
Faking It, Finishing, and Ambivalence

Women's Negotiations of (Sexual) Failure in Conversation

ABSTRACT This essay analyzes the transcription of critical focus group conversation among women to understand failure within their sexual lives. Against the backdrop of normative sexual scripts, women discuss faked orgasms and lackluster sex. Practicing a reparative reading method, we explore the relationship between failure, ambivalence, and sex in conversation. We conclude that the focus on women's lived experiences highlights the reparative possibilities of ambivalent discussions surrounding failure; failure and ambivalence in sex are neither endgame nor roadblock. Instead, failure and ambivalence are constitutive of the gray areas of sexual communication, which contain within them moments of agency, pleasure, and power. **KEYWORDS** Failure; Reparative reading; Ambivalence; Critical focus groups; Sex talk

It's after-hours at the "lesbian owned, multi-gender operated" sex toy store in a midsize metropolitan city and we've convened our third group of people identified as women. We are about halfway through a conversation about sex, pleasure, and failure when Soo says, "I've personally never orgasmed with a partner, um, male or female, so, like, if I were to say that every time I did not orgasm it was a failure, then I've just been having constantly shitty sex, which is not the case (laughter)." Another participant confirms Soo's laughter with a knowing nod and then Tamara chimes in: "I've, like, never come during intercourse, ever, and I've had sex, I've had a lot of sex and lots of partners . . . if that's the only criteria, like 0% fail rate or 100% fail rate . . . [I remind] myself it's more about the experience." Heidi interrupts and gently says, "I might be in the minority, but I want there to be an orgasm." Tamara chimes back in and assures Heidi that "that's not a bad thing (laughter). I really, I mean, I wish I cou—, like I would love to have one."

A long pause. As co-researchers, we are on the edge of our seats. We ask, "Are there any other thoughts?" and Aria says, "In my relationship now, with a woman, it's a lot different. You know? We communicate. She's like 'If

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I don't come, that's fine, too.' So, because we already say it out loud, it's like, whatever." Tina immediately responds and says, "This is nice to hear 'cause I . . . It's very hard for me to come as well, and I just always kind of felt that, like I needed to, like try to figure out how to make it happen. I thought that it was sexier if I came, uh, so I probably faked it a lot. Or (clicks tongue) . . . yeah. That's it." Another participant confirms with a knowing "Mmmm." Another pause.

Less than five minutes of five hours of conversation across four critical focus groups are represented in this introductory vignette. The conversation moves through desires for orgasm, to hesitancy, to laughter, to vulnerability, and reassurances. Sitting in a circle, the women test the waters of sex talk with strangers. We invited them to talk to one another about sex, failure, and orgasm, but in the background—which often became the foreground—our participants shared so much more. Women talked about their struggles with body image, eating disorders, becoming sober, sexual assault, trauma triggers, mental health, confidence, and the overall trouble of sexual communication.

As this essay illustrates, conversations about sex and orgasm among women are often tied to the social sexual scripts crafted in culture and history (Barmak, 2016; Frith, 2015; Jackson & Scott, 2001; Jagose, 2012; Koedt, 1970/2003; Potts, 2000; Shulman, 1971/2003). And it is against the backdrop of this history that the women in the focus group circles animate their sense-making. The story of women's pleasure carries with it a tumultuous and long history within feminist, popular, and sexological accounts (Frischherz, 2018). And as we explore below, those scripts guide women through gendered meaning-making practices about sex. By bringing women together to discuss sex and orgasms within a focus group setting, we witness the connections made in conversation with each other when constructions like failure and pleasure are at play within lived experiences. Focus groups help explore how orgasm "becomes increasingly the measure for both individual happiness or satisfaction and the worth of intimate relationships" (Jagose, 2012, p. 85). And while these measures and scripts are sometimes normative, the active negotiation of those scripts by women in conversation with one another brings forth the complex, ambivalent gray areas of sexual pleasure and failure.

This essay takes as its archive the transcription of four rounds of critical focus group conversation between women to understand the sexual scripts negotiated amid the orgasmic imperative. Holding space for these conversations about sex and failure, we argue, comes at a particularly kairotic moment given the intense public circulation of sexual assault and reproductive justice

discourse. Practicing a method of reparative reading, we ask how failure is negotiated within the space of the focus group by amplifying the discussion of women's lived sexual experiences. While failure is a key component of popular narratives of the orgasmic imperative, our participants recognize "the persistence of negativity in every practice of repair" (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. xv). The essay, therefore, explores the relationship between failure and happiness—between negativity and repair—among women engaged in sex talk with other women. We conclude that the focus on women's lived experiences amplifies the reparative possibilities of affective discussions surrounding failure. Through a reparative reading analysis of our participant's conversations, we ask where the negativity of failure unleashes "the energy that allows for the possibility of change" (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. viii). The women teach us that failure and ambivalence in sex are neither always endgame nor roadblock. Instead, failure and ambivalence are constitutive of the "gray areas" of sexual encounters, which contain within them moments of agency, pleasure, and power.

To locate those moments of agency and power, this essay moves in four parts. First, we describe how two researchers came together in the field of sexual communication studies and landed on critical focus group transcripts. We detail how the focus group circles came to be, who animated the circles, and how focus groups tap into the gray areas of sexual encounters. The second section outlines our investment in Eve Sedgwick's groundbreaking articulation of reparative reading against the backdrop of normative sexual scripts. We position reparative reading as a method of analysis that invites us to resist a hermeneutics of suspicion and, instead, encourages us to read for moments of feeling, agency, and the valuable mess of normative sexual expectations. Rather than begin with assumptions about how a lack of an orgasm is always "bad," or that faking an orgasm is never (ever) okay, reparative reading allows us to maneuver in between and beyond these normative constraints to locate moments of agency and ambivalence within a communicative terrain often marked by failure.

