permissible sex which don’t center consent, and which might be able to be implemented at a legal or policy level. Michelle Anderson (2006), arguing for a legal standard that can address grey rape, argues sex (which she understands as penetrative sex) should only be considered legally permissible if it is the product of negotiation, rather than just of acquiescence or the absence of refusal. Fischel and O’Connell (2017) argue that permissible sex ought to be understood as sex wherein each participant had the *capability to co-determine* sexual relations. The notion of ‘capability’ here is intended to push away from individualistic, mentalistic notions of the capacity to consent and towards the idea that social supports and structures can enable people, especially although not exclusively people with certain kinds of cognitive disability, to determine the sexual experiences they are involved in.

the other, important and realistic, ways partners communicate enjoyment and desires and make sure of each others' continued willingness.

Case 1: YOUNG LOVERS

Ola and Lysha have been dating for 3 years. They slept together several times after meeting at a party, becoming romantically involved after. They've had sex countless times and know the kind of sex that works for them. Lysha knows that Ola enjoys clitoral stimulation and needs it to reach orgasm. When they have penetrative sex with Lysha wearing a strap-on, Lysha more often than not will use her hand to pleasure Ola in this way. It took them some time, and trial and error, to figure out a way of doing it that worked and was sustainable. But they found success and Lysha now knows some particular techniques that tend to work for Ola. One morning waking up together, Lysha and Ola begin to be sexual. They soon start having penetrative sex and Lysha moves her hand towards Ola's clitoris. She begins trying a particular movement that usually brings Ola pleasure, but this time Ola quickly moves her hips away and says: "Too sensitive right now, need something gentler". Lysha tries another movement, and this time Ola relaxes into it and raises her hips. Lysha raises an inquisitive eyebrow to check with Ola that he's reading her right; she gives a small nod in return. They continue, with Lysha continuing to search Ola's face for indications of what's working for her, and Ola expressing her pleasure and keeping tabs on whether things working for Lysha too.

YOUNG LOVERS can help us begin to get a grip on how in good, ethical sex each sexual partner's agencies, desires, and motivations informs the other's. A partner, A, brings to a sexual encounter her own interests, desires, skills, body, boundaries, and so on. These, along with her more in-the-moment desires, guide her actions, reactions, and movements, and enable her to sexually engage in the ways she wants and enjoys. Call A's general sexual interests, skills, boundaries, desires, and bodily particularities, in combination with her in-the-moment desires, A's *sexual subjectivity*. A's sexual subjectivity informs her actions and is a crucial component of her agency throughout sex. A also *regulates* her sexual agency in response to the sexual agency and sexual subjectivity of her partner, B. She regulates her agency with reference to her experience and knowledge of B's interests, desires, boundaries, skills, and body. A also continuously regulates and re-regulates her sexual agency in response to the actions and the physical movements,

vocalizations and other noises, facial expressions, and so on, B performs throughout sex. Lysha draws on her own preferences as well her knowledge of (and history with) Ola to take sexual initiative. But she also regulates her actions in response to Ola's in-the-moment expressions and responses, adjusting or continuing depending on Ola's gestures, expressions, movements, and verbal requests.

This kind of self-regulation doesn't amount to following rules, or extensive deliberation, or self-constraint. Rather, it reflects that A is or works to be "intersubjectively attuned" (Alcoff 2018, 129) with B and regards them as a source of normativity in the encounter. If A is to engage in good, ethical sex wherein she recognizes and treats B as an active sexual agent, then she won't domineer the encounter, or do whatever it is that she wants regardless of what her partner wants or does. Neither will she forsake her own sexual subjectivity and take a reactive stance to B. Rather, she will find ways to engage her own sexual subjectivity *with* B's. In addition to being guided by her own interests, boundaries, and in-the-moment desires, A will take on B's boundaries, interests, and in-the-moment actions and expressions as action guiding. And B will do the same: sexual agency is reciprocal. It involves an ongoing back and forth of reciprocally regulated (re)action as partners engage their own sexual interests, in-the-moment desires, and actions with and in response to one another. Thus such self-regulation is thus never "complete". It is ongoing so long as sex is ongoing.

In *YOUNG LOVERS*, Ola and Lysha are clearly "intersubjectively attuned". Through attention to movement, sound, gestures, and through verbal exchanges they have a sense of what each other wants, and they are able to tell if and when the other wants to change or adjust. They both work (although it may not feel like work) to make sure they remain aware of the other's wants and needs. Although Lysha is taking more initiative than Ola, in asking for a change of touch, responding to Lysha's inquisitive eyebrow, and keeping tabs on Lysha's enjoyment, Ola is self-regulating in response to Lysha just as Lysha is self-regulating in response to her, Ola. And both of them, through this reciprocal self-regulation, find ways of having sex that incorporate both of their sexual subjectivities.

