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Embracing Our Eroticism: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of Women's Eroticism

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ABSTRACT

Women's sexuality has been examined through political, religious, scientific, and social lenses. Despite advances, discourses driving sexual expression embody double standards, pathologizing, and silencing. Women's own experiences are largely ignored in existing literatures. Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) is a qualitative methodology rooted in Foucault's examinations of power and discourse construction. In this FDA, 111 women answered questions about their erotic definitions, experiences, and barriers to expression. Discourses emerging from the data included *my own definitions*, *free but caged*, *voices of influence*, and *caution*. These discourses are situated within social and institutional contexts, and therapeutic considerations discussed.

KEYWORDS

discourse analysis; eroticism; Foucault; sexuality; women

The subject of women's sexuality has a rich and convoluted history. Literature focusing specifically on women's eroticism and pleasure has been limited and fraught with ambivalence. Both in scientific research and in society at large, double standards and intrigue surround women's erotic expression. Existing social structures regarding female sexuality promote silence (Heyn, 1992), purity (Fahs, 2010), and regulation of female bodies and sexualities (Jakobsen, 2000), while at the same time sexually and commercially objectifying women (Giddens, 1992). In this article, impressions of women's eroticism are presented from their own words. After considering some of the socially constructed rules and beliefs surrounding women's sexuality, we situate women's own expressions of what is allowed and experienced in terms of their own eroticism within the sociohistorical context of U.S. American society.

Based on limiting research paradigms, repressive social practice, and the relative dearth of women's own voices in scholarly literature, we sought to explore how adult women construct their own meanings and experiences of eroticism. We wanted to encourage women to explore different aspects of

their deepest sexual desires, hopes, fears, and expressions. We also wanted to give space for women to share what they believed are the barriers to their own free, unrestricted sexual expression. In this study we utilized Michel Foucault's methods of inquiry in a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) to examine both institutional discourses-in-practice surrounding women's eroticism in America and women's own views to determine how participants live and carry out discursive practices of erotic expression.

Socially constructed discourses of sexuality and eroticism

Cultural trends and institutionalized belief systems contribute largely to socially constructed views of sex and eroticism. Referring to the relations of power, law, and sex, philosopher Michel Foucault (1978/1990) argued that larger institutions establish power dynamics and construct discourses that both influence and are influenced by social practice. This process has served to polarize aspects of sexuality, for example, into what either is, or is not, socially sanctioned or allowed. McElwain, Grimes, and McVicker (2009) later highlighted how, for women more than men, sociocultural influences, power, education, and context, all interact to shape women's own sexualities. In American society, socially constructed and institutionalized discourses exist on women's sexuality and eroticism in many areas, including religion, politics, popular culture, and research, to name a few.

Societal discourses: Politicization of religion

Many political and religious movements have used language to delineate rules of acceptability or taboo regarding sex. We acknowledge the risk of drawing hard-line conclusions based on the often-distorted views and portrayals of religion in America (Sands, 2000). At the same time, there is also evidence that the politicization of Christian influence has led to the internalization of sexual taboos and erotophobia for many women (Heyward, 1989). Current examples include actions of Christian Right movements, which garner tremendous political and economic support, including: opposing women's rights to choose; opposing sexual diversity and movements to equal rights for sexual minorities; advocating only for the practice of abstinence before marriage as the pure or right choice (Calterone Williams, 2011; Howell & Keefe, 2007); abstinence-only sex education programs yielding gender-biased messages about sex being bad or dangerous for girls, but not for boys (Hartley & Drew, 2001); and that abstinence is synonymous with virtue (Calterone Williams, 2011; Fahs, 2010). These discourses suggest that sex is bad for girls and women, and many women subsequently struggle to "flip the switch" into enjoying sex when the time comes (Foley, Kope, & Sugrue, 2012). As Hartley and Drew (2001) and Foley et al. (2012) have observed, girls who are influenced by these messages early on learn to associate sex with worry, guilt, and conflict. This is not to say that

Christian beliefs about sex are necessarily harmful. It is instead our belief that the *politicization* of certain aspects of the Christian Right movements, rather than the belief systems themselves, has done harm by compartmentalizing beliefs and unilaterally asserting discursive *truths* about what is or is not acceptable.

Popular culture

The 20th and 21st centuries have seen various reconstructions of women's roles, sexualities, and femininity. Gonzalez-Crussi (1988) described the progression of advertising, for example. Mid-twentieth century advertising portrayed women as calm, demure, prim, dependent, and childlike. The sexual revolution of the 1960s, and then the shift to the New Woman of the 1970s and 1980s saw dramatic shifts in idealized femininity: increased sexual freedom, demonstrations of strength and independence, and the overt calls for equality by the feminist movements.

More recently, developments in social and mass media promote an image-driven, consumer-based culture, wherein we are inundated with particular and often contradictory images of women. On the one hand, popular shows, movies, and ads portray sexiness as being young, thin, and overtly seductive. On the other hand, we see the equally prevalent retail commercials portraying blandly dressed soccer-moms with conservative haircuts and clothing, whose sole functions are conveyed as wife, mother, and homemaker. Although neither is inherently more or less sexy, the contradiction is such that the former is promoted as being the sexier ideal, and the latter is desexualized, while also being the more commonly morally sanctioned context for sex.

These trends have a profound impact on body image, which plays a large role in sexuality, particularly for women. Many authors have found body image to be a significant factor in women's subjective arousal (e.g., Basson, 2010; Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, & McBride, 2004; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Woertman and van den Brink (2012) reviewed 57 studies and found that body image impacts women's sexual behaviors, thoughts, self-esteem, activity, and satisfaction. They found that women with more positive body image tend to experience greater sexual satisfaction, higher sexual self-esteem, higher subjective arousal, and more frequent orgasms, whereas a poorer body image was associated with sexual avoidance, difficulties in arousal, desire, and orgasm, and more problems with sexual functioning in general.

