

Laurier Undergraduate Journal of the Arts

Volume 4

Article 7

10-25-2017

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Recommended Citation

Best, Sarah. "Not Just Biology: Socio-cultural Perspectives of the Female Orgasm." *Laurier Undergraduate Journal of the Arts* 4 (2017) : -. Print.

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Not Just Biology: Socio-cultural Perspectives of the Female Orgasm

Sarah Best

The subject of the female orgasm is perhaps one of the most fiercely debated topics in discourses of female sexuality today. Scientists and researchers question the biological nature of female sexuality and orgasm, particularly inquiring into its potential adaptive functions. Though there have been a variety of theories concerning the purpose of this phenomenon, some more convincing than others, whether it is truly an evolutionary adaptation remains unknown. As an emotionally loaded subject, even supposedly “objective” scientific interpretations of the female orgasm are often clouded by non-scientific discourses. Social and cultural perceptions of the female orgasm—and by extension, female sexuality—have undoubtedly shaped the ways in which it is understood in biological and scientific contexts and vice versa. This paper considers the ways in which popular, historical, psychoanalytical, and legal discourses intersect with biological and medical accounts to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes before discussing more recent alternative theories of the female orgasm that, whether accurate or not, serve to subvert these androcentric norms and conventional concepts of femininity.

In order to demonstrate how various non-medical discourses influence the perception of a biological function, the paper first considers Elisabeth Lloyd’s study on bias within the academic field of the evolution of the female orgasm. As this analysis shows, many adaptive accounts are skewed by socially constructed ideas of womanhood, consequently naturalizing gender roles. Additionally, the emphasis placed on the orgasm, especially the vaginal orgasm, by women today constructs an ideology of “normal” sexuality that is, in practice, unrealistic for most women. Furthermore, this paper considers the way women have historically been constructed as chaste and lacking desire. When women deviated from these androcentric models of “normal” sexuality, they were labelled delinquents or hysterics, thus promoting one form of sexual pleasure as the norm. Finally, this paper looks at an alternative adaptive theory of the female orgasm that reinserts female agency into sexual behaviour. This alternative perspective questions traditional gender roles, offering a somewhat optimistic vision for the future of female sexuality within the study of evolutionary biology.

Eleven of the current nineteen adaptive explanations of the female orgasm are based on the notion that it aids in creating a male–female pair bond, which is beneficial for maintaining faithfulness within a monogamous relationship and helpful for the raising of offspring. The most well-known pair-bonding account, put forth by Desmond Morris, suggests that females in early human societies would have adopted a pairing tendency as a way for males to assure their mates would remain faithful to them when they left to go hunting. Consequently, males learned to choose women based on this bonding factor (Lloyd 49). The pair-bonding account asserts that much of sexual activity is not merely about producing offspring but rather about maintaining the relationship by producing mutual rewards in the form of orgasm. However, Lloyd takes issue with this notion, claiming that it generalizes male and female sexuality and assumes more or less analogous responses when multiple studies have shown that this is, in fact, not the case. For example, Morris assumes that both males and females become fatigued and relaxed after sexual activity, thus increasing the probability that they will remain together after intimacy, yet evidence has shown that this is true only for males. Women usually become excited and energized after orgasm and often remain aroused (52). Viewed in terms of the pair-bonding account, there is no reason for a female to continue to be aroused after her male partner has finished, and this continued arousal may even cause the female to seek additional stimulation afterwards from other potential partners. Therefore, female arousal seems to contradict the pair-bonding account. The pair-bonding theory assumes that the specific conditions for sexual satisfaction in males will produce equal satisfaction for females yet ignores the fact that the rate of orgasm during copulatory intercourse alone for females is actually rather low (61). Lloyd therefore argues that the pair-bonding account of the female orgasm assumes “that females are satisfied sexually by one mate, and that males control and possess females” (62), a view that reasserts historical and cultural gender binaries and thus reinforces a bias in biological understandings of female sexuality despite contradictory evidence.

Likewise, Niles Newtown claims that women in “satisfying mating relationships with men usually accompany the coital behaviour with an urge to care for the man in various ways – like cooking for him, making a home for him, and being emotionally committed to his well-being” (Lloyd 62). The implication of the traditional domestic female role as a naturally occurring result of sexual satisfaction suggests that there is a link between the pair-bonding interpretation of the female orgasm and a woman’s stereotypical gender role in society. Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt has a similar view, believing that a female’s orgasm not only strengthens the bond with her partner but also “increases her readiness to submit” (Lloyd 63), construct-

ing female pleasure as a means of further allowing for a male's dominance over his partner, once again reinforcing the historically and culturally created image of the woman as an inferior, passive body.