Following our reparative method, we share three sexual script themes emergent in the transcripts. These three themes—(1) *Taking the "L": Faking It and Negotiating the Orgasmic Imperative*, (2) *Blaming Bodily Normativities and Gendered Sexual Expectations*, and (3) *I Don't Know, Whatever: Performing the Grays of Sex*—each illustrate where women locate moments of agency and power among ambivalence and failure. Finally, we conclude that locating moments of active sexual sense-making within discourses of failure and

ambivalence reinvests women with a sense of sexual agency, but also refocuses sexual communication studies to include the voices of women that actually inform the conclusions critical cultural studies produces.

AFTER-HOURS AT THE SEX SHOP: CREATING THE [CRITICAL FOCUS GROUP] CIRCLE

When we first discovered the overlapping touchpoints of our individual research agendas, we knew we wanted to talk with women to learn about the sense-making that happens around normative concepts like sexual “failure” and sexual “success.” Rather than interview participants and ask them directly what they thought about the sexual scripts that orchestrate ideas about “success” and “failure,” critical focus groups offered strangers an opportunity to consider themes like the representation of pleasure, the perfect orgasm, sexual success, and failure with other women in the circle. The women in our focus group circles staged practices of sense-making *in situ* about heady concepts like “the ideal orgasm” or “sex that just doesn’t feel that exciting.” And while, sometimes, our participants explicitly drew on their social locations to articulate their sense-making, critical focus groups allowed us to key into the traffic *between* and *among* women rather than the relationship between *one* woman (and her particular social locations) and their understanding of sexual communication. We approached our university’s Institutional Review Board with our research proposal, informed consent processes, and focus group guide and we were granted IRB approval between November 2016 and November 2020. As researchers we bore witness to the meaning-making emergent among all of us in the circle. And in that opportunity, women organically shared the sexual scripts that informed their sense-making practices.

In this essay, critical focus groups generated our “object” or “archive” of study, while reparative reading serves as our method of analysis (Rowe & Frischherz, 2022). We share these details not only for the sake of disclosing a bit of the “critical invention” process that foregrounds any piece of communication scholarship, but also to justify why we have returned to focus groups within cultural studies–inflected communication research (Nothstine et al., 1994). A sometimes forgotten piece of cultural studies history reminds us that *in situ* approaches like focus groups built much of the scholarly production at the center of the Birmingham school (McRobbie, 1996). More broadly, we join the recent turn in communication studies to play with field

methods in an effort to record discourse that hasn't been recorded already (McKinnon et al., 2016; Rowe & Frischherz, 2022; Senda-Cook et al., 2016). Centering the voices of human beings actually communicating about difficult topics (in this case, sex and failure), we argue, returns us to the most capacious areas of cultural studies.

The first three focus groups were conducted at a local lesbian-owned, multi-gender-operated, sex shop. Participants were recruited from several local social media groups that provide a virtual connection space for queer folks, queer people of color, and working-class folks. Our call invited people aligned with the following descriptors: "you must be 18+, identify as a woman, and be sexually active to participate in a small group discussion with women about their intimate partner relationships." In each of these first three groups, between five and six women participated and the circles brought together women of different ages, sexual orientations, gender descriptors, race/ethnicity descriptors, and levels of education.

Importantly, we acknowledge the racist, colonial, and trans antagonistic baggage of the category "woman." The category "woman" has long been at the center of feminist activism and inquiry—its capacity, its inclusions and exclusions, its social construction, and its relationship with biology. The "woman question," once again, feels both urgent and at risk. And because theory, especially feminist theory, is always built on the back of everyday life, our own focus group methodology illustrates how the category "woman" is bursting with variegated difference. Our participants articulate a wide affective range of sexual experiences, and this range is constitutive of a wide array of women participating in our circles. Following Kyla Schuller (2021), we stick with the category "woman" in this essay to respond to the "invitation to investigate how power has materialized over centuries and to what ends" (p. 252).

Our demographic questionnaire followed a "write-in" structure wherein participants could respond to fields pertaining to age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other demographic and sexual history information. When asked about their gender, most of our participants responded with the word "female" or the letter "F." Other responses to the gender field included "cisgender female," "genderqueer (primarily identify as female, female bodied)," "femme woman," and "queer cis femme woman." Our participants' sexual orientations ranged from lesbian and queer, to bisexual and pansexual. A few of the women were straight. The circles were also comprised of women who are disabled, do sex work, had recently divorced, and were recently having sex with the same gender for the first time. Describing their race

and/or ethnicity, our participants included Biracial, African American/Asian Indian, White, Chinese and Latina (mix), Asian, African American and Puerto Rican, Hispanic, White/Jewish, and Black women. A total of 16 participants joined us in these initial conversations. In an effort to support not only local queer business but also our participants, the women were compensated with a 25-dollar gift card to spend at the sex shop at the conclusion of the focus group.