The implications of religious, political, and popular societal discourses are such that the messages women receive about their bodies and their sexual/erotic nature are often critical, shaming, and limiting. When women are taught that sex is wrong, immoral, dangerous, and to be reserved only for a particular set of rule-based circumstances (e.g., marriage, heterosexuality, reproduction, and so on), or that only women who fit a specific body type can be considered sexy, it can be difficult to relax and enjoy being sexual.

Furthermore, such discourses have yielded the problem for many women of sexuality and eroticism becoming associated with guilt and shame. As Foley et al. (2012, p. 28) stated, “Many young women feel caught, trying to reconcile their sexual actions with their self-image of being good.” It is therefore not surprising that that low sexual desire is the most commonly presented sexual issue, as well as the most difficult to treat (LoPiccolo, 2011).

Scientific research discourses

Findings from scientific research on women’s sexualities have been limited and contradictory. Among female sex research, most studies have been predicated on fixing the problems of low desire or inability to orgasm, based on a pathology model. Some specific conclusions are that female sexuality is responsive (Goldey & van Anders, 2012), complicated (Basson, 2010), and unnecessarily pathological (Basson, 2008; Meana, 2010). Sexuality researchers (e.g., Geer, 2005; Laan, Everaerd, van der Velde, & Geer, 1995; Masters & Johnson, 1966) have traditionally relied upon behavioral, biological, or other quantifiable aspects of sexuality to focus primarily on function or dysfunction. Fewer (e.g., Goldhammer & McCabe, 2011; Graham et al., 2004) have undertaken qualitative explorations of women’s own experiences of their sexualities. The results of both types of research studies have been contradictory, and have rarely focused on pleasure, enjoyment, or a positive experience of oneself as sexual or erotic.

Many of the researchers have additionally relied on male-analog methods and assumptions, assuming a linear sexual response cycle like those of Masters and Johnson (1966) and Kaplan (1979). Under the male analog assumption, desire leads to sexual activity and orgasm; anything else is considered suspect or dysfunctional (Basson, 2008; Meana, 2010; Nagoski, 2015). Furthermore, although ground-breaking and pivotal to our current understandings of sexuality, these linear models leave out both the nuances of eroticism and the validity of different types of desire.

Despite the over-pathologizing of differences in women’s sexual functioning (Derogatis et al., 2010) and the objectification of women’s sexualities, treatments to address these perceived concerns are vastly limited. For example, while there are approximately two dozen treatments approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for male sexual dysfunction, there is only one for women, approved by the FDA only last year (Basson, Driscoll, & Correia, 2015). This discrepancy demonstrates what Dr. Irwin Goldstein, world-renowned sexual medicine surgeon, researcher, and editor in chief of the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, described as overt gender bias in the FDA regarding medical research for the treatment of women’s sexual issues (Personal communication, 2015). Of course, medication is not the only treatment for women’s sexual issues. More comprehensive treatments include some combination of bibliotherapy, mindfulness, cognitive behavioral therapy, individual and couple therapy, and pharmacological interventions (Brotto & Luria, 2014).

More descriptions of pathology, etiology, and epidemiology exist, than of effective treatments for problems of female sexuality. The pattern of labeling and diagnosing without offering effective treatment, and the discrepancy in treatment options for men versus women further hints at the sexual double standard and a double bind for gender-based sexual expression: women are simultaneously objectified and criticized for their sexual expression by society, pathologized for low desire or sexual expression that does not match the male model in research (Meana, 2010), and limited in the availability of treatments even if they do try to seek help (Basson, 2008; Basson et al., 2015; Goldstein, 2015 [Personal communication]).

Adding further complexity to the picture are findings on women's erotic fantasy and erotic plasticity. Fantasy and desire are key components of erotic life; desire is about wanting, and what we want can often be found in fantasy (Perel, 2006). Leitenberg and Henning (1995) found that women tend to be more relational in their fantasies, focusing on aspects of the relationship and/or partner. Zurbriggen and Yost (2004), on the other hand, found that compared to the men in their study, women fantasized more about their own pleasure and desire than their partner's, emphasizing their own needs being met and receiving pleasure than meeting others' needs by giving. Women also tend to show more erotic plasticity, defined as greater variation in sexual activities and preferences, contextually sensitive sexual desire, and lower agreement between sexual behaviors and attitudes (Baumeister, 2000). Diamond (2006) later coined the term *sexual fluidity* to describe the greater variability in women's preferences across different aspects and times in a woman's life. Although Baumeister attributed erotic plasticity to women having a lower sex drive than men, others have noted the limitations of this conclusion (e.g., Meana, 2010). The variability, complexity, and context sensitivity of women's sexual fantasies, desires, and preferences both highlight areas ripe for further research, and demonstrate a lack of clarity regarding women's internal yearnings.

New views

Some authors, such as Meana (2010), Foley et al. (2012), Nagoski (2015), and McCarthy and Wald (2016) champion a more positive and nuanced view of women's sexuality and eroticism. These later proponents acknowledge the limits of past research and the pernicious effects of societal double standards and misperceptions about female sexuality. Meana was one of the first to explicate a non-male-analog view of women's desire by highlighting the limits of such a view in terms of research findings about women's sexual desire and arousal. Her call to action listed nine recommendations for research and clinical practice to be more inclusive of the diversity of possibilities within women's sexual experiences of arousal and desire. McCarthy and Wald (2016) further advocated for the complex and variable nature of women's sexuality as

being *first class*: a valid and desirable way in its own right, rather than being considered second class by comparison to male sexuality.