Case 2: NEW WAYS

Billy and Phil have been in a relationship for 30 years. Billy has recently had radiotherapy treatment for prostate cancer. Throughout their relationship, Billy has usually been the receiving partner when the couple have penetrative sex, but engaging in this way has been impossible while recovering from treatment. Phil has been a supportive partner and they've engaged sexually in other ways, but both have lamented the loss of that form of sex. After several months and a successful recovery, the couple know that, in theory, they should be able to have penetrative sex with Billy as the receiving partner again. They also know that it might be different from how it used to be - sensations might be different, and there's a higher chance of pain. After lots of preparation and foreplay, they try penetrative sex. It's very tentative and, despite being so familiar with one another's bodies and having a long history of engaging in this act together, this feels like new territory for them. Phil pays close attention to the facial expressions, noises, and movements Billy makes, as well as his direct verbal cues - he knows Billy's signals and cues well, but this occasion merits particularly close and careful attention. They can only have sex in this way for a few minutes before Billy has to tap out - the sensations feel strange to him, and he's emotionally confused. They cuddle and kiss. Despite how tentative, difficult, and brief sex was, they both feel increased intimacy for sharing a vulnerable experience. Over the coming weeks, they try penetrative sex again and slowly re-learn how to engage with one another in this way, while also devising new ways to stay sexual with one another.

NEW WAYS illustrates that in good, ethical sex, sexual partners are *interdependently motivated*. A's motivations depend on and are intertwined with B's, such that if B's motivations change - B wants to slow activity down, for example, and communicates it through adjusting his body - then A's change in response. In this sense, A and B are having sex *together* - they are doing something *with* one another rather than acting in a way that is more solipsistic, performing

actions upon each other's bodies³⁶. If B's motivations change while A's stay the same and A continues doing what he was already doing or planning to do - i.e. A's motivations for action do not change in response to the change in B's - then A has, in an important sense, ceased having sex with B and is performing actions upon B's body. Interdependent motivations are thus extremely important for ensuring that sex doesn't continue when one partner wants to stop, or that it changes when one partner needs it to change. Verbal negotiation is one way to signal a change in motivations, but it isn't the only way. If partners are intersubjectively attuned, they have a whole verbal and non-verbal array of means to communicate and respond to shifting motivations. Communicating with and responding to one's partner/s through verbal sexual communication, expressions, gestures, sounds, movements - these are the practices we engage in when we're interdependently motivated in sex.

Billy and Phil's sexual motivations are clearly interdependent, and it is extremely important in this case (and in any case) that they remain so. Given the situation, it is incumbent upon Phil to pay especially close attention to Billy, to work to remain highly intersubjectively attuned, as they navigate this effectively new territory together. If Billy's motivations change, Phil's will immediately change in response. As Phil is taking the lead (and Billy is learning in real time what works for him and his body now), the direction of such attention and motivational interdependence seems more unidirectional, from Phil to Billy. There *is* an asymmetry here, but Billy's motivations are still intertwined with Phil's; if Phil indicated that he needed to stop or pause, Billy would adjust his expectations and his motivations would shift accordingly. One

³⁶ Interdependent motivations and the emphasis on having sex *with* someone raises the question of shared agency. Bratman (2014) introduces an "interdependence condition" (alongside other conditions) in his account of joint action. The condition states that for an activity, J, to be something two agents A and B undertake *together*, there is interdependence in the persistence of the intentions of each A and B in favor of their J-ing. That is, the persistence of A's intention to J is interdependent with the persistence of B's intention to J. The idea of motivational interdependence draws on this condition. In describing interdependent motivations rather than intentions, I aim to reflect the fact that in sex, and in other improvisational, creative joint activities, our mental states aren't necessarily understood as a series of concrete, clear intentions. "Motivational interdependence" allows for a greater degree of openness with respect to mental states. I think the kind of shared agency involved in improvisational activities is an interesting and under explored topic, but one I leave for future research.

partner taking the lead doesn't contradict bi-directional motivational interdependence or the general idea of reciprocal self-regulation.

Case 3: FIRST TIME

Lila and Rue, both 16, have been dating for a few weeks. Lila is a queer trans woman; Rue is a queer cis woman. While they've kissed, neither have done anything more sexual with each other, or anyone else. One night, Rue and Lila begin to make out. This time, their kissing becomes more intense, and Rue asks Lila if she'd like to "go further". Lila smiles and nods, they resume kissing, and clothes come off. After a while, Rue tries to perform oral sex on Lila, replicating how she's seen women interact with penises in porn. Lila is clearly uncomfortable. She knows this is not how she imagined having sex, but she's not sure how to express why. When Rue notices Lila's discomfort is persisting, they have the following exchange:

Rue: "What's wrong?"

Lilia: "Nothing, it's fine."

R: "Seriously, what's up? Did I do something wrong?"

L: "It's just...I feel like you're treating my body like it's a guy's."

R: "I was trying to make you feel good..."

L: "I know. But I think I need to feel my body can be just like, mine in this. And that I can be me. I want the same for you, too."

R: "...I'm really sorry, I kind of don't know what to do. I just want us both to enjoy this. I want *you*."

L: "I don't really know how to do this either. Maybe let's show each other what we like? You could give me your hand and I can show you, and then the other way around?"

R: "That sounds fun. And hot. Promise you'll let me know if you wanna stop or change things?"

L: "Promise. You have to promise the same, though."

R: "Promise."³⁷

³⁷ See Talia Mae Bettcher's "When Selves Have Sex: What the Phenomenology of Trans Sexuality Can Teach Us About Sexual Orientation", *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2014, pp. 605-620 for an exploration of how some trans people experience their bodies and desire during sex.