The fourth round of focus groups were conducted at a hotel conference room in a working-class community on the outskirts of a small mid-Atlantic city. Participants were recruited through a Facebook shopping group dedicated to a woman-owned independent clothing retailer. Like the first three groups, the women were compensated with a 25-dollar gift card to spend at the small business after the focus group. Although we anticipated a more homogenous fourth group based on our preconceived notions about who shops with this independent retailer, the six women who participated included straight, lesbian, and bisexual women, working-class women, Black women, white women, married women, single women, and cohabiting women. In total, we held space for four separate conversations with a total of 22 women across the groups.

How women make sense of moments of failure and ambivalence within sexual encounters in conversation with other women sits at the center of our inquiry. The snapshots of conversation below help us understand how sexual scripts—those sexual expectations laden with normativities—show up in women’s sense-making practices. Critical focus group conversation allowed us to tap into how women articulate a sense of resistance to and (re)negotiation of these scripts. That is, what happens when women recognize they have “fallen short” of a sexual script? What happens when the “alignment” is off? Our initial research questions guided us into these robust conversations:

RQ1: What are the dominant discursive and non-discursive scripts enacted when women discuss reaching orgasm during a sexual encounter?

RQ3: What cultural norms do women draw upon when discussing sexual “failures”?

RQ4: What is the relational function of faking an orgasm?

We began by asking the women to describe representations of sexual pleasure in music, television, or film with which they were familiar. As

researchers, we knew that people would be more comfortable discussing representations before digging into their own personal experiences. We then asked about what constituted an “ideal” orgasm and an “ideal” moment of pleasure (spoiler alert: women are not *strictly* guided by sexual norms, and therefore, they offered quick rejoinders to the concept of “ideal” pleasure). Soon, the conversation progressed as our participants discussed their own personal sexual experiences.

Our focus group guide aimed to draw out moments of hesitancy, failure, and delight by asking how women make sense of those gray areas of sexual communication—lackluster sex, sex that just isn’t that great, hesitant and uncertain sex, sex that leaves us feeling bad afterward or maybe even during. Though the #MeToo movement has done important work to bring to the fore public discourse about sexual assault, conversations about hesitant sexual encounters live on shaky political, social, and personal ground. Portrayals of sex and sexual consent, for example, are often based in popular culture on an idealized depiction of consent, “as underpinned by open communication—in which women make a judgement about whether or not they are ‘into it’ and then ‘make it known’ that they do not consent” (Frith, 2017, p. 699). As a consequence, we explore the areas of sex that exist in the ambivalent space between an enthusiastic “yes” and a resounding “no.” This ambivalent space, we argue, makes visible the active and sometimes productive negotiations of sexual failure women enact in conversation with one another—moments of pleasure, power, and agency.

SEXUAL SCRIPTS AND REPARATIVE READING: SITUATING THE [CRITICAL FOCUS GROUP] CIRCLE

When we first invited our participants to join our circles to talk about sex, the field of sexual communication studies and popular culture had just reinvigorated the volume and intensity of narratives about sexual assault, consent, and patriarchal danger (Wilz, 2019). Convening women in conversations about sex against the backdrop of these discursive circuits struck our curiosities about the co-mingling of cultural stories. That is, where do narratives of blurry consent come into contact with stories of pleasure and satisfaction—narratives of failure and pain? These tensions are especially salient within the context of sexual scripts that demand faking orgasm, vocalizing orgasm in a particular way, and, overall, performing pleasure, sex,

and orgasm according to cultural expectations (Barmak, 2016; Fahs, 2011; Frith, 2015; Frischherz, 2018; Jagose, 2012).

Gendered understandings of sex and pleasure, like the orgasmic imperative and the impulse to fake an orgasm, lurk behind the sexual scripts our participants draw on in conversation. To be sure, the history of feminist interventions on sex, pleasure, and orgasm is long and fraught with both tension and delight. As Frischherz (2018) notes, much of the public orgasm discourse that circulates in the United States aims to rectify Sigmund Freud's limiting theories on pleasure. Similarly, scholars and pleasure activists have long questioned the durability of the imperative to orgasm and the gendered expectations cooked into the articulation of pleasure and orgasm. Like Barker, Gill, and Harvey (2018) note, "the status of orgasms as desirable is almost unquestioned—their absence regrettable and remarkable" (p. 144). As a rejoinder, our analysis illustrates women's *active* negotiation of these constructions and highlights their subsequent resistance to the orgasmic imperative. Women do, in fact, critically question what we are told. Our participants illustrate how these scripts both inform and challenge the sense-making practices activated by cultural conceptions of normative sex.

Take, for example, the gendered injunction to fake an orgasm. Both scholarly and popular outlets comment on the pearl-clutching scandal of faking orgasm (Fahs, 2011; Frith, 2015; Jagose, 2012). Within the discursive scandal, sexual scripts are built—*She's a liar if she fakes it. She's not a good lover if her partner fakes it. Faking it means she's never taken the time to learn what she likes. Faking it is something you should never (ever) do.* Thomas et al.'s (2017) study of women who feign pleasure to end unwanted sex refers to sex that is not enthusiastically consensual or wanted as "problem sex" (p. 285). For them, faking an orgasm is read as a kind of "embodied hedging" that "colludes with dominant discourses of heterosex" (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 296). And yet, sexological accounts conclude that women fake orgasms for a variety of complex reasons (e.g., avoiding conflict, feeling sexy, preserving partner's feelings, encouraging partner to end sex or try something different) (Fahs, 2011). Indeed, blogs and "self-help" books often instruct women to avoid faking orgasm because it puts future pleasure in jeopardy—and even so, many women *confess* to this practice in self-reported surveys and "think pieces." As we discuss below, our reparative reading method illuminates not only this complexity, but also the ambivalence that marks the active negotiation of sexual failure and sexual success.