Nagoski (2015) used Janssen and Bancroft's (2007) dual control model of sexual excitation and sexual inhibition to normalize differences in arousal based on each individual's context and factors that either turn him/her on or off. Focusing on women, she explained that in addition to myriad possible differences in the specifics, generally the best context for enjoyable sex involves low stress, high affection, and being explicitly erotic (Nagoski, 2015, p. 88). Similar to McCarthy and Wald (2016) and Nagoski (2015), Foley et al. (2012) advocated for a definition of sexual health that includes the facets of desire, pleasure, eroticism, and satisfaction. Foley et al. also stated that one's "sexual health and satisfaction require knowledge, self-awareness, and a willingness to embrace your sexuality" (p. 2). It is the latter of these requirements that we emphasize in the present study.

The discrepancies in the literature about the relationship between arousal and desire and the limited considerations of eroticism have promoted discourses of women's sexuality as complicated, fickle, and more pathological than men's. We propose that there is more to women's erotic lives than sexual arousal and activity and linear sexual desire. There is a deeper, more powerful, nuanced eroticism that drives women's sexual yearnings and expressions. The strict confines of current research and societal paradigms have furthermore stymied possibilities for women's open exploration and expression of their true eroticisms. In this study, we therefore asked women a series of questions to explore their constructions eroticism. We hoped their stories might shed a different light on how women experience various aspects of their sexualities.

Methods

Procedures

Researchers recruited women age 25 or above, who were raised in the United States since the age of two or earlier, and who self-reported enjoying sex. These criteria were selected for specific purposes. First, the biological age of adulthood begins around the age of 25, when adolescence ends (Kaplan, 2004). Second, the researchers aimed to examine a non-clinical, not exclusively college student sample, since these populations are already widely researched. Third, due to the nature of Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) focusing on sociocultural influences, the researchers in this study wanted to ensure that the participants were, in fact, raised in and thereby influenced by U.S. American society. Therefore, participation of any ethnicity or sexual orientation was welcomed.

Participants were recruited using criterion, snowball, and convenience sampling methods. Emails, posters, and Facebook posts by primary researchers and researchers' friends and colleagues were sent using personal,

professional, and university listservs. An anonymous online survey, which included open-ended questions about demographics, inclusion criteria information, and the actual research questions (see the appendix), were used to conduct the current study.

Participants

A total of 173 women participated within 1 week of launching the survey, indicating interest in the subject. Of the 173, 62 were excluded based on either not meeting inclusionary criteria or discontinuing the survey before answering most of the questions. Participants ranged between 25 and 69 years of age, with the majority (70%) being aged 25–39 years old. About 15% were in their forties, 10% in their fifties, and 5% in their sixties. The majority of participants (80%) reported identifying as heterosexual; 10% as bisexual, 5% as bi-curious, 1% as queer, and 4% as *other*. Half were married, 27% in committed relationships, 17% single, 1% divorced, 1% in open relationship, and 5% classified their relationship status as *other*.

The majority of participants identified as White or Caucasian (83%); other ethnicities reported were Latina (7%), Black (4%), Mixed Race (4%), and Pacific Islander (1%). There was diversity in religious/spiritual orientations, with 34% of participants reporting being Christian, 20% reporting None, 13% Other, 9% Catholic, 6% Atheist, 6% Spiritual, 4.5% Jewish, 4.5% Agnostic, and 3% Mormon or LDS. Participants were geographically diverse, being born and or raised in 35 of the United States and DC, and currently living in these states and three other countries outside of the U.S.

Data analysis

FDA is a postmodern, interpretive, qualitative research method used to examine sociocultural and historical influences in the creation and maintenance of various discourses, and to challenge the rules of acceptability and power dynamics in forming them (Andersen, 2003). Researchers employing FDA deconstruct how language and discourse shape how people think or feel, what they do, and the context within which these occur (Willig, 2008).

Noting that language is power and that power establishes control over sex (Foucault, 1978/1990), as well as the discourses we described above highlighting power imbalances in defining female sexuality, FDA was the best approach because it (a) gave female subjects the power by relying on *their* language; (b) did not confine subjects' expression with pre-determined answer choices; (c) was created for and by women; and (d) allowed for a thorough and sound examination of the courses of interaction between subjects (participants) and their social worlds, partners, themselves, and their eroticisms in relation both to discursive practice and discourse-in-practice.

Using FDA to examine women's sexualities is unique in sex research. In addition to broader scientific, socio-political, and philosophical discourses that exist for women's erotic expression, we sought women's own discursive constructions of their experiences, to compare discursive practices, and to situate their responses within the broader contextual backdrop of a sex-conflicted American society.

Scholars have not yet concretized a definitive methodology for FDA. We therefore utilized Willig's (2008) six-step methodology for conducting FDA because it shows theoretical consistency and usefulness, guiding sound qualitative methodology (Peers, 2012). During this process, the primary analyzer (first author) also reflected on interpretive bias and consulted with others to keep this interpretation grounded in theory, research, and the participant response data. Willig's steps are as follows.

Stage one, *discursive constructions*, is an examination of the ways participants construct discursive objects. The objects in this study were women's definitions and perspectives of sex, eroticism, free sexual expression, and the barriers thereto. We examined participant responses to the questions specifically about definitions for this stage.

Stage two is *discourses*, wherein the researcher examines differences between discursive constructions. Given that a single object may be constructed in different ways, analysis involves making a comparison between the constructions identified in stage one. In stage two, we focused on locating various discursive constructions within broader discourses, such as the varying constructions of eroticism by participants, the existing societal discourses about female sexuality and eroticism, as well as how their constructions are similar to or different from one another, and similar or different to the institutionalized discourses already in practice.

Stage three, *action orientation*, surrounds discursive contexts, asking, "What is gained from constructing the object in this particular way at this particular point within the text? What is its function and how does it relate to other constructions produced in the surrounding text?" (Willig, 2008, p. 175). By looking at action orientation, a clearer view emerges of what participant constructions can achieve. We also situated participant responses within context, and examined them according to what both participant responses and the broader contextual discourses may achieve by being as they are. For example, we examined questions such as: What might be gained by constructing eroticism in this particular way, at this point in time? How do these constructions relate to other discourses, and what might be achieved by such discourses?

