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## **Gender**

### **A sociological reader**

Edited by

**Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott**

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tomorrow or whatever – you know? – that kind of thing – Oh God, I wish this would just be over – you know? – which speaks volumes, doesn't it?

It would be hard to do justice to the question of the distress and harm inflicted upon women by their being reduced to mere instruments of their partner's gratification. I will not try, save to say that tears were shed during some interviews, and to give these two quotes from Sarah and Jean:

SARAH: It's horrible. He doesn't even like me. He doesn't look at me . . . And I feel awful afterwards, because I feel like I have just been used. . . . It is soul-destroying, and I think it just makes me lose all my confidence.

JEAN: After it was over I would sort of just lie there for a while and then come down[stairs] and break my heart, thinking *for God's sake I can't stand this*. I hated it.

Without accounts from men, it is not possible to know how they understood this violence which they exacted upon their partners. Women's accounts suggested that the aim of men's aggression was, paradoxically, to block out all knowledge of the suffering they were inflicting in their hopeless attempt to enforce the fantasy that women actually could, and wanted to, provide them with unconditional gratification. This observation would certainly correspond with the psychology of the 'master'. The master does not aim to inflict suffering for its own sake. Indeed, he might feel extremely guilty were he to allow knowledge of the slave's suffering to come fully into his awareness. The master's ability to exhibit concern or compassion for the slave is overridden, however, by his own existential drama; his aggression is aimed at reassuring himself that he has control over the independent will of the slave, whose recognition he needs to convince himself of his own existence.

## Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden

### WHOSE ORGASM IS THIS ANYWAY?

#### 'Sex work' in long-term heterosexual couple relationships

Drawing on interviews with both partners in established heterosexual couples, the authors explore the gendered responses to the expectations about and the practice of sex and intimacy. They develop the concept of 'sex work' to explain how their respondents managed feelings of distaste and disappointment as time progressed, in contrast with earlier feelings of attraction or passion, which had masked any flaws and difficulties. The data indicate that many of the women had never been really happy about the quality of sex with their partners and were relieved to find ways to negotiate a minimal degree of intimacy. The men, on the other hand, tended to regret the decline, and in some cases expected sex as a conjugal right. This study suggests that despite women's greater equality and sexual freedom behind the bedroom door they are not experiencing sexual pleasure and that this is still being blamed on their 'frigidity' rather than their partner's failings.

From Jeffery Weeks and Janet Holland (eds) *Sexual Cultures: Communities and Intimacy*, London: Macmillan (1996).

**T**O SUSTAIN THE SENSE of intimacy in long-term relationships, women often undertake 'emotion work' on their partners and *on themselves* by insisting that 'We're ever so happy, really' and putting up defences against evidence to the contrary. This process may be described as 'living the family myth' (Hochschild 1990) or, as we would say, 'playing the couple game'. . . .

By analogy with emotion work, in doing 'sex work' individuals would 'manage' their emotions according to 'feeling rules' of how sex *ought* to be experienced (Hochschild 1983), to try to attain or simulate (for themselves and/or their partners) a sexual fulfilment they would not feel 'spontaneously': for example, to endure

sex, Victorian brides-to-be were exhorted to 'lie back and think of England'; and, more recently, women admit they sometimes fake orgasms, and couples (or women) are advised to 'work' on their fading relationships by restaging romance. . . .

In fact, married couples generally experience a long-term decline in sexual activity,<sup>1</sup> which has been attributed to 'habituation', or the 'distractions' of family life and work (Frank and Anderson 1980; Rubin 1991; Weiss 1990). It has been suggested that a companionate 'tenderness' may outweigh any sexual regrets (Frank and Anderson 1980), but Rubin reports how many of her respondents in longer-term relationships 'mourn the passing of . . . passion' (Rubin 1991: 166-71), and occasionally get nostalgic flashbacks and wonder, 'Why can't we make this happen all the time?' (Rubin 1991: 186).

### Our study of change in longer-term relationships

Our respondents echoed this puzzlement that they could not recapture earlier passion and romance – apart from the occasional sense of *déjà vu* with the aid of wine or the romantic setting of a holiday (Duncombe and Marsden 1995). But the decline of passion and tactile or sensual intimacy seemed somehow inevitable: one wife said, 'We don't have sex so much now, I mean I think you'd have to be pretty energetic to maintain that sort of . . . Sometimes we have a long kiss but not so much now. Not every day. . . . We like being, I mean I like being close.'

However, it was surprisingly common for women now to 'confess' that they had *always* 'at some level' found their sexual relationships unfulfilling:

He didn't really bother with foreplay. But somehow I was so into him that it didn't matter, and I never said anything. I sort of didn't notice, yet I sort of did. . . . I think somehow it doesn't seem important, and you don't want to hurt their feelings. And somehow the sex seemed wonderful even when it went wrong.

Other wives commented on early doubts (about erection failures, or the shape or size of their husband's penis) about which they had reassured their husband or blamed themselves, but which they now consciously recognised *had* mattered 'at some level' even then, and had come to matter more later.