Understanding ambivalent spaces requires capacious and compassionate methodological orientations toward reading and analyzing our transcripts. Ambivalence, by its very definition, is slippery—often temporary, contingent, dynamic. And ambivalent spaces of sex remind us of the imperfections of (sexual) communication—like failures and eye rolls; uncertainty and shoulder shrugs; defensive laughter and dull emotional pain. Rather than understand the enacted sexual scripts as strict disciplinary vectors of control and power, we approached our focus group transcripts through a method of reparative reading. We chose to read the transcripts reparatively to do justice to the agential power of women making sense of imperfect sexual experiences. Against the backdrop of a long feminist history that has grappled with pleasure and danger and with consent and patriarchy, we are inspired to read these conversations reparatively within their current cultural contexts.

Reparative Reading, Failure, and Critical Focus Group Transcripts

Since Sedgwick's first articulation of this method of reading in 1995, the limits and possibilities of reparative reading have been taken up by feminist critics across the disciplines (Hanson, 2011; Love, 2010; Sedgwick, 2013; Wiegman, 2014). This mode of criticism aims to practice "an investment in tracking subjects in their everyday life worlds," with an attention to feeling, agency, and empowerment of the objects of inquiry (Wiegman, 2014, p. 13). As West (2013a) writes, reparative reading is "not the trading in of unhappy endings for happier ones or wishing away the contamination of practices with complex power relations" (p. 20). Instead, a reparative mode of criticism orients itself toward objects of inquiry with love and care in the face of the normative terrain (Sedgwick, 2013). Reading with "repair," or reading to resist the suspicion of total power, allows the critic "to take up texts and practices in all of their messiness" (West, 2013b). For us, we turn away from the textual analysis and turn instead toward women themselves within the field of the critical focus group—to practice a love for and an amplification of our participants.

We position reparative reading of critical focus groups as a method that seeks to practice both care and love for our participants. First, co-mingling reparative reading with critical focus groups not only invites us to create a space for strangers to work through sexual sense-making together, but also orients the mode in which we "read" our participants in conversation. Rather than begin with vectors of control, or sexual expectations, we begin with the exchange between women. This exchange, we argue, offers a different starting

point for sexual communication knowledge production. Together, strangers share snacks, they talk about sex and orgasms, and, later, they browse for toys at the sex shop—the conversation is about them, the conversation is *for* them. As co-researchers, we push our voices to the side and communicate with our eyes to signal when a gentle moment of facilitation feels good.

Second, we take up reparative reading to carefully grapple with how “failure” shows up in sexual sense-making. Grappling with failure alongside other women who have navigated what it feels like to “fail” at sex, to “fail” at inhabiting a body, to “fail” at “good” sex feels like an act of being together, of meaning making together. Highlighting LeMaster’s (2018) intervention on failure’s creative capacities, the women in our circles demonstrate how “failure provides a productive ground from which to trace the contours of normative cultural relations so as to envision ‘dialogic possibilities’ secured through an improvisational sensibility” (p. 11). This dialogic artistry emerges within the space of the focus group, and as critical researchers, we are given an opportunity to both bear witness and amplify the communicative processes that emerge from the normative noise. Extending this reparative mode of analysis to our focus group transcripts allows us to tap into those cultural scripts that are typically coded as negative and powerless and instead, read for moments of agency and power. We argue that “reading for” agency and power is not about reading for that which is “good” or “right,” but rather for understanding the rich complexities of women’s sexual negotiations—especially in ambivalence and failure. As the women who animate this study illustrate, the sense-making processes that live on after sexual encounters are characterized with ambivalences, gray areas, and failures.

In failure we locate the possibility to perform reparative readings of women in conversation with one another. As Rowe (2018) asserts, the affective traces of failure within everyday life performance come with uncertainty, which is an integral part of experiential sense-making. The themes emergent in the focus group transcripts each speak to different facets of failure and uncertainty—both the material “falling short” of various sexual scripts and the articulation of ambivalence. Following Spencer Schultz’s (2017) feminist call to understand failures as a way to become “accountable to complexity,” our analysis aims to enact that accountability rather than relying on outdated tropes or clichés (p. 505). Amplifying how women grapple with failure not only allows us to witness the normative sexual scripts that *always already* encase conversations about pleasure and orgasm, but also

allows us to witness how women respond, react, negotiate, ignore, resist, and make do with those scripts (Muñoz, 2009, p. 173). We do this work through our conversations with women themselves. Those conversations, we argue, bring us back to the foundation upon which much critical/cultural studies theorizing originally emerged.

In the reparative mode, neither faking it nor mediocre sex (both coded as “failures”), we argue, need portend the total subordination of a woman in a sexual encounter. As Frischherz (2015) writes, “the dangers of ascribing affects with definitive outcomes arises from both the occlusion of individual emotive invention and action and also from the predisposition of scholars to pre-valence affects as either “good” or “bad” (p. 259). Because the orgasmic imperative is “a powerful discourse that positions orgasms as vital for good sex and relationships . . . [and is] constructed as *right*,” the injunction to come is valenced positively (Barker et al., 2018, p. 141). Our intervention asks: What can be gleaned from conversations amongst women giving an account of sex—beyond deliberations of “good” vs. “bad” sex? That is, where might we hear agential expressions despite or because of the orgasmic imperative? Where might “bad” or “mediocre” affects feel empowering? Quotidian? Traumatic? Just another bodily encounter?