Stage four is *positionings*. This stage involves examining the findings of the previous stages to then identify and explore a subject position. The subjects in this case were the female participants. Positioning refers to the repertoire

of what roles subjects take, what and how they are able (or unable) to speak about the object, and the relative positions they take regarding the discourse of women's eroticism (Willig, 2008).

Stage five, *practice*, involves examining the relationship between discourse and practice. Specifically, the focus is on how the positionings influence the actions that are possible or not for the subject (Willig, 2008). The guiding analysis questions in this stage surround how women might be set up to act or not act on their true erotic desires based on how dominant discourses construct the rules regarding women's eroticism. Given that certain practices or ideologies become (il)legitimate within certain discourses (Foucault, 1978/1990), we examined possibilities for participants' actions and interactions with both their own, as well as institutional discursive constructions of women's eroticism.

Stage six is *subjectivity*, in which the focus is on the relationship between discourse and subjectivity. This stage involves looking at participants' subjective experience as a consequence of their positions. Whereas earlier stages looked at what could be said or done, this stage examines what can be subjectively *experienced* by way of thoughts and feelings, from subject positions (Willig, 2008). In this stage, we examined participant responses for information about what the women themselves experience in their own eroticism, as well as how discourse influences the possibilities for what can be experienced. There is an assumption that social and psychological realities form within discourses, which make available certain worldviews and ways of being, and limit others (Willig, 2008, p. 176).

Results

Throughout the presentation of our results, the larger social and institutional discourses will be referred to as discourse(s)-in-practice. Participants' interactions with these discourses-in-practice will be referred to as discursive practice. To summarize, the institutionalized discourses-in-practice of women's eroticism were (a) religious and political conservatism contributing to sex-negative beliefs and practices and the subsequent regulation of women's eroticism; (b) mixed messages and devaluing of women's sex roles leading to double standards and a double bind regarding women's erotic image and expression; (c) mostly quantitative, behavioral, and pathology-based explorations of arousal and desire rather than personal or pragmatic inquiries into women's sexuality; and (d) inconsistent and pathologizing conclusions in women's sexuality research.

The results of the data analysis from the current study present a different picture. The women in this study reported wanting more sex, and more *from*

sex than extant literature has elucidated. Although popular culture has given some space for women to be openly sexual, this is not without predefined limits of acceptability. The results from the current survey uncovered several discursive constructions of women's views of sex and eroticism, commonly experienced barriers to their free expression, influential voices to their discursive constructions, and the resulting discursive practices. The results were also indicative of the larger discourses-in-practice, within which the women in this study lived and thereby experienced themselves.

Discourse 1: My own definitions

The first free response questions in the survey surrounded definitions of sex, eroticism, and free expression. This was to establish how participants defined these concepts for themselves in order to better root interpretation of their responses in the actual data, rather than in assumption based on existing discourse. Participants defined sex as value-laden, multifaceted, and different from eroticism.

Sex as value laden

The vast majority of participants wrapped up their values, intentions, experiences, purposes, hopes, and meanings in their definitions of sex. These women indicated they valued sex in some way, or that sex exists within a value system for them. For example, Nancy shared that, "Sex is a very important, often essential component of a healthy relationship.... In a stable (perhaps monogamous, but perhaps not) relationship, sex allows true vulnerability, which is really, really cool." Participants also situated sex within moral value systems, communicating that they have values about sex in deciding with whom they choose to have sex, or the meaning they hope for from sex. Mary declared that sex is, "An intimacy created by God. It's to be shared in a monogamous relationship between a man and a woman."

Sex as multifaceted

Participants presented multifaceted definitions that also had purpose. Some of the specific purposes for sexual activity were stress relief, as a sleep aide, to bond with partners, to communicate, to reproduce, or to escape themselves. They included multifaceted definitions, indicated by contrasting adjectives and the multiple facets of physical, emotional, and spiritual expression. Descriptions were indicative of pleasure and pain, powerful and meaningless, positive and negative aspects. Consider Betty's response that sex means, "expression of love, lust, passion, closeness, intimacy, sharing, vulnerability, aggression, passivity, connection." They included emotionality, dichotomy, and multifaceted importance in their definitions, upholding a discourse of desirable sexual complexity over one of simplicity.

Distinguishing sex from eroticism

Women in this study distinguished between sex and eroticism, describing sex as relational and more than logistical acts—as mutual, connecting, and relational—and eroticism as more internal, individual, and personal. In describing eroticism, nearly all of the women discussed eroticism in positive and desirable terms, as intentional, arousing, and enhancing or accentuating mind, body, and sex. They used strong language, using words such as *power, fire, passion, desire, heat, electric, deep connection, and fantasy*. Maria shared,

I see eroticism as a deeper connection of sex. It is more of a deliberate choice to explore sexuality in a deeper way. I think it is a way to go beyond 'just sex' to something a little more intimate. I think it has less to do with the physical act of having sex and more to do with heightening the senses so that touches mean more, smells mean more, the way that something tastes means more, and so on.

Participants were also generally clearer on their constructions of sex than of eroticism, giving more specific and certain descriptions in the former, and less specific, often uncertain in the latter. Perhaps they lacked a common language and context of practice for this discussion. Bobbi, for example, shared, “I don’t think or talk about it much, so it’s hard to figure out the answers.”

Eroticism as free expression

Many women described eroticism in terms of free expression. Sara included that eroticism is “Fully expressing yourself sexually without judgment.” Women’s ideas of free expression often included fears of judgment, which we found interesting in light of the mostly positively valued constructions of sex and eroticism, and the striking inclusion of free expression within definitions of eroticism, before the questions about free expression were posed in the survey.