Lila and Rue's exploration in *FIRST TIME* shows the kinds of rich experiences we can gain in attentive, engaged sex where we regard our partner/s rather than preconceived interpersonal scripts for sex as sources of inspiration and normativity. In this sense, reciprocal self-regulation - finding ways to engage one's sexual subjectivity with that of one's partner/s, being interdependently motivated - makes possible certain options for agency that otherwise wouldn't exist, such as engaging in certain sexual acts, having sex in certain ways, or various opportunities for learning about bodies and pleasure. But more generally, and as *FIRST TIME* highlights, reciprocal self-regulation is what undergirds having sex *with* someone. Part of what is enriching about sex is having sex *with* other, particular and idiosyncratic persons: learning how to engage your interests with theirs, playing with desires, trying things out, being sexually inspired, learning how to physically move together, and seeing what works for you both. Co-creation (or co-discovery), rather than sexual domineering, is what makes for good, enriching sex.

Of course, there are cases where self-regulating in response to another during sex might be stifling and constraining, but self-regulation itself is not the cause of such constraint. Factors like a lack of sexual compatibility can mean that there are no substantive options for partners to engage their sexual subjectivities or to have workable interdependent motivations. If A's yucks are B's yums and vice versa, then both A and B are likely to find attempting to self-regulate in response to one another constraining and stifling. But reciprocally responsive and expressive self-regulation (backed by at least a degree of sexual compatibility), generally enables partner's to experience those aspects of sex - exploration, play, fun, self-expression, self-determination, learning - most conducive to sexual flourishing.

It is worth stressing that although it emphasizes self-regulation, sexual self-expression is central to the reciprocal self-regulation model also. Reciprocal self-regulation doesn't amount to rule following or self-constraint, and it doesn't curtail or contradict the freedoms sexual expression and exploration can offer. As the cases show, reciprocal self-regulation is the mutual, creative exercise of agency as sexual partners find ways to engage their sexual subjectivities together, and find ways to *mutually* self-express or enable one another's sexual self-expression. Absent self-regulation generally, it's difficult to imagine that sex would really get off the ground and constitute a site of sexual self-expression for anyone: sex is, in important respects, a

cooperative engagement, a matter of practical coordination. Such cooperation naturally involves a degree of self-regulation in response to the other/s one is wanting to engage with. And absent reciprocity in self-regulation and an interdependence of motivations, one person's sexual self-expression and subjectivity dominates, leaving no room for their partner's sexual subjectivity or self-expression. If expressiveness is important to us in sex, which it is and should be, we must recognize the necessity of self-regulation. Reciprocal self-regulation enables *each* partner to self-express during sex; it enables each partner to engage their sexual subjectivities in the sexual experience they're participating in.

Verbal Sexual Negotiation:

Case 4: KINK

Gillian and Jacob connect on a dating app. From online chatting, they realize they have complimentary sexual interests - Jacob is sexually submissive, looking for a dominant play partner, Gillian is sexually dominant, looking for a submissive. Gillian Ubers to Jacob's place. Over drinks, they flirt and plan - once they've playfully affirmed that they're both interested in having sex with each other, they establish a safe word (an agreed upon word which will immediately stop sexual activity), and a slow down word (a word to pause sexual activity and invite a check in), as well as boundaries and the sexual acts they both would like to engage in. After some kissing, Gillian ties Jacob up and begins spanking him, as per the requests he made during earlier sexual negotiation. After some time, Jacob begins to feel discomfort in his shoulders from being tied up. He tries to indicate his discomfort to Gillian through movement and sound, hoping she'll take it as a cue to loosen the ties. But Gillian misinterprets Jacob's action as play, as part of the scene, and continues what she's doing. Jacob uses the 'slow down' word; Gillian immediately checks in. Jacob asks her to loosen the ties, and to generally be a bit more responsive to his bodily and non-verbal cues. Gillian apologizes for not doing so, agrees to try, and asks that Jacob makes extremely clear when he wants things to change direction (given she doesn't know him or his subtle cues well). They resume play, Gillian mentally referring to both the boundaries and desires they explicitly discussed and continuing to watch for Jacobs cues, Jacob making sure to make more clear when he needs something to change. They have a fun and satisfying night, and leave it at that. Neither was looking for anything more involved, and they both have positive memories of the experience they shared.

KINK highlights the role verbal *sexual negotiation* can play in reciprocal self-regulation. Kukla describes sexual negotiation as the ways partners verbally “settle whether or not (they) will have sex, what kind of sex (they) will have, involving which activities, what (they) like and don’t like, what (their) limits and constraints are...when (they) want to stop” and so on (Kukla 2018, 70-71). Although ‘reciprocal self-regulation’ encompasses the myriad ways we verbally *and* non-verbally sexually communicate, regulate, and express, sexual negotiation plays an important role in enhancing and enabling sexual agency as understood through the reciprocal self-regulation model.