Guided by our reparative reading method, we prioritize sexual scripts as a paratext in our analysis because the scripts are one way that marginalized voices explore the ambivalence of their own experiences in the face of the status quo. The scripts are powerful agentic forces for participants to confront their experiences. The scripts are reflections of those embodied experiences—a type of conversational shorthand that is heavy with meaning, but creates a framework for understanding how sense-making happens *between* participants. Sexual scripts are weighed down through experience and emotion and are one of the places where the “labors of living” are made plain—indeed, articulations of falling short and ambivalences run through each of the focus group transcripts. Tracing the affective weight of the participant conversations takes up Stewart’s (2017) call to perform “analysis [that] trains itself on an effort to describe the iterations, durations, and modes of taking place” rather than the static understandings of disciplined bodies (p. 195). We revel in the messiness of the stories—with the accompanying slippages and failures—in order to uncover the push and pull of how women negotiate their own sense of being in response to sexual experiences that live within the blurry boundaries of acceptability.

SEX TALK AMONG WOMEN: SENSE-MAKING IN THE [CRITICAL FOCUS GROUP] CIRCLE

Sex isn't "just" sex. Sex, sexual expression, and sexuality produce subjectivities and normativities; they produce sexual scripts that sometimes guide practice and that sometimes invite improvisation. Through cultural and institutional forces, sex moves beyond the bedroom (or the kitchen, or the keyboard) into our lives in ways that are more than just bodies colliding into other bodies. Bell (2005) reminds us of the pressures of sexual performativity and writes, "If 'doing it' is a complex intersection of materiality, institutions, sociality, and privilege, then 'doing it well' introduces questions of performance competence" (p. 194). Following Bell (2005), we center how women talk to one another about those "competencies" to understand how those complex intersections come to the fore when considering what "counts" as failure or pleasure or success or ambivalence. Hearing women make sense of experiences with sex and orgasm laden with those normative expectations, we examine the three sexual scripts called forth within the conversations.

Sexual Script 1: Taking the "L": Faking It and Negotiating the Orgasmic Imperative

This theme addresses the performative moment of failure within the sexual encounter, and pulls together how women frame unsuccessful (or failed) sexual experiences. These conversations culminate around moments in group conversation where women reflect on their lack of orgasm during sex. For some of our participants, not reaching orgasm or pretending to reach orgasm is just part of the "game of sex"—where the orgasm is the "reward" or a "win." Sometimes that reward is lost and sometimes that reward is powerfully staged and felt. Participant Bethany reflects: "I kinda feel like, [I should] just take the 'L.' Like, I'm not, I'm not going to go pull out [a vibrator], I'm not going to go through my top drawer, 'cause that's gonna piss you off. I'm going to be fine, but, like, you know. I mean I feel like for her, she'd feel inadequate if I go to reach for a vibrator after you've tried to get me where I need to be." Part of this utterance reverberates through the second theme discussed below, but we begin here with Bethany's reflection of sex as game. The "win" is the orgasm and so, this time, she simply just takes the "L." Understanding sex through the metaphor of a game repositions the encounter and depersonalizes the orgasmic imperative. The repositioning also leaves open the possibility that during the next game she might take the "W."

The women in conversation with one another gesture toward the possibility of “loss” in the absence of orgasm—but that loss also illuminates the complexities that accompany women’s sexual desire. In Rhiannon’s case, it was about shelving what she experienced at work that day. Rhiannon recounts a conversation between her and her husband. She confesses to the group of strangers that she chooses *not* to communicate to him that her head is at work (the ER). She pauses and reflects that she *could* tell him what’s going on, but “then it becomes about him, and it’s not about him, it was about me and just where I am in my head, and so in that moment, I anticipate a loss.” Bethany affirms Rhiannon and suggests that sex is, after all, not an “I” thing but a “team thing.” Bethany never tells us who is on which team or if there is more than one team in the game, but we know from her affirmation that the imperative to orgasm leaves both at a loss.

Women also reflected on the orgasmic imperative and its gendered implications calling up the sense of failure that accompanies sexual encounters without orgasm. In the first focus group, Jade reflects on the sexual scripts inherited from pornography. She shares with the group, “I think it’s about, like, a conditioning. . . Like, that’s part of the sex, right? You’re supposed to be doing that [having an orgasm]. And then all of a sudden it just. . . it messed with me. I’m like, ‘I’m doing this because his orgasm is the important part.’” Several participants “mmhm” in supportive response. As reparative readers witnessing this conversation, we find here a powerful moment of critical self-reflection. Jade’s ability to say “it messed with me” actively negotiates the imperative to come. She finishes and reflects, “I think I did it for, like, their benefit. Like, you know, ‘Thank you so much for having sex with me. Here’s your treat. Here’s your reward for that.’ And, ugh, I don’t know.” There is both delight and disgust in her sense-making—delight in her ability to give a reward, and disappointment for following a sexual script she has seen in pornography before (“And, ugh, I don’t know”).

