Exploring Female Sexuality

By Julia Maguire

The discussion about women and their sexuality has always been turbulent. Debate over what is “moral” and what is “normal” has raged for generations, severely hampering objective, practical analysis. As a result, even in today’s modern, scientific world, female sexuality remains shrouded in mystery and references to female desire are persistently met with discomfort. All of this is relevant to how women experience themselves as sexual beings and interpret their own feelings. In recent years, an increasing number of women are reporting low feelings of desire, a problem diagnosed and treated as a sexual dysfunction. On the surface, it would be easy to conclude that women, in general, seem to be genetically predisposed to abnormally minimal sexual feelings, as many seem to have done. However, by looking at desire itself, as well as what is considered normal or abnormal, as culturally defined as well as biological, a much more complex picture emerges. It is not enough, then, to merely decide what is “normal” and treat that which is abnormal accordingly. Attention must be given to how and why men and women differ sexually and what differing factors are present for each on the road to sexual maturity and self-realization. Only when these realities and their affects are integrated into our understanding of what sexuality is can an intelligent discussion about female sexuality take place.

It is imperative, when examining how men and women are conditioned sexually, to understand the concepts of sexual subjectivity and objectivity. Sexual
subjectivity refers to the ability to see oneself as the “subject,” or lead actor, of one’s sexual life, making decisions entirely in pursuit of one’s own needs and desires. Sexual objectivity, then, is its inverse, and occurs when an individual lacks this feeling of agency and acts in reaction to the needs and desires of others (Tolman, 1991; Welles, 2005). Throughout western history, men have been seen as the “historical subjects,” shaping and writing history through their choices and actions, while women have held a more passive role as “historical objects,” living their lives in reaction and response to the choices and actions of men. This subject/object paradigm has distinctly shaped the sexual self-concepts of men and women, and continues to do so today.

The practical effects of this construction cannot be overemphasized. Research on the link between sexual subjectivity and a variety of outcomes, including sexual satisfaction, safety, and self-confidence, is extensive. Emily Impett and Deborah Tolman conducted research in 1996 exploring how sexual self-concept and approach motives (two aspects of sexual subjectivity) were related to sexual satisfaction. Similarly, the 2008 work of Vanessa Schick, Alyssa Zucker, and Laina Bay-Cheng sought to demonstrate how female sexual subjectivity, inspired by feminist ideology, translated into higher levels of sexual satisfaction and condom-use self-efficacy (confidence in one’s ability to make sure a condom is used). Both studies indicate strongly that sexual subjectivity is a strong predictor of the quality and safety of women’s sexual experiences. The first study employed the Sexual Self-Schema scale developed by Andersen & Cyranowski in 1994. This scale measures a person’s sexual self-concept in terms of positive aspects like passion and agency, as
well as negative aspects such as anxiety and embarrassment (Impett & Tolman, 1996). Approach motives, on the other hand refer to an individual’s reasons for engaging in sex, and are divided into “approach motives” and “avoidance motives.” An approach motive anticipates the sexual encounter bringing a positive result (like feeling closer to your partner) while an avoidance motive anticipates the avoidance of a negative result (like your partner losing interest in you or avoiding a disagreement) (Impett & Tolman, 1996). They note that “research with both adolescents and young adults has found that approach motives were associated with less sexual risk taking, whereas avoidance motives were associated with more risky sexual behavior “(Impett & Tolman, 1996). They found, furthermore, that engaging in sex for approach methods was associated with higher feelings of contentment and happiness.