KINK illustrates that through sexual negotiation, partners can develop a shared set of boundaries and desires, putting them on the same page with respect to what acts sex could involve and which acts are off limits. Negotiation enables partners to deepen their understanding of one another’s sexual subjectivities (encompassing limits, triggers, desires, and so on), and enables partners to set up a particular “discursive frame” for sex (Kukla 2018, 79). As Kukla argues, in sexual contexts words can take on particular significations they don’t have in other contexts. In some BDSM sex, for example, one partner uttering “no” or “stop” doesn’t necessarily mean that they want activity to stop; uttering “no” can be a part of play and shared fantasy. Sexual negotiation enables partners to be on the same page about the discursive frame they are operating in during sex and to share an understanding of how certain words, like “no” should be responded to. It also enables partners to establish specific cues like safe-words which definitively indicate that sex needs to stop, such that certain discursive frames, such as those in which “no” doesn’t mean “no”, are safe.

In deepening partners’ understandings of each other’s sexual subjectivities and in enabling partners to establish a set of shared desires, boundaries, cues and a shared understanding of the discursive frame sex will occur in, sexual negotiation generally enables partners to develop a *shared framework* for sex. Reciprocal self-regulation can thus be *mediated* by a shared framework, rather than only consisting in partners more “directly” responding to one another. This enhances options for agency: after negotiation, partners better know what forms of initiative they can take - what they can suggest, how they can change the direction of events, how they can do something new - while still respecting each other’s interests and limits. As a result of negotiation before and

during sex, Gillian knew what forms of initiative she could take without necessarily asking Jacob before each new act, and she knew (and during sex learnt how to better) gauge Jacobs enjoyment and comfort levels. And although Jacob was in a passive role during sex, the framework he negotiated with Gillian also enabled him, Jacob, to know what kinds of initiative and what kinds of actions were open to him. Gillian and Jacob’s reciprocal self-regulation was mediated by the framework they established. Of course, sexual negotiation isn’t only helpful for partners wanting to engage in kinky sex. Sexual negotiation for *any* sex can enhance partner’s options for agency and initiative through establishing a framework which can mediate reciprocal self-regulation.

From the foregoing we can see that reciprocal self-regulation in sex is creative. It involves partners finding ways to engage their sexual subjectivities together, working to find ways to mutually self-express, riffing off one another, taking up what the other offers, expresses, or suggests and acting in response for the purposes of continued pleasure, fun, intimacy, or whatever else it is those specific partners are aiming to experience in sex. This form of agency is also skilled. It takes practice and experience (both in sexual and non-sexual situations) to become good at reading another person and self-regulating one’s agency in response to them, and to do so without sacrificing self-expression (although it is still a form of agency that can be exercised, albeit falteringly, absent significant experience - think of Lila and Rue). Like other skills, when one is proficient in reciprocal self-regulation, it won’t necessarily feel difficult, laborious, or effortful. *This* notion of skill highlights that being good at sex isn’t just about having certain technical or performance skills, but is more about having a flexible communication, engagement, and responsiveness skill set that adapts to and learns from the particularities of specific contexts and specific people³⁸.

Sex isn’t the only activity characterized by reciprocal self-regulation. “Reciprocal self-regulation” generally describes a form of agency characterizing joint improvisational activities which rely on

³⁸ The idea of being “technically skilled” at sex is, I think, something of a fraught idea, given that no technique is guaranteed to be compatible with everybody - or every body; more likely people are technically good at having sex with *particular* people.

a dynamic interdependence of motivations to be performed. Jazz, arguably, involves reciprocal self-regulation as players creatively and skillfully riff-off one another, finding ways of engaging their musical skills and interests together (perhaps this similarity in creative, expressive, responsive engagement is part of why sex is so frequently likened to music, and to jazz in particular (see e.g., Millar 2019, 23-42)). Joint “free play” - enjoyable, unstructured, purposeless, often creative activity with another person (such as a spontaneous, non-competitive snowball fight, for example) - also involves reciprocal self-regulation, as participants creatively and playfully respond to one another in extending and inventing their game (perhaps this similarity in playful response and joint invention is part of why sex therapists and other sexuality experts describe sex as a form of adult play (Tuckman 2018)). In different domains, reciprocal self-regulation is carried out in different ways, takes on different forms, and has different significances. In the context of jazz or free-play, reciprocal self-regulation is a success condition more than an ethical condition; in the context of sex, it’s both. Even if there are important ethical dimensions to engagement in jazz and free-play, they are not as salient and not as connected to extreme potential for injustice and harm as they are in sex.

III. Co-determination

Reciprocal self-regulation describes how partners relate to each other in an ongoing, dynamic, improvisational, creative, and expressive way. In this sense, reciprocal self-regulation is the very stuff of having sex, in particular, of having sex wherein each partner is enabled to play a role in determining the nature and content of sexual engagement, and each is enabled to access the freedoms and goods sex can involve. As such, the reciprocal self-regulation model effectively describes how partners *co-determine* sex. The ability to determine the kind of sex one has is central in a feminist ethics of sex. Cahill’s analysis of unjust sex can be read as highlighting how in normalized heterosex women are frequently denied sufficient determination of the sexual experiences they share with men. Cahill (2016) writes:

[In unjust sex] the relevance of the woman’s sexual agency is wholly (or at least to a problematic degree) determined by the specific sexual actions, desires, and

interests of the man in question...[in this sense the woman is] precluded from having a sufficiently efficacious influence on the particular interaction (756).