Part of our recruitment process included a demographic questionnaire that asked women if they had ever faked an orgasm—a practice often marked by scholars, educators, and activists as a moment of failure. When we got to the circle, many of our participants were ready to talk about the act of “faking it” within the context of consensual sexual encounters. Across all four conversations, women consistently recounted faking an orgasm as an active strategy to choose when to end the sexual encounter. For many of these women, “faking it” is an empowering tool to determine when the interaction needs to end. Nora articulates the agential power of faking an orgasm to end

an uncomfortable sexual encounter. Her voice is resolute and she looks the women in the group squarely in the eyes. She says, “I was just going with it . . . just once, I actually felt physically unsafe, like, I was thinking before we had sex, I was trying to figure out how would I get out of here . . . not like he was gonna, like, harm me, but I felt like if I said ‘You know what? I’m gonna go home, ’cause that was all I was there for.’ Like, we both understood that. I was not going to make it out in a way that, like I wasn’t going to leave [until I orgasmed] . . . It was somehow implied . . . I could feel it in my gut, and so I was just like, ‘Okay, Let’s, let’s do this.’ . . . And I was like, ‘Okay. Mmmmm’ . . . I was never happier to get out of some fucking house.” “Faking it,” often coded as failure, allows Nora to get out of the fucking house.

And while the women affirmed Nora in that first focus group conversation, not all women understand the meanings attached to “faking it” in the same way. In the third focus group, Tina recounts the time she flirted with a bus driver and then invited him over. “Not my best decision,” she says, “but, then I realize, I really, really don’t want to sleep with you, but he was not gonna let that happen. I had verbally said, ‘No’ and he was like ‘I know you want to.’ I was scared and I was like, ‘Okay, I kind of feel like I have to do this.’ Like, I don’t really know what to do at this point. Like, I already said, no. And then, I was like, ‘Okay, if I just, pretend like I came, maybe it’ll be, like, over faster, and like, he’ll leave.’” Several women in the circle let out affirming “Mmmm’s” but Tamara retorts, “Oh, I’ve never faked an orgasm actually (laughs). I don’t wanna be not true to myself.” This moment in the conversation briefly stings—it stings Tina as her eyes meet the floor and there is a palpable shift in the circle’s vibe. Together, the women confront consent, desire, power, faking an orgasm, and sexual coercion wrapped in their own life experiences and the circle of the focus group. The sexual script demands women “always be true to themselves” and Tamara intimates that Tina has failed at prioritizing her own orgasm. A paranoid reading might understand this moment as one wherein Tamara normatively disciplines Tina. But what if we understood Tamara’s critical act as an act of love instead? Reading reparatively, we understand sharing one’s relationship to pleasure (especially with a stranger) as a gestural performance of love that gently encourages Tina to center her own pleasure. We are only halfway through the conversation. Tina is quiet for five minutes, but soon she finds moments of identification again with other women in the group as the conversation shifts to getting wet and vibrators.

“Faking it” within the terrain of the orgasmic imperative functions differently for different women. Nora and Tina had to perform well enough to be able to leave the scene of the unwanted sexual encounter. In that desperate moment, faking the orgasm would work only if the performance accurately portrays normative assumptions of what orgasm looks and sounds like within the sexual experience. Faking it, for these women, offers a break from the encounter and becomes one of Stewart’s (2017) labors of living. Enacting the normalized script of orgasm provides a material tool for escape from an encounter that is unwanted. The affective weight of the sexual script is heavy with patriarchal power, and is present in the participants’ desires to either pleasure their partner, end an experience, or just get the hell out of the house. And even though Tamara shares that she has never faked an orgasm at a tense moment in the conversation, she does remind the strangers in the circle of the tension between the orgasmic imperative and lived sexual realities. Tamara says, “It’s a bit like re-scripting the ending. Like, okay, ‘Here’s the true story.’ But, mmm, we don’t like that, so when we make the movies, we’re gonna change the end.” In taking the loss, in confronting the orgasmic imperative, these women teach us about the complexities of lived sexual experiences. Sex, intimacy, pleasure, and even consent sometimes sit in the gray liminal spaces of sexual communication.

Sexual Script 2: Blaming Bodily Normativities and Gendered Sexual Expectations

This second theme describes the sexual scripts that outline gendered and bodily expectations in sexual encounters. Regardless of partner status or sexuality, many of the women in conversation negotiated sexual failure through blaming only themselves rather than co-constructing the failure with their sexual partner. And that blame was often articulated on the axis of what their gendered body *should* be capable of doing. In that fourth focus group in the conference room, we’ve just talked about “not-so-awesome sexual experiences,” when we ask the group if they have ever “faked it” during those experiences. Several women laugh and “admit” to faking orgasms. One woman says, “I got over that a long time ago,” and the tenor of the conversation shifts.

Ambivalent sexual encounters, we learned, often brought women into conversation about whose body is to “blame” for a lackluster sexual experience. In describing an emotional breakup with a male partner, a participant describes the moment where he wants to have sex one last time. Dawn says,

“I really didn’t want to, like, I have feelings about that now. Like, I should have just said no I don’t want to have sex with you.” She continues to describe herself as “feeling like a prostitute” and frames the experience as a sexual failure in which she blames herself for agreeing to have sex because he was upset about the breakup. In the group, this story was met with unanimous affirmation as many of the other women mark the intentionality of sex and how sex is beyond the physical engagement, but complicated through layers of emotionality. Blame, the group agreed, is a common affective tension within sexual experiences.

How our bodies physically respond to desire and intimacy (and how they are *supposed to respond*) also consistently emerged within all four of the focus group conversations. Many women shared stories of experiencing difficulty getting wet when they did, in fact, want to have sex. Here, a different kind of gap between the mind and the body emerges in conversations among women. Tamara reflects on the blame she directs at her body when she cannot get wet without the help of a lubrication product. She says,

The wet thing makes me real nervous because I’m almost 40, and, I really feel like, um, there’s, again, just not enough information about women’s bodies and certainly relative to women’s sexual pleasure as it is, and then there’s even less for older women, so as I look toward middle age, I’m starting to really cultivate older female friends because there’s some information, but there’s just not enough.