Women used words such as *fantasy, deep, intense, pleasurable, and free*, as well as *without judgment, being free, and taboo*, in their constructions of eroticism, in conjunction with discussions of showing openly, wanting more, and enjoying or accentuating sex. Rene, for example, described eroticism as, “the fire and artistic imagination of this drive to reproduce. I have never found satisfaction in sex that is not a mixture of the sacred and the physical. You don’t hear that much in the media, do you?” Cris described, “The freedom to explore my sexual expression without shame, guilt, or reservation.” These responses show a subjectivity of a deeper yearning, wanting more stimulating and intense sex, recognition and acceptance of fantasies that may be considered taboo, and a space to express these desires with a partner who will not only participate, but also enjoy it and not judge them for it.

Discourse 2: Free, but caged—The dilemmas of being a sexual woman

Participants reflected on themselves as sexual beings, showing both their wants and desires, with both internalization of themselves as sexual, and at the same time having many barriers experienced to expressing this aspect of their identities. Tiffany, for example, talked about herself as a sexual woman, and the importance of, “Being comfortable sexually with who you are and meant to be.” The majority of participants’ overall response sets indicated that they wanted more sex, more types of sex, and more *from* sex than they are currently experiencing. Megan succinctly indicated that free expression for her would mean, “More sex. Sex in more ways and with other participants at times.” Many women listed wanting more partners, kinkier sex, orgies, threesomes, sex in public, BDSM, sex with strangers, non-monogamous sex, wanting sex with other women while identifying as heterosexual, trying multiple positions, wanting to try new things, and using toys and accessories. Many of these women explicitly acknowledged that their desires were outside of what they believed was socially normative. In their words, phrases such as “beyond normal,” “beyond vanilla,” “kinky,” “pushing limits,” or “outside the ‘normal’ realm of what people think about sex” were common. Many used quotation marks to demarcate or qualify their desires, or stated that their desires were unacceptable or inappropriate. This shows participants’ efforts to show their vigilant awareness of social discourses surrounding “appropriate” sex, and the barriers they experience to their own free expression.

When asked about free expression, participants went first to highlighting oppression. When asked to share what comes to mind regarding “free expression of your true sexuality” and what that may look like for them personally, many women mentioned fear of judgment, absence of guilt, shame, or embarrassment, and “not apologizing” for their sexual desires and or erotic expression. Apologizing implies wrongdoing, indicating an internalized sense that free expression or asking for one’s sexual desires is doing something wrong. This was evidenced in the societal stereotypes of women that suggest women are to be submissive or silent, that women’s sex role is as recipient, and that violating this norm feels like an offense or misbehavior. Helen described it as, “The idea of being completely comfortable with oneself and having no shame,” and “Confidence, higher self-esteem, less worry of judgment.” Pia’s description was that free expression is “being able to be who you are and not hiding what turns you on.”

Women often reported guilt in the barriers to, and definitions of, free expression; guilt because they believe they have done something wrong. As Michelle explained: “It’s always a paradox. We’re liberated but restrained. We’re free but caged. We’re supposed to be sexual but we really shouldn’t be too much, but we always are too much or excessive etc. It’s tough.”

Social, cultural, and media influences

The majority of women mentioned social, cultural, and media influences that get in the way of their own expression of or experience of their sexual natures. The barriers led many of the women to indicate that they compartmentalized aspects of their sexual nature, either walling that part off completely, or only showing it to certain people, under certain circumstances. When asked if she had ever revealed her unrestricted sexual/erotic self, for example, Jordana shared, “No, not truly. I have such a good girl persona. I feel it might come out of left field. Occasionally, if I have too much to drink, things might get interesting.” Natasha disclosed that she had revealed that part of herself, but that,

It went horribly. Almost break up. I mostly hide all my past sexual behaviors because no one wants to know about the ones ‘before them’.... If you reveal too much about your past sexual experiences you will be thought of as damaged goods and no one will want to pursue a relationship with you.

Many women mentioned body image, weight, performance, and worthiness throughout their responses. Nineteen women spoke of insecurity based on not matching media representations of attractiveness. The vast majority of these insecurities were about weight or size. For example, Val summed up most of the commonly expressed self-image influences, as well as asserted herself as a sexual person, by saying:

To me, that saying involves being free of both societal restrictions about sexuality (e.g., what someone of my gender “should” feel, think, say, or do). It also makes me think about being free of inhibitions that come from my specific life experiences, for example, shame about my body/weight and feeling insecure about my worth to others). Being unrestricted and freely expressing my sexuality would involve not feeling self-conscious or embarrassed or insecure related to my self-image.

More, please

About half of the participants spoke of sex and eroticism in ways that indicated that they wanted more *from* sex. These were the women who felt limited or restricted, who enjoyed sex, and who wanted more from their sexual experiences, from society, and from their partners. Adeline evinced this by sharing, “sometimes I feel I get messages that I should NOT enjoy sex (think of all the jokes about women ‘having to’ have sex to please their partner)—but I REALLY enjoy it, and typically have a higher sex drive than my partner (and get aroused as quickly!).” She has clearly acknowledged some barriers to her free expression, made efforts to acknowledge common expectations of women, while also openly declaring herself as sexual and wanting more. Megan succinctly indicated that she wanted, “More sex. Sex in more ways and with other participants at times.” Others talked about how

they were working on being more open to express freely, suggesting that this was something they wanted to achieve. Melanie struggled to be free, stating, “I yearn to be able to experience it. Something is holding me back.”