Deborah Tolman (1991) presents this binary construction in different wording, referring to the earlier work of Judith Jordan. She explains that throughout adolescence, boys develop a “sexual entitlement;” girls, a “sexual accommodation.” This occurs in response to the differing ways our culture addresses the developing sexuality of boys and girls (de Beauvoir, 1949; Katz & Farrow, 2000; Kreager, 2009, Tolman, 1991; Welles, 2005). Sexual interest and desire are considered inevitable and natural in young boys, with the unsurprising result that boys tend to discover masturbation earlier and are more likely to engage in it frequently (Welles, 2005). Men, then, grow up with a better understanding of and stronger feeling of entitlement to their sexual feelings. Girls, on the other hand, usually reach puberty having “no awareness of the presence of their clitoris.” (Welles, 2005).
Deborah Tolman (1991) eloquently describes how the missing “discourse of desire” in a variety of contexts in which sexual education and discourse takes place is largely to blame for girls’ confused feelings about their sexuality hindering their sexual agency. She discusses the fact that the dominant strains of dialogue concerning female adolescent sexuality are the “discourse of disease,” the “discourse of victimization,” and the “discourse of morality” (Tolman, 1991). All of these characterize sex as a dangerous arena in which a girl may become infected by an STD, be raped, or soil her reputation; none encourage girls that sex could be a positive avenue of their growth and adult lives. The connection between discourse and experience is certainly not merely theoretical, which she shows by referring to Foucault’s work, saying that “discourse about sexuality—the terms, tenor and tone in which sexuality is talked about—shapes sexual experience and that discourse is controlled and deployed by those in power” (Tolman, 1991, p.1) The result is that girls, unlike boys, “fail to know themselves as the subjects of their own sexuality” (Tolman, 1991, p.2). In her view, desire and acknowledgement of desire are directly and inescapably linked to the subject/object paradigm discussed above.

Tolman and others have discussed a major effect of the “missing discourse of desire” that becomes problematic in a variety of ways: girls develop ambiguous feelings about their own sexuality (Tolman, 1991; Impett & Tolman, 2006; Schick et al, 2008; Welles, 2005). In her 1991 paper, Tolman discusses a note written by a 16-year-old girl to her psychiatrist in which she discusses strong feelings she is having (obviously sexual in nature) conflicting with her worries that it is not normal to have them. While the girl’s psychiatrist writes the case off as “a typical adolescent
concern about normality” (Tolman, 1991, p. 2), Tolman believes that the fact that the struggle is about the normalcy of her sexual feelings is the real issue. The implication is that girls in our culture our in a tight bind: experiencing sexual desire amidst countless messages that tell them it is dangerous, unnatural, or wrong to do so. This is not a very enriching environment in which to learn to appreciate your own sexuality, and it hardly seems surprising how many girls describe their experiences of intercourse, especially their first time, as painful, boring, and disappointing (Impett & Tolman, 2006; Schick et al, 2008; Welles, 2005). Welles also identifies another result of this ambiguity as it relates to girls’ sexual risk taking. In her 2005 paper, “Breaking the Silence Surrounding Female Adolescent Sexual Desire,” she discusses how girls who have deeply internalized the message that sex and sexual feelings are “wrong” or “unnatural” are far less likely to employ safe-sex practices if they do have sex. This, she says, is because preparing for safe sex (ie having condoms ready), in the eyes of these girls, implies that she was “expecting” to have sex, while she would prefer to feel she was “swept off her feet” (p. 39), minimizing her feelings of guilt.

As girls reach adulthood, a new problem emerges, which is somewhat ironic in its opposition to the first. Although young girls’ feelings of desire are ultimately silenced and denied, leaving them on a difficult course towards understanding their own sexuality, women are not supposed to feel the same confusion, especially once they are married. Impett and Tolman eloquently summarize this shift in their study, “Late Adolescent Girls’ Sexual Experiences and Sexual Satisfaction:” “At the same time that society views girls’ lack of sexual pleasure as normative, women in
heterosexual marriages are supposed to have sexual desire (for their husband); when they do not have desire, they get pathologized and labeled with a sexual problem” (p. 639-40). This shift from the pathologizing of sexual desire to the pathologizing of its lack will be discussed further later.

Internalization of the “sexual accommodation” attitude referred to above is visible from a young age. Girls are taught to obsess over their appearance, and to conform to a very narrow and difficult standard of beauty. Shugart (1994) noted: “Women are socialized to conform to specifically male standards—which are intentionally impossible—of the feminine sexual ideal; that is, women's socially dutiful obsession becomes that of perfecting their own objectification” (p. 17). The forced belief in this “duty” causes girls to turn against their bodies for not “looking right,” making it much more difficult to explore their bodies’ potential as vehicles for desire and pleasure (their own, that is). This is supported by the body of research indicating that a small percentage of girls actually like the way their body feels during sex (Impett & Tolman, 2006; Welles, 2005). Women end up watching themselves with the same critical eye they imagine men to be watching them with, and even when they delight in their appearance, it is very often the delight they take in knowing they will look good to men (Shugart, 1994; Welles, 2005). By putting the emphasis on women’s appearance, as opposed to her desires, as she sexually matures, society seriously hampers women’s ability to seek and discover what actually feels good to them.