In unjust sex, the woman partner's agency is "truncated" while the man partner's predominates; women's desire is thus denied the "capacity to affect, in a meaningful [and ongoing] way, the quality and nature of the interaction" (750). Women are not "recognized as effective and...active elements in the creation of an intersubjective interaction" (754). As such, they are denied anything but cursory determination (in the form of giving consent) over their sexual experiences. Cahill emphasizes that in ethical sex, women's agencies and desires *as well* as those of their partners make meaningful contributions to the sexual experience, shaping the nature and content of the experience as a whole. Although Cahill's analysis focuses on unjust heterosex, we may take out of it that sexual determination for people of all genders involves one's desires and subjectivity having a robust influence on the nature and content of the sexual experiences one engages in.

Despite the dominance of heteronormative scripts, "sex" does not have to be a fixed kind of activity, and good, ethical sex often is not. Determining our sexual experiences comprises determining what kind of sex we want to have, what is important to us in sex, what kinds of acts we want sex to involve, being able to change direction during sex, being able to influence how sex unfolds in an ongoing way, and learning about ourselves and others in the process. In important senses, we can invent sex for ourselves. In the context of partnered sex, we engage this robust agency and invent sex *with others*. We determine with others what sex is for us, we decide (or figure out as we go) what it will involve and how we will engage in it. Sexual partners become "partners in invention" (Langton 1995, 158). Even when partners have long established shared understandings of what sex is and what acts it will involve, sex is still indeterminate in several respects - when it will stop or when pace needs to change, for instance. The notion of co-determination reflects how partners navigate the indeterminacies of sex, how they construct "sex" together. It highlights that despite indeterminacy, resolute normativity comes from one's partner/s and their status as (an) active sexual agent/s. Thus the form of determination involved in good, ethical sex is intersubjective and interactive.

The reciprocal self-regulation model gives us a way of modeling how agency works in this creative partnership. In good, ethical sex, sexual partners are motivationally interdependent and adopt an intersubjective, reciprocally self-regulating form of agency. They verbally negotiate, make attempts to read each other and respond to gestures, sounds, movements, and expressions. These are the kind of practices interdependently motivated partners engage in in sex; these are the practices of engaging in creative, expressive reciprocally self-regulated action and response. Through such engagement, partners enable each other's desires and subjectivities to play a role in determining the nature and content of sex, and they find ways of engaging their desires and subjectivities together. Reciprocal self-regulation is what enables sexual partners to be "partners in invention" (or exploration) in the domain of sex. The reciprocal self-regulation model effectively describes the process of co-determining sex in terms of the agency it involves; it describes the motivational interdependence and interpersonal practices of co-determining.

Co-determination and Consent:

The Antioch model of sexual consent is also an attempt to describe how each partner in a sexual encounter can determine the nature and content of that encounter. According to the Antioch model, persons exercise their sexual agency and engage in sexual determination primarily through the practices of request and acquiescence, or request and refusal. Unlike traditional understandings of sexual consent, the Antioch model guides people to engage in these agential practices *throughout* sex; the scope of each act of consent in the Antioch model is significantly narrower than in traditional understandings where one consents to sex as a whole. On the Antioch model, consent needs to be sought and given for each action and touch as sex progresses. In this sense, both the RSR model and the Antioch model recognize that sexual agency doesn't just come down to one "crucial moment" of saying yes or no to something predetermined. "Sex" isn't, or it shouldn't be, isn't a predetermined activity one makes a contract-like agreement to participate in, but is, in important respects, something that we invent for ourselves with our sexual partners and one that we can change or end when we choose.

In this sense, the Antioch model can also be read as an attempt to highlight that good, ethical sex is co-determined by interdependently motivated partners. But the Antioch model offers extremely limited means through which such interdependence is exercised and through which co-

determination can be achieved: repeated verbal request and acquiescence, or request and refusal. One part of the problem is that the Antioch model carries the conceptual and theoretical baggage of consent more generally. Sexual consent is, historically and legally, the act of waiving one's right to freedom from bodily interference, giving another permission to act upon your body in ways that would otherwise be impermissible. Repeatedly asking for another to cede their right to freedom from bodily interference, and repeatedly waiving one's own, is, as an ideal analysis, so far removed from what is actually involved in the creative, active, expressive, agential mode of engagement in which one co-determines a positive shared sexual experience with another. The form of agency and the nature of the kind of activity described by the two pictures is fundamentally at odds.

The other part of the problem is at the practical level. As we've seen, asking for consent and acquiescing or refusing doesn't exhaust the different forms of verbal sexual negotiation, nor the non-verbal forms of communication, expression, and responsiveness we engage in in sex. When A and B are interdependently motivated in sex, they don't only engage in explicit verbal consent practices, but a whole array of verbal and non-verbal communication, expression and response. Sexual co-determination involves much more besides request, acquiescence, and refusal. The Antioch model offers limited, regimented options for co-determination. These don't reflect the range of interpersonal practices interdependently motivated sexual partners can, and often do, engage in in co-determining sex.