Tamara marks the feeling as heavy with frustration but also nervousness. She actively resists the cultural narrative that demands women become wet at every sexual turn and seeks out experiential knowledge. Tina responds: “Yeah, I think the getting wet thing is huge. Like, it stresses me out. And so much music I listened to growing up was like ‘She gets wet. Like, that’s hot.’” And I was like ‘I can’t get wet!’” She remarks how she didn’t start using lube until a year ago because she was adamant about “not needing it” but she says, “Like I need that (laughter from the group) really badly.” In this exchange between two bisexual women, there is a mutual acknowledgment of the strange stigma of using lube. In their acknowledgment of the script, they recognize its limiting force. In the same conversation, Soo chimes in and discloses that she used to conduct research for women’s reproductive health wherein she learned that even “biology” could help her upend the normative demand to get wet. She shares, “Like, I know that it’s not my fault. It’s just my body. It’s not failing, it’s just like, doin’ whatever it wants and I can’t change that, so

I can support it.” Two participants respond with affirmative “mm-hmms” and another compliments Soo and says, “Nice reframe.”

Finally, drawing on the sexual scripts that compel women to blame their bodies, many women referenced the relational function of sex toys. Some women noted that the use of sex toys shamed their partners, while others noted sex toys signal a lack of one’s own ability to “perform.” Aria, like other participants, reflects on what role sex toys play in adjudicating a sexual failure. Many of our participants echoed the idea that the use of toys (especially with men—but also, sometimes, with masculine-of-center women) was marked as a sexual failure. Aria blames her body for not reaching orgasm with men without toys. She remarks:

Before I came out, when I was with guys, it would be the expectation that if he didn’t come . . . that it was, like, a failure. . . . I’m not gonna generalize, but I just got this feeling that, like, no toys. It emasculated them, um. . . . Doing it myself kind of emasculated them, um, and so in my relationship now, with a woman, like, it’s a lot different. You know?

Her experience using toys with men differs from her experience with women, and she recognizes how gendered forces write that shame unto her body. When she asks the group, “You know?,” she affirms her revision and rewriting of blame and shame. In a different focus group conversation, Taylor says, “As a gay female, a lot of people think that the only way we have sex is using strap-ons, and you know, utensils outside of what were given by God. Um, I’m not that kind of person. I like to use what the good Lord gave me (laughs) . . . it’s just kinda a pride issue.” Taylor performs her gender with a masculine-of-center aesthetic and resists the sexual script that lesbians must use sex toys. For Taylor, there is an expectation that she has placed on her body to perform and provide pleasure for her lovers. Perhaps that expectation comes from the “good Lord,” or cultural codes of gender, or from a stigma surrounding sex toys. In any case, the sexual script is negotiated in the conversation when a co-facilitator affirms Taylor with a nod, and then Lynn, a heterosexual woman, remarks simply, “Well, I have a box of toys.” The women go on to consider the different orientations toward sex toys men and masculine women express in their experience. And while no two experiences are the same, the women each continue to blush and laugh and shift in their seats and offer additional anecdotes. This conversation demonstrates that different sexual scripts guide different women differently—and even when there is an awareness of a script women have the capacity to reject *and* negotiate failure and ambivalence.

Sexual Script 3: I Don't Know, Whatever: Performing the Grays of Sex

The longer we sit with this third theme, the more convinced we are that gray areas are inherently constitutive of sexual communication more generally. And if gray areas of sex and desire are constitutive of sexual communication, then there is much work left to do (by scholars, practitioners, activists, and, frankly, people who have sex) to understand how to navigate, ethically and with consent, those gray areas.

This third theme describes those moments beyond the easy binary of either successful or failed sexual experiences. We mark these conversational moments as the grays of pleasure. In the focus groups, women work through these sense-making practices with each other. They express ambivalence and various degrees of pleasure among “failure.” Here, the women are less definitive about what constitutes clear demarcations between success and failure. This falls in line with Frith’s assertion that a focus on the easy “yes or no” of consent “as the measure of violation obscures unequal power relations and may problematically position women’s participation in unwanted sex as an active choice made by individuals free from relational and societal pressures” (Frith, 2017, p. 698). Frith’s (2017) analysis, and the women in our groups, agree that the only definitive conclusion about conversations about sex and active choice in consensual relationships is that the rules are blurry and constantly shifting.

Besides the word “orgasm,” the expressions “I don’t know” and “whatever” appear frequently across all four focus group conversations. And it is in the “whatever” that we locate the gray areas of sex, failure, and desire. Dawn remarks: “They feel like it was . . . I don’t know, awesome for them, for whatever reason. But like it’s . . . when my pleasure is no longer about me and it’s about, like, their – mental edification. That feels really uncomfortable. And again, goes back to this performative thing. Like, do I fake an orgasm to make them stop, or do I tell ’em to fucking quit and, like, have to deal with the repercussions.” When we asked her, “So is this failure?” She responded by saying “Hm. I guess . . . I don’t know. I’m having a hard time with this question.” The conversation that follows this “failure ambivalence” culminates around a collective group reflection on the idea of “checking out” and “checking back in” during sex. Together the women consider moments when the brain wanders during sex. Many of the participants nodded along during this part of the conversation to suggest that “success” and “failure” ebbs and flows parallel to how the mind aligns with the body and then

misaligns during a sexual encounter. The ebbing and flowing of the alignment between mind and body is articulated by several women across all focus groups when reflecting on consensual sexual experiences that don't feel good.