In reviewing the responses, a sense of disappointment and frustration emerged. There was common mention of things that get in the way of sexual expression, such as being judged, not worth the effort, or too much for partners to handle. Whether it was fear of judgment or rejection, or disproportionate cost-to-benefit, many women reported actions of self-restriction, to the detriment of their own sexual fulfillment. Kathy, for example, shared:

I think we are molded by our environment and tend to stay within that, unless we find a partner who allows our real sexual selves to be open without judgment or fear. I think that we all have fantasies and turn-ons buried deep just waiting to get out. I would be a Dominant with many men to wait on me and wait for my commands. Being a dominant has been portrayed as a bad fetish. I know that ‘to each his own’ but living a secret life is hard.

Michelle lamented, “Given the contexts of sexism and patriarchy that we live in, I don’t believe this is possible. Nothing is completely unrestricted and free. I think women struggle with a lot of toxic garbage in their heads, and no one is exempt for this. Not possible, though we always strive.”

Given that discourse legitimizes and delegitimizes certain actions and thoughts, it is important to examine how actions were facilitated or inhibited based on the various constructions within the discourse of *free, but caged*. The function of the discourse of *free, but caged* is a legitimation of the self as an erotic being, within a sociohistorical context that in many ways delegitimizes women’s eroticism. Participants spoke up for their desires as if to say, “me too!” regarding their enjoyment of sex. For example, Bianca said, “Our culture tells us that men are the horny ones and women are just the ones that they have sex with. I disagree. Sometimes I am sexually aroused and want to act on my feelings too.” These actions and expressions demonstrated the action orientation of self-legitimization of being sexual; these women stood up for themselves to establish a legitimate place in the world for them to enjoy sex, and to be considered sexual beings.

Discourse 3: Voices of influence

There were five primary voices influencing women’s experiences of their own eroticism. These were family, society, religion, social circle, and partner. These voices were clear throughout the data, in both facilitative and restrictive ways. Most described family influence either as supportive and open or as silent or repressive. The former appeared to be less conflicted about erotic expression, stating that the topic was common conversation, and reporting few, if any, barriers to their expression.

Family

Women whose families were silent or repressive of sexual discussion and/or expression most often demonstrated restricted expression in their own sex lives, with either a guarded stance or a counter-stance to the influences leading to their restriction. Consider the words of Mary, who reported being raised in a home that was silent about sex: “I wanted to be a good girl. I didn’t want to disappoint my parents.” Rene shared, “Being raised in a ‘don’t ask don’t tell’ environment I found it difficult to relax and share with my kids as well. I envy my few more free spirited young friends who can talk about it.” Those who took a counter stance spoke up about actively disagreeing with this aspect of the way they were raised, making choices to live and raise their own children differently, with many using aggressive language in their disagreement. Examples of this were: “I do not agree with this view and in my adult hood have dropped this belief;” “I believe differently;” “I (angrily, strongly, completely, etc.) disagree;” and “it is bullshit.”

Society

The barrier to erotic expression mentioned by roughly three quarters of participants was “societal stereotypes.” Women described many specific stereotypes, broad assumptions about women, and expectations about women that they experienced as societal. The most damaging stereotype mentioned was the double standard of men’s sexuality being acceptable while women’s is not. For example, Angie explained:

Society and our culture tell me that there is still a serious double standard between men and women in regards to eroticism. Women are still judged harshly and looked down upon for expressing sexuality in open ways, and men are almost expected to be ‘pervs.’ It’s almost like this hidden message that men are inherently sexual so they can do/say whatever they want but women are supposed to walk this line between staying sexy and classy as the perfect objects for men while giving them whatever they need when they want it. But we aren’t supposed to go too far or be too free or it’s tacky and trashy and then we can become not worthy of a man having a relationship with us.

Toward the end of this quote, the experience of a double bind becomes apparent, where women like Angie felt expected to act in a certain way, then punished for that action.

Religion

Religion was the third most mentioned social influence, and often a barrier to free expression. In conjunction with family and societal influences, religion played a large role in participants’ constructions of their eroticism in both facilitative and repressive ways. The positive influence of faith for some women provided a framework for sexual expression that is safe, namely, within the context of marriage, under the eyes of God, and consistent with their family values.

Others, however, held less positive experiences with how religion influenced their sexualities. These were repression, marginalization, and the legitimization of sex only within the confines of marriage. Cris elaborated:

I think my first barrier to my sexual expression was the guilt that I felt over having sex before I got married. Growing up in a Christian home and church I definitely heard numerous messages against premarital sex. When I started having sex, and was not married, I felt as though it was something that I needed to hide since I knew that I could not actually talk with anyone about it. I also felt bad because I really enjoyed it and in my “circle” growing up no one ever discussed actually enjoying sex. If I would be seen as an outcast from the Christian community, or if I would be seen as “just another easy black girl.”

Social circle

Women mostly described their social circles of other women friends and on social networking sites as positive and supportive of women’s sexuality. These women shared that they chose like-minded friends who upheld the ideas that women can and do enjoy sex. The function of this is that women experiencing the barriers and judgments outlined above need a place to feel accepted, affirmed, and “normal.” The positioning of women is being expected to be sexual but then being judged and repressed for it, which leads to a subjective experience of conflict or disappointment. If their other primary influences were repressive, silencing, judgmental, or castigating, an accepting community of like-minded women is experienced as a welcome relief, and affirmation of self. Robin exemplified this by stating, “This idea of ‘purity’ and discomfort with discussing a woman’s sexuality is truly a detriment because women feel like it’s taboo to talk if they’re experiencing issues or have questions in that area of their life. Thank god for ladies’ nights with wine!”

Partner

The implicit or explicit value of the male partner, often over the women themselves, also became clear throughout responses. Women often shared that they ventured to express freely only when their partner would allow it or made them feel safe to do so. Some spoke of their desires as “weird” or “freaky,” and disclosed uncertainty of whether or not their partners would accept those parts. One participant shared, “If I feel the need to bring myself to orgasm and my partner has already cum I feel that maybe I am selfish because I feel the need to cum every time.” When asked if she had ever revealed her unrestricted expression, she disclosed, “Not completely. I had a feeling of fear that my partner would think it was too outrageous and choose not to continue the relationship.”