So, while the Antioch model is an attempt to promote a *kind* of co-determination, the picture it offers is at odds with how motivational interdependence and co-determination actually function in good, ethical sex. Relatedly, the picture of sexual agency it implies is sparse and surprisingly solipsistic. The Antioch model effectively suggests we have no real way of reading our partner or knowing anything about their mental states, and no real way of expressing anything about our own mental states or motivations, short of explicit verbal request and affirmation. But plainly we *do* have other ways of reading, and expressing ourselves to, our partners. Continual asking for consent doesn't amount to being, or working to be, "intersubjectively attuned"; it doesn't encompass what it means to be engaged with one's partner, reading their cues and body language, noticing when or if they seem uncomfortable or would like to change things. Inventiveness and

initiative in sex doesn't just come in the form of one partner thinking of something they'd like and asking for consent, but rather is the product of being engaged, of reading one another and being attuned, or of acting with reference to a framework established by negotiation such that each partner is likely to have a good sense of what kind of initiatives are likely to be welcomed. Engaging and being connected in these ways is one of the pleasures of sex and is central in realistic good, ethical sex. The solipsism of the Antioch model runs counter to this kind of attunement with another person, something most people find valuable in sex. Perhaps this is one aspect of why the Antioch model is often met with a kind of horror, including by feminists ardently concerned with combatting rape culture and engineering new understandings of good, ethical sex.

Within the reality of good, ethical sex, however, there is an inherent degree of risk and vulnerability. We are vulnerable to another in that we hope they, and that they care to, read us attentively and properly. There is chance that we misread one another, that our expressions take on significances we aren't aware of or didn't intend, and that we take actions which are not aligned with each other's motivations. In making "ongoing, enthusiastic" verbal consent a requirement, the Antioch model attempts to remove the risk of miscommunication and the vulnerabilities sexual partners have to one another, or at least to make it such that each partner has a clear guide as to what constitutes proper communication. But inasmuch as the Antioch model is a strategy for managing risk, its advocates also claim that it is key to more wholly ethical and pleasurable sex. If the Antioch model is truly intended as an appealing, practicable guide to enhance sexual pleasure and ethics (rather than *just* an institutionalized risk management strategy, as Nash argues), then it needs to reflect the nature of sexual co-determination, as well as what people experience as valuable and pleasurable in sex and the varied verbal and non-verbal practices sexual partners engage in to be responsive, receptive, and attentive to one another. But, I have argued, it does not.

The reciprocal self-regulation model, by contrast, better illuminates the nature of sexual co-determination, and is more flexible and pluralistic with respect to how motivational interdependence is actualized and what kinds of practices and modes of expression and response

achieve co-determination³⁹. It recognizes that intersubjective attunement often involves non-verbal gestures, sounds, and movements. It recognizes also that explicit verbal negotiation can create frameworks which partners can utilize to take sexual initiative and perform certain actions that they know are likely to be welcomed. Many of these practices are essential parts of good, ethical sex, as we can see from the cases in the preceding section. These cases would be impoverished if we replaced all the acts of subtle communication, non-verbal engagement, sexual negotiation, and knowledgeable initiative taking with repeated requests and acquiescences. And we would be misapprehending them if we didn't recognize the role and centrality of the whole range of verbal and non-verbal ways partners become and remain intersubjectively attuned.

Sexual flow is one dimension of good, ethical sex which relies on partners being able to engage in a whole array of interpersonal practices including non-verbal and bodily modes of engagement and sexual negotiation. In ignoring other forms of sexual negotiation and the nonverbal, bodily modes of self-regulation and replacing them with only practices of explicit verbal consent, the Antioch model cannot accommodate and effectively disrupts the possibility of sexual flow. The reciprocal self-regulation model both accommodates and illuminates it.

IV. Sexual Flow

A feature of partnered sex many people take to be valuable is the sense in which we can get absorbed in or transported by it. Often this is described as losing sense of time, of extreme focus combined with extreme ease, elation, or a loss of self-consciousness. Many people regard

³⁹ Allowing for a plurality of means of sexual co-determination also enables the reciprocal self-regulation model to be friendly to Fischel and O'Connell's argument that the socially supported "capability to co-determine" should be a standard for permissible sex, and would enable certain cognitively disabled adults to be sexual subjects. This form of subjecthood is often denied to cognitively disabled adults when the (mental) "capacity to consent" is taken as the standard for permissible sexual subjecthood. Fischel and O'Connell argue that at least some of these adults are harmed by being denied a valid sexuality and that we should recognize the ways such adults can, with various social supports, co-determine sexual experiences. Although I've focused on one particular common practice of sexual co-determination, allowing for the plurality of means of co-determination leaves open, to a degree, how different people with different bodily needs and abilities, as well as different cognitive abilities, might, or might be enabled to, sexually co-determine.

the absorbing and transporting potential of sex as deeply important. I think that reciprocal self-regulation, as a model for how partners engage and respond to one another throughout sex, can accommodate the fact that sex can (although doesn't always and need not to be ethical *or* good) induce these altered states of consciousness, and might even go some way to explaining how they arise⁴⁰. The Antioch model, in neglecting intersubjective attunement, the plurality of ways motivational interdependence is actualized, and what kinds of practices and modes of expression and response achieve sexual co-determination, cannot.

I suggest that we might understand the “altered consciousness” dimension of sex by characterizing it as a kind of *flow*. Flow states are “intrinsically rewarding highly absorbing state(s) in which people lose a sense of time and the awareness of self”, with elation and joy as “signature emotions” (Walker 2010, 2). The kind of activities likely to produce flow states are ones that are freely chosen, involve challenge matched by skill, and provide immediate and concrete performance feedback. Writing, making art, and certain sports are typical activities for inducing flow states.