Additionally and just as importantly, this also affects the way women view each other; if women are viewing themselves the way a man would, certainly they
are viewing each other that way as well. As Welles explains, women are bombarded
with the message that “her body is her passport to happiness: it is through her body
that she entices a man, which should be her main objective” (p. 33). This places
women in opposition with one another, competing for the attention of the male
gaze. At no point is this more keenly felt than during adolescence, and Derek
Kreager’s 2009 research on the sexual double standard offers some interesting
insight into the way girls of this age group view one another. He studied whether or
not there was a correlation between popularity and sexual permissiveness in high
school students, both male and female. His method was to interview high school
students on a variety of factors, including sexual experience. He then had each
student choose, from a roster of their school, their five best friends. He wished to see
if there was a correlation between how many sexual partners a youth had had and
the number of friend nominations they received. Between males and females, the
results were exactly opposed: boys with more sexual partners had more friend
nominations, girls had less. But the most interesting finding was that the popularity
of an individual was greatly affected by the sex of the interviewee. A girl who was
sexually permissive (had many sexual partners) was generally less popular, but only
with other girls. The same trend did not appear if the interviewee was male. This
suggests that the harshest critics of adolescent girls, especially where sexuality is
concerned, are other girls (Kreager, 2009). This serves as strong evidence of how
deeply engrained in the female psyche are current societal notions of how women
and girls should behave sexually. This reality shows how efficient the system of
oppression of female sexuality has become: that it encourages women themselves to become the oppressors of their fellow women.

An important way that female experience and desire has been made invisible is through the historical association of “male” with “human.” Just as written history has focused primarily on the activities of men, early sociological and psychological research used only male subjects, with the natural consequence of normalizing, or “neutralizing” male experience (Richgels, 1992). Richgels described this in her work, saying, “Women have not had a language or symbol system to describe their sexual experience in the same manner that they have not had a history that describes their life experience” (Richgels, 1992, p. 126). Simone de Beauvoir, writing in the 1940’s, discussed the same phenomenon in her analysis of the androcentric view of the lesbian:

“The truth is that man today represents the positive and the neutral—that is to say, the male and the human being—whereas woman is only the negative, the female. Whenever she behaves as a human being, she is declared to be identifying herself with the male. Her activities in sports, politics, and intellectual matters, her sexual desire for other women, are all interpreted as a “masculine protest”; the common refusal to take account of the values toward which she aims, or transcends herself, evidently leads to the conclusion that she is, as subject, making an inauthentic choice.”

(The Second Sex, p. 408)

Luce Irigaray was also plainly aware of the androcentric nature of our culture, from sexuality to language to symbolism, and this awareness was the basis for her belief in the urgent need for women to develop a new language, one that allows us to “speak ourselves” (Irigaray, 1977). Without this language, she believes, women will never be able to fully realize themselves, and will never have their
experience and point of view understood. This lack of understanding is evidenced in Freud’s analysis of the lesbian, which Christine Hormlund discussed in her 1991 study of Irigaray’s work.

For Irigaray, the lesbian’s reduction by Freud to a man—she looks and acts like a man; she desires another woman like a man—stands as “the extreme consequence” (Ce Sexe, pg 43) of what Irigaray labels the hom/m/osexuality” of psychoanalysis, by which she means its inability to conceptualize women except as the “same” as men.”