On a more internalized aspect, there was much discussion that indicated implicitly that the partner is valued more. Language of feeling “allowed” to express implies that someone else has to give permission, such as Jana, who said, “Being allowed to do what I want [and] express how I want with no judgment.”

Inherent in the dynamic of giving and receiving permission is a power dynamic, wherein the woman feels the need to seek permission to be sexual.

Not all of the partner references were as limiting to women's eroticism. On the contrary, many of the women took delight in pleasing their partners, thereby enhancing their own sexual gratification. The mutuality of pleasurable sexual-erotic experience described by participants also demonstrates the relational, interactional, and mutually satisfying aspects of free erotic expression. The influential voice of the partner was therefore complex and multidimensional.

Discourse 4: Caution

The most prevalent discourse that arose was one of caution. A sense of caution, apprehension, and even fear emerged from all of the discourses and the majority of participants' responses. *Caution* indicated fear and/or apprehension of a real or perceived danger, and drove participants to take cautionary actions to protect themselves. Specific dangers that were woven throughout the responses included judgment, castigation, criticism, rejection, or being taken advantage of by partners for expressing one's true erotic nature. They were also afraid of being ostracized by religion, family, and society at large. The broader social rejection looked like women saying they would be labeled as a slut or whore, that their family would "flip out" knowing their sexual histories, or they would be judged or rejected for their sexual behaviors and desires.

People in, and aspects of, this society have socially constructed these fears for women. Women have historically been disproportionately subject to the dangers of sexual submission, rape, being unsafe in the family, gender-biased norms, unwanted sexual attention, sexual objectification, and judgment for being "too sexual," and these participants shared experience with all of these fears. Women are also expected to be a certain level of sexy, being compared to unreachable standards of sexiness, with the digitally altered images and hypersexual characters bombarding us from the media. The double bind that occurs from being a sexual object and then being judged negatively for it, limits women's perceived possibilities for expression. In every discourse, in every question, and from nearly every participant, the most pervasive discursive practice was *caution*.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to give women a safe space to explore and describe their meanings of erotic expression, and to examine the contextual barriers women face in modern American society to their own free expression. We made no assumptions or hypotheses about what would arise from the data prior to engaging in the analysis, only hope that women would, indeed, share their stories, and that these stories would broaden the current understanding of women's eroticism.

Myriad institutional discourses exist on female sexuality. Institutional knowledge and epistemological preferences have shaped sexuality discourses in religion, politics, popular culture, and research that have emphasized silence and pathology, thereby limiting possibilities for open female eroticism. These discourses place women in double binds that lead to practices of self-restriction based in fearful apprehension of real or perceived consequences, despite desires to reveal their true erotic nature.

Participants shared desires for more sex, and more from sex. They described the factors that encouraged or discouraged them to engage in it. Despite wanting more sex in more ways, women showed restriction in acting on their desires because of inner conflicts between their desires and the limiting and silencing effects of self-image, societal stereotypes, family or religious influence, and the internalization of silencing discourses. They also indicated that they can be, and often are, aroused by a multitude of factors, thoughts, partner actions, and other stimuli, both internal and external. These findings support research findings indicating women's erotic plasticity (e.g., Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2006). They also counter the discourse-in-practice of the complicated, responsive, and moody constructions of women's sexual desire and response (Meana, 2010) and the conclusion that plasticity is due to lower sex drive (Baumeister, 2000).

Rather than a narrow chance of arousability, these women indicated a broad window of opportunity to evoke their erotic desires. What many arousal and desire researchers (e.g., Bodenmann, Atkins, Schär, & Poffet, 2010; Davidson & Hoffman, 1986; Goldey & van Anders, 2012; Laan et al., 1995; Levine, 2002, 2003) did not fully acknowledge were the factors of fear, apprehension, and internalized social discourse that inhibits desire and limits perceived opportunities for action for those who are still wanting. As Perel (2016) noted, women desire much, but they also have many reasons to be selective as to whether they express or act upon those desires.

What these women reported needing was less judgment and punishment for being desirous in the first place. By describing both the desire for, and the fear of, free expression, women were clearly highlighting the confusing and frustrating sexual double bind that exists for us to be sexy, but not too sexy. In other words, we are free, but caged. Based on the results of this study, we wish to advocate for a perspective of women's eroticism that is in line with McCarthy and Wald (2016): that the variable and complex nature of women's sexuality is indeed *first class*. We encourage every woman to find her own erotic voice. More importantly, we encourage broader acceptance that every woman has a right to have and express her own erotic voice without shame or fear.

These women demonstrated a sense of guilt over their personal enjoyment of something considered taboo at best, evil at worst, and shame about their sense of worthiness to freely express this part of their nature. Discourses of silence, appropriateness, and gender-biased "shoulds" of female erotic experience

become internalized and subjectively experienced, which then encourages women to hold back parts of themselves that they would rather share. Among these competing influences, however, one thing was clearly common practice: participants were, in fact, finding and using their voices. In many ways, these women were standing up for their wants, admitting their fears, and in many cases fighting to be heard. For this, we admire them.

Limitations

One major limitation was the relative lack of diversity in ethnicity and sexual orientation in the sample. Despite much variation in age, religious-spiritual orientation, and geographical locations, most of the participants were heterosexual white women in committed relationships. The risk in making conclusions based on this sample is perpetuation of the discourses of the dominant population, and thereby further marginalizing the voices of women of color and women of minority sexual orientations (Robinson, 2011).

A second limitation to this study is that there is no widely accepted or manualized method for FDA to be easily replicable. Many authors have used FDA, and each has presented his or her conclusions in different ways, making reliability a potential issue of concern. Several authors (e.g., Crowe, 2005; Nava, 2007; Wallis & Singh, 2012; Weeden, 2010) have provided model examples of FDA that we followed, in addition to consulting with colleagues versed in Foucault's philosophy for confirmation, challenge, and feedback.