While flow was originally a concept applied to individual absorption in individual activities, recent work in social psychology indicates that interdependent, *social* flow states can be brought about by interactive activities. Like individual flow, social flow is enabled by freely chosen activities involving challenge and corresponding skill alongside immediate and concrete feedback. But unlike individual flow, social flow is primarily enabled by “highly interdependent interactive situations where people must cooperate and coordinate their performances” (Walker 2010, 4). Engaging in interdependent action is a key part of producing social flow. The kind of situations and activities that can enable social flow states include “jazz musicians improvising in a jam session”, engaging conversation, and certain highly interdependent sports, like soccer. Social activities that are predetermined or routinized (such as a marching band performing at half time) or less interdependent (like cricket) are much less likely to result in social flow states and the

⁴⁰ While flow is a possibility in sex many people find valuable, flow isn't always a product of partnered sex and achieving it in shouldn't be seen as normative. Sex can still be robustly ethical and good, and can certainly be permissible (however permissibility is spelled out) in the absence of flow, and flow doesn't automatically make sex better.

signature emotions of joy and elation. Because activities leading to social flow are highly interdependent and interactive, social flow is “mutual and reciprocal”, involving people serving “as agents of flow for each other” (4).

Social flow, as a form of agency, is significantly embodied. In the kinds of activities which produce social flow, participants read each other’s body language, respond to and express through gestures and non-verbal noises, understand each other’s motivations through the trajectory of motion, and pick up on changes in motivations through noticing subtle shifts in tone or demeanor. This kind of intersubjective attunement might be more obvious in cases like soccer or jazz, but it is present even in engaging conversation. Despite the (apparent) main action of conversation being verbal, engaged conversationalists are also attuned to each other’s body language, poised to notice and respond to stance, gesticulations, gestures, and tone. They get into a rhythm with each other which is as much bodily as it is verbal.

The notion of social flow describes a kind of interdependence of agencies, felt as spontaneous and effortless, but clearly complexly agential and active. Skilled cooperation and coordination of performance, engaging in a challenging and intrinsically rewarding activity with others, ongoing interdependent action: these all involve responsive self-regulation. Even if the nature of flow means deliberation is not laborious or is not felt as deliberation at all, even if an individual participant’s actions and knowledge of what to do *does* just seem to flow, participants must be engaged and regulating their agencies in response to one another to first achieve and then sustain such a state. The reciprocal self-regulation model captures this kind of highly interdependent, embodied agency. The reciprocal self-regulation model might thus be useful in describing a central element of how partnered sex can induce flow states. Reciprocal self-regulation is the making of highly interdependent action: it is a form of agency that is significantly embodied, it is how people navigate activities that require in the moment, flexible coordination and cooperation, that require responsive engagement with other participants, and that involve one’s own self-expression and skill working in concert with others. Reciprocal self-regulation, in sex and in other highly interdependent activities, is what enables partners/participants to get into a flow state with each other and then is also what sustains such a state.

Of course, the reciprocal self-regulation model can't fully explain flow in sex alone. Sex is often rhythmic, another quality thought to induce altered states of consciousness, and it typically involves highly sensitive body parts, pleasure, and sometimes orgasm. These physiological factors cannot be discounted. But if, as I've argued, the reciprocal self-regulation model characterizes good, ethical sex and reciprocal self-regulation is a key dimension of social flow, then good, ethical sex is more likely to induce flow for all partners than bad, unethical, solipsistic, or disengaged sex, or sex that unfolds according to a predetermined, relatively routinized and predictable script. Dynamic reciprocal engagement and regarding one's partner/s as sources of normativity in sex is more likely to induce absorption, elation, and joy. In many respects, this seems obvious. The claim that reciprocal and robust engagement makes for better sex is not new. I hope to have illuminated why this is the case by accounting for it in terms of the kind of agency we engage in in good, ethical sex. In highlighting that robustly engaged, co-operative, co-determined sexual experiences are those more likely to induce flow, I hope the reciprocal self-regulation model can show how ethical, mutually pleasurable sex is closely connected with this aspect of sex many people consider deeply important.

Conclusion

A more nuanced approach than that offered by old consent models is necessary to understand what robustly good, ethical sex looks like. Just, enjoyable sexual relations call for ongoing co-determination in sex, where each partner involved is able, and enables each other, to play a role in determining how sex goes, what it involves, and when it will stop. The Antioch model is one, currently influential, attempt to institutionalize a standard reflecting ongoing co-determination. But the Antioch model discounts the variety of ways partners can and do co-determine sex together, obscuring the array of verbal and non-verbal practices which attune us to our partners and which allow for certain kinds of enriching connection and intersubjective engagement in favor of repeated verbal acts of request and acquiescence. This makes the Antioch model insufficient for capturing the reality of good, ethical sex, and it also makes it seem unappealing and impoverished to many. And *this* risks rendering the project of articulating a form of robust, ongoing ethical engagement throughout sex seem, to some observers at least, like the

domain of “political correctness gone mad”. In positing a kind of engagement at odds with what many people find valuable in sex and with what, in real cases, constitutes robustly ethical sex, the Antioch model risks undermining the aim of working towards more just sexual relations.