In contrast, men who acknowledged early problems tended to blame what they saw as their wives' low sex drive:

I really do . . . *try*, but. . . . I think she might be one of those women who just doesn't need sex. . . . I remember a very funny night, we went out to see some friends and the bloke had devised a chart. . . . There were three colours, one where his wife wanted it, one when he wanted it, and one when they both wanted it. . . . But I thought, I wouldn't need . . . the one when Penny wanted it. . . . [But] if I'd sat down and said, 'Look Penny, we've got a problem in our sex life, we need to talk about it,' she would have gone off in a rage, so I just didn't bother.

However, several husbands had recognised their own deficiencies, again initially at some rather deep level:

We kind of settled into a routine where I liked sex early in the morning . . . but she was sleepy . . . although she'd let me have it (I was a 'dawn raider!'). . . . I can remember . . . 'subliminally' . . . I was frightened of *letting* her get into it . . . because I wouldn't know what to do with it. . . . It made me feel a bit inadequate. . . . [But] it's not all my fault because she never said – she sort of said she got pleasure even if she didn't come – and she would never participate much if I tried anything different.

Discussion was avoided because each partner did not want to hurt the other, but also men feared looking vulnerable while women feared men's anger:

It was like he knew there had to be foreplay so – a couple of squeezes up here, then a quick rummage about down there and straight in. But he went *berserk* when I tried to say I'd like him to try more in the foreplay bit. . . . I thought he'd hit me.

So couples tended to develop informal strategies and routines – restricting sex to particular nights, or giving coded messages like wearing sexy nighties or bathing at an unusual time – which indicated and regulated sexual availability (and incidentally avoided the need for women openly to show desire). . . .

### Sexual experimentation, pornography and masturbation

To overcome boredom or sexual difficulties couples sometimes experimented with the use of pornography or changes of sexual techniques, or they had resorted to more frequent masturbation.<sup>2</sup> Our data suggest differences between the incorporation of pornography during the earlier passionate phase of a relationship, as compared with the attempt to liven up sex that had lost its passion. In either case men tended to be the initiators because they more readily found pornography arousing and hoped it would help overcome women's inhibitions (get them 'worked up'). But pornography was more acceptable to women early in the relationship (when they might also dress up in sexy undies) than later with a partner for whom they had lost their sense of intimacy, when they felt less able to 'allow' themselves to become (and admit to being) sexually aroused.

Some couples had agreed to experiment with the introduction of pornography later in their relationship: as one husband said, 'What else can you do if you've been married for twelve years and you don't want to endanger your relationship by having affairs?' However, this couple were uneasy at how maintaining the boost to their sex life seemed to need more frequent changes and ever 'harder' porn. Then, it was women who began to find pornography distasteful and a 'turn-off'.

In our study, the husbands had often wanted their wives to give them oral sex, although it was not uncommon for wives to refuse even early on. And while

a few who had complied sensed a power over men's vulnerability, they sometimes admitted suppressing qualms about smell and taste. However, as intimacy decayed, such feelings increased, as did the sense of coercion, until oral sex ceased.

As a relatively guilt-free and 'functional' safety valve for their marriages, husbands began to resort to more frequent solitary masturbation – not uncommonly at work where pornography was available.

You have to be quiet, it's funny really. Sometimes I wonder, afterwards, how many other blokes were wanking in the loo!

Although some wives felt released by this from pressures to have sex, over time husbands might become resentful:

It would be no skin off her nose. . . . Sometimes I just want her to let me put it in and do it. . . . She's broken the contract. Sex is *part* of marriage, and I can't see that anything's changed enough to alter that.

One woman claimed she didn't mind her husband masturbating in the bathroom but she resented the way it joggled her about in bed; but the husband claimed that she aroused his desire, so she should help or at least let him do it in comfort! For a husband deliberately to let his wife know he masturbated could be a deliberate attempt to induce guilt. . . .

Unlike men, women actually *preferred* to masturbate alone, out of greater shyness but also afraid their husbands would see their behaviour as an insult or a prelude to penetration. Women's masturbation might also be seen as 'functional' for marriage (giving them the orgasm their husband could not). However, (as with men) masturbation could bring the realisation of lack of fulfilment in their relationship; and discovering about orgasms (in one instance through contact with a women's group) could sometimes change women's lives more radically:

I started to think [feeling frigid] wasn't my fault – which actually [my husband] had . . . let me believe. And I started to feel angry . . . I read about [masturbation] so I decided to try it and it made me feel very powerful to learn about my own body.

This wife then discovered she could attain orgasm with other men, and the couple have now negotiated an open relationship. . . .

### In conclusion: the pursuit of 'authentic' sex

Overall, we would argue that there is considerable empirical evidence of sex work, both where individuals reveal that influence of ideologies of how they believe sex 'ought' to be and, more explicitly, where they say they have to 'try' or 'work' or 'force' themselves to have sex. We cannot say how far sex work pervades sexual life, but we are not arguing that people live at a constant pitch of sexual disappointment or even desperation – only that we suspect that 'at some level' many long-term couples would recognise the difficulties described here. . . .

### Notes

- 1 In the US and UK, sexual activity and marital satisfaction decline, the latter reaching a low point after fifteen years, although the pattern is by no means simple (Frank and Anderson 1980; evidence summarised in Goodman 1993; Wellings *et al.* 1994).
- 2 Rubin gives some evidence on pornography and changes in sexual technique, e.g. oral sex is now practised by most younger couples – though not anal sex (Rubin 1991). US surveys indicate that masturbation is relatively common in marriage, men more than women (Aldridge 1983; Goodman, 1993).

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