(Holmlund, 1991, p. 287)

Patricia Richgels considers this “neutralization” of male experience to be of utmost importance in examining hypoactive sexual desire in women. Hypoactive sexual disorder, or continued lack of sexual desire, is the most common problem reported to sex therapists, and an especially high number of women bring the complaint (Richgels, 1992). However, she sees something highly problematic in the way our society regards and treats this issue: “The process of defining illness is value-laden and constantly changing, especially when women and sexuality are involved...Underlying these ideologies is the assumption that sex is a biological entity residing in an individual’s hormones and psyche, without history or significant social determinants” (Richgels, 1992, p 125). She points out examples of how women’s sexuality was medicalized historically, always by men, in such a way that pathologized certain tendencies. These constructions have worked to “serve the needs of the culture and the need to control and limit female sexual behavior” (Richgels, 1992, p. 127). Noteworthy is the Victorian era, in which women were understood to not naturally have any sexual desire, and were considered to have a “disease” if they felt any. Now, the trend has changed, and it is considered healthy
and normal to have sexual yearnings, and interestingly, tremendous numbers of women are seeking a “cure” for the current “sexual dysfunction:” lack of desire. That high rates of low sex drive in women exist, according to Richgels, is neither incorrect nor unimportant. It merely must be examined within a broader context.

In most mainstream discourse, “sex” means “sexual intercourse.” Thus, the key sexual organs are considered to be the penis and the vagina. However, it has long been understood that many women experience very little vaginal sensitivity, and many as well cannot achieve orgasm without clitoral stimulation (de Beauvoir, 1949; Richgels, 1992; Welles, 2005). This tendency to define sex exclusively as coitus, then, is problematic for many women who would seek sexual activity for pleasure’s sake, and not merely to procreate. It is especially demeaning to lesbians, who do not have penises, and therefore, using the above definition, can’t have sex at all. As long as the clitoris remains in the background, rarely discussed in sex education and academic discourse, it is difficult for women to not conceptualize their own pleasure as being of secondary importance to her male partner (Tolman, 1991; Welles, 2005; Richgels, 1992). Evidence of this can be observed in the study conducted by Laina Bay-Cheng, Adjoa Robinson, and Alyssa Zucker in 2009, which compared levels of female adolescent desire, wanting, and pleasure in their experience of different sexual acts. They distinguish between “desire” and “wanting” in response to “studies in which female respondents described engaging in a sexual encounter, despite not wanting to do so” (Bay-Cheng et. al., 2009). In other words, a distinction must be made between wanting and consent, and desire fits into another category entirely: a person may desire a sexual encounter because of physical
arousal, but not want to for a multitude of reasons. Among their results was the finding that of the sexual activities studied, coitus had the highest rating of wanting, cunnilingus of both pleasure and desire, and fellatio had the lowest rating of all three. However, fellatio was conducted more frequently than cunnilingus, and was also more likely to occur in “less serious” relationships (friends with benefits, random hookups, etc.) (Bay-Cheng et. al., 2009) The discrepancy between the high level of “wanting” associated with coitus, despite higher levels of “desire” and “pleasure” associated with cunnilingus, as well as the low occurrence of cunnilingus in comparison to fellatio seems indicative of some ambiguity in young women’s experience of their own right to pleasure, as well as their internalization of the supremacy of coitus as the “one true sex act.”

The insistence of our culture on equating sex with intercourse makes perfect sense in the framework thus illustrated: 1. Discourse about sexuality is shaped by those in power, with the express purpose of meeting their needs; 2. Men are in power; and 3. Intercourse is a sexual act that both requires male participation and guarantees their pleasure (if not necessarily the woman’s). For this reason, many have seen heterosexual relationships in general to be too fraught with inequality and phallocentric bias to offer, at present, a realistic avenue towards unhampered female expression (de Beauvoir, 1949; Irigaray, 1977; Richgels, 1992). It is also a reason for why lesbian sexuality has been so denigrated and mocked: a sexuality (and sexual act) that doesn’t require men is seen as quite dangerous (also supported by the above-mentioned low status and visibility of female masturbation as well as cunnilingus, which does not require a male participant.)
It is also important not to ignore the historical economic reality of women in exploring women’s sexual agency. For much of history, women were severely limited in the ways in which they could support themselves, through various laws and customs which have prevented them from owning property, inheriting wealth, working outside the home, etc. For this reason marriage was a matter of survival. Richgels remarks, “a woman with a ‘bad reputation’ i.e., one who is sexually active, takes the risk of being ineligible for marriage to a respectable (read economically secure) man” (p. 130). So the adherence of women to a strictly guarded, socially acceptable sexuality was quite literally an issue of survival. The threat of pregnancy and the social stigma associated with an illegitimate child, as well as the economic burden, further hindered women’s access to control of their own sexuality. Additionally, once within a marriage, the balance of power within the relationship was very clear, with the husband as the only source of support and survival for the wife and children. This creates an environment in which “the traditional heterosexual contract expects sexual services to be delivered by women to men as part of an economic exchange” (Richgels, 1992, p. 131). The fact that women’s sexuality has been so inextricably connected to her survival is one of many factors that set up a distinction in how men and women may regard sex and themselves as sexual beings, indicating that a system which regards male and female sexuality as the same is fallacious.