These performances in the grays also demonstrate the complex traffic between bodies, desire, gender, identity, pleasure, and failure. And that complexity sometimes creates the "it is what it is" affect voiced by so many of our participants. From Patricia we learned that, sometimes, faking an orgasm was less about the pursuit of her own pleasure and more about affirming her transitioning partner. She shares,

When I used to fake orgasms it was to encourage people. I had a partner when I got out of college who decided to transition. We were a straight couple, then all of a sudden we weren't. And so, about halfway through the relationship, there was this patch where she was discovering her new body and, like, we were trying to make things work that just . . . it got very complicated. And so by me pretending to have orgasms, which I didn't realize I wasn't anyways . . . it was making her feel better.

For Patricia, these gray areas of sexual communication do not live within easy black and white boundaries (where one partner's pleasure is constantly valued and "won" over the other's). Her pleasure communication does not rely on the quasi-feminist imperative to come (where orgasm is marked by a liberal feminist assessment of orgasm as always already transcendent and powerful). Instead, Patricia's choice to fake her orgasm as an act of care for her trans partner's pleasure ("making her feel better") signals neither failure nor success when "it got very complicated." When her partner "stopped showing up" for their weekly scheduled sex sessions, a participant chimed in to compare her partner's absence to a sex strike. Patricia does not warm up to the metaphor and hesitantly responds with more of a question than an answer, "a two-year sex strike," followed by a shrug and sigh. The group never returned to Patricia's story that evening even though several women let out affirming "mm-hmms" to let Patricia know that sometimes, it is, indeed, neither complete failure nor complete success. Their silence fills the grays.

Over and over, women return to the scene of the orgasmic imperative—sometimes as a metric by which to definitively judge failure or success and sometimes to sit in the grays of the imperative itself. In the first focus group conversation, Jade talks about how she used to feel really "entitled" to an orgasm, "Sleeping with cis men, my idea was I'd be angry if they didn't make me come from a feminist perspective, like, 'How can you fuck me and not

make me come?” Several participants laugh in agreement—it’s funny because it’s true, they knowingly nod. She then reflects on getting older and suggests that the level of fulfillment is more important, and that she places less pressure on herself to orgasm. She says, “If I don’t then it doesn’t mean I’m a bad feminist, and it doesn’t mean that my partner didn’t fuck me great. Like, it just means that, like, I didn’t come. It’s fine, and that’s okay.” Similarly, in a different conversation, Lucy remarks, “Cause, like, I’ve always had trouble coming. Like, that’s just, like, that’s my story, you know? And, like, guys that are just like, “All right. Well, I’ve, uh, reached my threshold of wanting to work about, on this, so I’m gonna move on.” You know? . . . the instances themselves weren’t bad . . . but reaffirm that, like, I should not be concerned with, like, achieving my own pleasure.” And that’s just “how it is sometimes” the women conclude—not quite success and not quite failure, but somewhere in the murky middle.

CLOSING THE CIRCLE

After every focus group, we thanked the participants for sharing these conversations with a small group of strangers, gave them their small-business gift card, and wished them a safe commute home. Each night, when we locked the sex shop door and the conference room door, we headed for the bar. With a legal pad in hand, and a jumbo glass of wine, we sketched our impressions, our early hunches about themes, the discordances, and the harmonies. At the top of the notepads, we reminded ourselves of our research questions and the contexts swirling around the conversations. Over and over again, these snippets that bubbled to the surface struck us. These women in conversation with one another put pressure on a long history of feminist research that overemphasizes normative and disciplinary sexual expectations and deemphasizes the agential, communicative moment of sense-making. But here, in these focus groups, against all communicative norms (strangers, sex talk, research!), these women shared pieces of themselves and their experiences that loudly ask critics to look twice before concluding how norms impress upon women. In this way, the women determined our mode of transcript reading. The reparative reading method allowed us as researchers to listen for those discordances that so often mark sexual experiences.

Locating these moments of active sexual sense-making through the reparative mode, within discourses of failure and ambivalence, reinvests women with a sense of sexual agency, but also refocuses sexual communication studies

to include the voices of women who actually inform the conclusions critical cultural studies produce. Our participants taught us that—not the theories, or the preexisting research. In our third focus group, Aria reflects on what “society” has taught her about sex and sexual communication. She describes how if you can’t do “x” or “y,” then that makes you feel like you are “bad.” Aria remarks, “It’s kinda drilled in my perception, into women, like patriarchy, you know, the dick is the end-all, be-all. You know? And to move away from that is defective in some way and I don’t believe that, but I definitely have internalized it.” Tamara responds to Aria and says, “Yeah, I like that notion of core, core values, core concepts. The external verse the internal relationship.” In critical-cultural communication we don’t often leave the door open long enough to let in “the people” but when we do, through the reparative method, we are given an opportunity to amplify robust moments of sense-making like Aria’s and Tamara’s. Rather than read the internalization of these sexual scripts as definitive vectors of control, this essay practices a reparative reading strategy and highlights how women communicate their own experiences within the gray areas of sex sutured by cultural scripts of sexual success, failure, and ambivalence. ■

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