In support of the pair-bonding account is evidence suggesting some women, especially those who experience problems with orgasm or are nonorgasmic, are inclined to use sex as a mate-retention method. Several studies show that women fear desertion and loss of love more than men do and are more likely to experience "separation anxiety" (Fisher 71). A survey concerning the fears and anxieties of men and women reveals that women had their highest scores in responding to questions about "being rejected by others" and are shown to be overly invested in the creation and maintenance of positive relationships (85). In Fisher's extensive study on orgasm variance in women, he found that the main difference between high- and low-orgasmic women was their level of separation anxiety; low-orgasmic women tend to worry more about the people they love leaving them (277). Similarly, a 2012 study co-authored by Kaighobadi found that women who perceived the risk of infidelity of their partners were more likely to fake orgasm during intercourse and were more likely to engage in mate retention strategies such as public possession signals (Cooper 424). These findings suggest that women may fake orgasm to demonstrate commitment to their partners and manipulate their partners' commitment to them. However, though both Kaighobadi's and Fisher's studies demonstrate a link between mate retention and female orgasm, the connection is not necessarily biological; rather, it may be the case that the female orgasm has been constructed, both societally and, in turn, scientifically, as a phenomenon that is important to relationship maintenance. As a result of this social construct, women are led to believe that orgasmic consistency plays a role in increasing bonds with partners and that a deficiency in this capacity means the potential of losing a partner.

Indeed, a high level of importance is placed on the female orgasm in Western culture, and this elevated status stems from both scientific discourse and popular media. Research suggests that 79–90% of women do not attain orgasm consistently during sexual activity with a partner and around 5–10% of women never orgasm at all (Cooper 423). Despite these statistics, the biomedical categorization of female "orgasmic disorder" and the focus of contemporary research on solutions to these supposed problems has transformed female sexual pleasure into a dichotomy of "normal" and "abnormal," creating a narrative of expected sexual response. Additionally, popular media plays an important role in shaping women's understandings of their sexualities, constructing a version of femininity and what it means to be a sexually active woman. H el ene Joffe and Maya Lavie-Ajayi, in their study of social representations of the female orgasm, examined how women's magazines

shaped women's perceptions of femininity and pleasure. They found that these magazines usually presented sexual pleasure as "a woman's right" and often the ultimate goal of sex as "a romantic and sexual highpoint, a symbol of womanhood and of normality" (Joffe and Lavie-Ajayi 100). Compared with the male orgasm, which is conceived of as overly mechanical and straightforward, the female orgasm is described in much more poetic, glorified terms (101). In contrast to this exalted orgasm, then, is the anorgasmic: the one who either does not orgasm consistently during sexual activity with a partner or who does not orgasm at all. The inability to orgasm, though common among women, is portrayed by these magazines as a problem that should be dealt with and as a potential cause of disharmony (and even failure) in relationships. Many women who have problems with orgasm therefore experience feelings of failure, embarrassment, and frustration (102). This pressure further reinforces in the minds of women that sexual responsibility falls squarely on them and that men are simply entitled to dominating and taking rather than giving.

Scientific discourse also often depicts women who lack orgasmic consistency as being somehow "less than," specifically considering the language used by scientists. A study by Terman, for example, separated women according to their different orgasm consistencies. Those who had high orgasm rates were described as "adequate" and those who rarely or never orgasmed were described as "inadequate" (Fisher 41). This division recalls Emily Martin's theory of how scientific language functions to construct certain images of bodies on the biological level that reinforce everyday understandings of those bodies on the social level (Martin). As Joffe and Lavie-Ajayi note, many women who do not orgasm consistently feel "inadequate" and often experience anxiety and stress when it comes to sex. Both popular media and collective social interpretations of sexuality position women who do not orgasm as flawed and inferior, and this idea of dysfunctionality, coupled with the fact that orgasm is often seen as the end goal of sex, stigmatizes women who do not regularly experience orgasm (104). Thus, it is no surprise that various studies have found one of the main reasons women fake orgasm is to avoid negative sexual experiences that may stem from these feelings of inadequacy. One study suggests that faking an orgasm may be a way of dealing with the discrepancy between what is actually happening and what a woman believes should be happening, as "ultimately, women's choice to fake orgasm may be an attempt to avoid being viewed as physiologically and/or psychologically abnormal" (Cooper 425). Even though a significant portion of the female population never experiences orgasm and few women orgasm consistently during sexual activity with a partner, low-orgasmic women are constructed by popular media and medical discourse as being deficient and inadequate. When heard by the public, this language transforms what happens

on a biological level into a form of social stigma that has the potential to lead to negative body experiences in which women see themselves as being defective.