The reciprocal self-regulation model of sexual agency illuminates the form of agency involved in sexual co-determination and better accords with what we find is, in actuality, enjoyable in sex that is robustly ethical. The reciprocal self-regulation model effectively provides an ameliorative understanding of what is involved in being a sexual agent. It cannot give first order guidelines in the way the Antioch model aims to. But it does describe a practical stance and a relational skill set we can recognize, develop, and help others develop through sex education and elsewhere. These kind of personal and interpersonal interventions are one part of larger social change. Even though sexual subjectivities are socially influenced, the particularities of human bodies, selves, and sexualities are tenacious in their ability to exceed sex scripts and oppressive subject-shaping forces. Thus one way individual interventions in sex are achieved is through properly attending to and engaging with one’s sexual partners - regarding *them*, rather than the scripts one culturally inherits, as the major source of normativity in sex. The reciprocal self-regulation model aims to capture the interdependent form of agency involved in such attention and engagement.

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Conclusion: Towards Just, Pleasurable Sex

All three chapters in this dissertation highlight that the details of sex can matter, whether these be details about the structural conditions and dominant scripts for sex, or the details of specific cases. These details show us that sex, including consensual and non-coercive sex, can be more or less agential, ethical, just, and enjoyable, more or less conducive to alienation and pain (both physical and psychological), and more or less conducive to flourishing and joy.

Chapters 1 and 2 highlight the ways the social world constructs (cis-hetero) sex as a practice that is *less* just, less ethical, less pleasurable, and less joyful than it could be, and Chapter 1 also highlights the social unwillingness to contend with the pernicious ways cis-heterosex is structured and constructed. Dominant scripts for cis-heterosex make sex heteronormative, restrict women's agency, and marginalize women's pleasure (and they create a very narrow path for men's agency and pleasure also). It isn't hard to see that they foreclose genuine possibilities of the kind of co-determination I have argued characterizes good, ethical sex (or, at least, they make those possibilities very hard to come by): by directing a relatively rigid, non-communicative, and gendered sequence of action and positioning one kind of act - coitus - as the "main event", dominant cis-heterosex scripts promote a *performative* mode of agency directed at getting it "right" (or, at least, at appearing to get it right). This performative mode of agency comes at the expense of the kind of collaborative, playful, interdependent mode of agency that can make for a better and more ethical sexual interaction.

Yet, despite this, people *do* find ways of having good and robustly ethical, agential, and enjoyable sex. Chapter 3 highlights the goods sex can involve and the ways sex can be a site of agency and joy when sexual partners take one another rather than the dominant scripts as their guides.

So, how can we make it such that there is more of the good, robustly ethical sex and less of the unjust and too-often unenjoyable sex in our social milieu? How can we make good, robustly ethical sex more accessible for people? I want to conclude this dissertation with some thoughts on how we can work to make sex better (although I leave elaboration of these points for future work).

As will be evident by now, I do not think the consent framework can, by itself, help us here. While understanding and articulating better accounts of consent is important work, the concept of consent cannot, by itself, help us see or understand the injustice that occurs all too frequently in in “normal” cis-heterosex, nor can it give us direction on how to understand or remedy the fact that “normal”, consensual, non-coercive cis-heterosex marginalizes women’s pleasure and that women are socialized to relate to pleasure as something to perform and provide rather than as something to experience. I hope I have also shown the concept of consent alone cannot do the work of helping us understand what serves to make sex good and robustly ethical, nor can employing practices of consent alone ensure this in our personal lives.

I think, and this dissertation highlights, that if we want to make sex better, intervening on both the personal/interpersonal and structural levels is important. We can, as individuals, try to adopt practices that are more conducive to sexual co-determination, and we can work to become more ethical as sexual partners, in this (very) non-ideal social context. But we also need intervention at the structural, social level. Individuals will have limited ability to adopt more ethical sexual practices if the dominant conceptions of and scripts for sex do not make space for or work against those practices: when men are expected to take the lead and just know what to do, it is likely going to be more difficult for them to engage a reciprocally self-regulative mode of agency and engagement, for example, and so long as women are socialized in a way that cuts them off from their own pleasure, it is going to be hard for them to understand and advocate for themselves as sexual agents deserving of pleasure. If we want to genuinely empower individuals and enable them to become more ethical and agential sexual agents, and if we want this empowerment to be widespread, we will need to challenge the scripts, norms, and expectations for sex that are presently culturally dominant.

Part of this work can be done through critique (as I have done in this dissertation, and as many others have done in academic and non-academic writing), through showing how these scripts and norms limit us and limit sex. This work is also done through multiple practical strategies of intervention, such as the proliferation of alternative hermeneutical resources for understanding sex (and gender), through devising different scripts for sex, through reducing the stigma

associated with not conforming to normative definitions of sex and sexuality, through rendering queer sex and relationships more visible, and through increasing access to knowledge about sex, bodies, and pleasure. This work is often the domain of progressive sex educators, and I think philosophy can both add to and learn from these efforts: philosophical conceptions of scripts and sexual agency, for example, can illuminate how expanding our hermeneutical resources enables people to become more ethical and agential sexual agents. The practical work of sex education highlights what it actually takes for some of these changes to be effected. The work of sex educators also highlights that in effecting such change we will need to talk critically and candidly about sex - about good sex, about bad sex, about bodies and sexual activity, and, yes, about pleasure.