Based on these limitations, we therefore encourage other researchers of different subjectivities to replicate this study or build on this research by exploring other emergent discourses. Racial identity and social constructions of race and sexuality, as well as intersectionality of multiple minority statuses, gender, discourses of masculinity, and sexual orientation are all areas ripe for future study.

Implications for therapeutic practice

Given that many participants shared stories of rejection, judgment, castigation, blame, being silenced, sexual abuse, and not feeling sexy enough throughout their response sets, there was much shame either directly reported or evinced in the way they described free expression, and in terms of what gets in the way of it. As mental health clinicians, it is vital that we are sensitively aware of the nuances of sexual desire and the shades of caution that may be inhibiting our clients' desires and actions. More importantly, we must attend to their own and their partners' perceptions about the desires and actions they believe are allowed, and how these have been discursively shaped.

Women's subjective experiences are often silenced for not fitting within the dominant discourses. There are societal rules of what is socially acceptable or unacceptable to talk about or act upon, specifically regarding sex.

These rules do not cease to exist in the therapy room. It is vital that therapists do not inadvertently promote the discourses of silence and rejection by neglecting to talk about, and even honor, women's eroticism. Provide a safe space for clients to discuss these issues, and continue to open the dialogue, despite initial reluctance, apprehension, or silence. Initial dismissal of a topic may indicate fear of judgment, rather than not wanting to talk about an issue. Therapists should continue to encourage women to talk about previously silenced experiences, as many women silently yearn to share. This will not only give women permission, but also empower them to find words they may lack, thereby counteracting silencing discursive practices.

Institutionalized discourses-in-practice have repressed or punished women's free sexual expression, thereby instilling a deep sense of caution. Couple and family therapists must be aware of how this caution may extend to therapy and into our clients' relationships. We need to work through and beyond it, promoting freedom and not colluding with an institutionalized system of oppressive and judgmental silence. It is quite possible that when a woman loses her erotic voice, whether due to caution, shame, fear, overt silencing, or lack of equality in her sexual relationships, that this will most certainly compromise her desires to freely express her sexuality. With low desire being the most common sexual complaint presented in therapy, we believe it is imperative for therapists to support women in finding, and safely expressing, their erotic voices. The women in this study shared many barriers to their erotic expression: fear, disappointment, and the benefits of sex do not always outweigh the costs. We recommend exploring these issues with each client, and promoting an environment of safe, free expression.

These clinical implications are true both for individual women and for couples. Many people do not learn to communicate openly about sex. Clients often feel apprehensive about sharing their undisclosed desires with partners because of this. They simply may not have the words, or be afraid because of other relational problems they may have, such as past rejections or attachment injuries. They may also both have fears of judgment and rejection based on internalized sex-negative messages from society or family upbringing. It is important to help partners of women in therapy to offer reassurance that they are beautiful, cared for, supported, safe, desired, and sexy, and to address any double standards that may be arising. We also need to acknowledge, honor, and help men to identify their own insecurities and practices regarding sex, performance, body image, social influence, and any barriers they may have experienced to their own erotic self-understanding, caution, and fears. Our focus on women in the current study is not intended to imply that men do not also face similar experiences of anxiety, shame, or damaging societal stereotypes regarding male eroticism. We therefore advocate for therapists to support partners in becoming what McCarthy and Wald (2016) labeled as *erotic allies*, supporting and encouraging each other's erotic expression in an egalitarian way.

Conclusion

As Gonzalez-Crussi (1988) stated, “Some speak of the erotic with cynicism, others with excitement, still others with nostalgia, and few with fear” (p. 141). In the extant literature, as well as in participant responses, his words were true. Sex research has a complicated history, pulled in varying directions by institutions of politics, religion, medicine, social justice, public health, education, and others. The women in this study opened their hearts, and hopefully a door to a more appreciative discursive possibility for the study of women’s eroticism.

More research of this kind is needed to allow women the space to have their voices be heard, to encourage a sex-positive view of women as inherently (and acceptably) sexual beings, and to hear more about women’s actual experiences and thoughts. In addition to the usefulness of quantitative research, qualitative explorations into the sexual lives of women will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of female eroticism, thereby deepening assessment, treatment, policy, and education endeavors to be more inclusive and less marginalizing of feminine knowledge and experience.

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Appendix: Survey questions

All questions had a free response area with no length requirements or limits.

How old are you?

How many consensual (willing) sexual partners have you had in your life?

How would you describe your sexual orientation?

Please describe your current relationship status.

What is your race or ethnicity?

What is your religious or spiritual identification?

Compared to the majority of your close family, how similar to or different from them is your religious/spiritual orientation?

In the space below, please describe what sex means to you.

Do you enjoy sex? (Likert: Do not enjoy at all; Do not enjoy very much; Neutral; Enjoy somewhat/sometimes; Enjoy very much; *This question was not free response strictly for the exclusion criterion of women who enjoy sex*)

Have you ever had therapy or counseling for sex-related issues?

In the space below, please describe what eroticism means to you?

What comes to mind when I say “unrestricted, free expression of your true sexuality”?

What does your unrestricted sexuality look like, or what would it look like if you showed it?

Have you ever experienced any barriers to, or has anything gotten in the way of your free, unrestricted, sexual expression? For example, media stereotypes, or messages from people you know, that women do not or should not enjoy sex? If so, please describe.

What does your family/culture/society tell you about women’s sexuality and/or women’s eroticism? Do you agree or disagree with any of that?

Have you ever revealed your free, unrestricted sexual/erotic self to any of your sexual partners? Why or why not?

How do you feel about talking/thinking about this topic?

Would you ever seek therapy for sexual or erotic issues? Why or why not?