The ever-present rape threat is also a significant factor in women’s experience of sexuality. In Helene A. Shugart’s article, “The Missing Text: Rape and Women’s Sexuality,” she outlines a multitude of ways the threat of rape affects
women’s lives, such as their needing to be careful about going out alone and keeping their doors locked, as well as perhaps not taking jobs or classes at certain times of day if it might require them to have to walk alone. She also points out the irony that the rape threat can affect women’s economic opportunities (by limiting the jobs they can take), since poor women tend to be more vulnerable to rape (because of the neighborhoods they live in, the type of transportation they use, etc.) (Shugart, 1994). In addition to these concrete affects of the rape threat, there are subtler results as well that relate to women’s position in society and the way they see themselves. The rape threat increases women’s dependence on men, as they may feel safer with a man around. It also makes women more likely to view themselves as victims, which is dangerous because “women who perceive themselves innately as victims and, thus, as weak are far less likely to actively challenge the circumstances of their victimization” (Shugart, 1994, p. 13). Shugart sees the rape threat, then, as a very dangerous form of gender oppression which serves to enforce patriarchy because although the threat to women comes directly from men, it consequently increases women’s perceived need for men. That the crime is so common and wide-spread (one in three girls will be sexually abused before her mid-teens (Richgels, 1992)) speaks volumes about our society, and causes Richgels to disturbingly observe that “the magnitude of that number suggests at least some covert social sanction for such behavior. (p. 131)”

An important aspect of rape that Shugart discusses is the way rape reflects a feeling of ownership or entitlement. Until quite recently, marital rape was not recognized in the United States. Additionally, she notes that often “when women are
raped, it is their male ‘guardians’ who are considered harmed...it is not unusual that the husband or lover of a woman who has been raped reacts to the rape as if another man has taken/used what is rightfully his” (Shugart, 1994, p. 14). The clear message being sent in situations such as these, then, is not that rape is wrong because it takes from a woman what belongs to her, but because it takes from another man what belongs to him.

In order for women to have easier access to their own sexual agency, it is glaringly clear that a new, woman-friendly discourse of desire must emerge. Richgels enumerates a number of qualities she imagines this discourse would possess:

“Desire would no doubt be highly variable, reflecting fluctuations in desire based on the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and lactation status, and especially the quality of relatedness between the two individuals involved. Penetration and simultaneous orgasm would most likely not be the dominant theme even for heterosexual women. There would be adequate language for female self-pleasuring as well as recognition of the important role of the clitoris and other erogenous zones in female sexual experience...It would be integrated with other aspects of relational and social life, and not viewed as if sexual expression and desire could exist separate from those realities.”

(Richgels, 1992, p. 133)

This passage beautifully outlines the necessity for fluidity and integration in a mainstream discussion of women and sexuality. Women are relational beings who naturally excel at connection: both externally (connecting and relating with other people) and internally (recognizing the connections between various aspects of themselves). Thus, women will always benefit from an available framework that seeks not to isolate sex as a separate element, but rather to integrate it in a way that is comfortable and makes sense to her. In her conclusion, Deborah Tolman states
that an introduction of a discourse of desire must start young, and that mothers, psychotherapists, and others who come in close contact with adolescents should listen for what girls are not saying. They should also feel comfortable discussing their own experiences of desire, to give girls the assurance that their feelings are normal. When girls begin at a young age to claim their sexual agency and desire as their birthright, an enormous leap will have been made towards gender equality in sexual relations.

**Bibliography**