In considering the portrayal of low-orgasmic women as inferior, it would be helpful to examine the ways in which women's bodies have traditionally been seen as subpar in contrast to men's bodies. In considering the subjective bodily experiences of men and women, Fisher writes that "it has been popular to assume that the average woman feels that her body is somehow inferior to that of the man. It has even been suggested that a sense of body inferiority is an integral element of feeling like a woman" (74). Much of this notion of female bodily inferiority is derived from psychoanalytic theory, most notably Freud's idea that the little girl, realizing she lacks a phallus, "discovers her own deficiency" and forever struggles to cope with her body as less than the male form (60). Similarly, in addition to their apparently "lesser" bodies, women have historically been constructed as lacking both carnal desires and the capacity for sexual pleasure. Shoshanna Ehrlich, in her book on regulating female desire, discusses the ways in which social constructions of femininity as innately chaste and pure were, at various times throughout history, inscribed into state law. Social constructions have thus reinforced and even legalized gender stereotypes. For example, the anti-seduction campaign proposed by moral reformers in the mid-Victorian era made it illegal for a man to seduce a chaste woman. Coupled with campaigns to raise the age of consent to twenty-one years, this ideology not only reinforced prevailing sexual norms of female chastity but also essentially removed all possible desire and agency from young women (Ehrlich). During the Victorian era, a woman's consent was considered virtually invalid, and "flipping the contemporary adage that 'no means no,' according to the purity reformers, 'yes' never actually meant 'yes,' thus, effectively classifying *all* sexual activity involving young women as non-consensual" (55). Here again there is a prevailing idea that to a woman, sex is not something that is *wanted* but something that *happens*. The woman's purpose in the exchange is to make the experience satisfactory for her male partner and the experience of desire is considered abnormal.

Even with the onset of the Progressive Era and the introduction of new ways of thinking about sexuality, female desire was heavily regulated and constructed by extremely patriarchal views. The category of the "female sexual delinquent" was created to define young women who did not fit into traditional notions of femininity such as the obedient and ever-ready wife with a pristine hymen on her wedding day. This idea was exacerbated when speaking about women who did not come from "respectable" homes but rather those who were subject to the conditions of working-class and immigrant life—the kinds of lifestyles that were seen as threatening to a young woman's sense of morality, "thus leaving her vulnerable to

the temptations of the flesh” (Erlich 72). The delinquent girl consequently became synonymous with the sex offender, and between 1890 and 1920 more than 80% of these so called “delinquents” were brought to court because their virtue was thought to be in grave peril (78). The same standards, however, did not apply to boys, whose sexual behaviour was far less regulated. The sort of actions that could commit a young woman to a juvenile facility were written off for young men as being unremarkable because it was widely accepted that “boys will be boys” (80). Worries about the destabilization of Victorian moral codes were not seen as an issue for the male population during this time. Instead, the blame was placed solely on young women. As Ehrlich writes, “social anxieties about these issues were mapped onto [a young woman’s] body, thus magnifying the disruptive potential of her delinquent conduct” (80). Therefore female desire, when it was not being ignored or negated, was considered a problem, and the woman who experienced bodily pleasures was seen as a threat to the patriarchal system. This history of suppressed female desire can provide some insight into why many women see their sexual pleasure as less important than that of men and why the female orgasm is sometimes constructed “as a gift men give to women in exchange for women offering their passive bodies” (Joffe and Lavie-Ajayi 100). Joffe and Lavie-Ajayi’s findings, posited in a study as recent as 2009, suggest that the narrative of women’s lack of desire and agency is still prevalent today.

One of the most significant aspects of female orgasm discourse is that of the clitoral versus vaginal orgasm. This too is arguably a product of the patriarchal manipulation of feminine concepts. According to Fisher’s study, around 49% of women assign high importance to clitoral stimulation in sexual activity while only 12% attribute equal importance to vaginal stimulation (Fisher 297). Vaginal orgasms have historically been constructed as valid, implying that orgasms attained any other way are not. Rachel P. Maines considers this idea as first stemming from the fact that clitoral massage to induce orgasm was historically used as a legitimate medical treatment for hysteria in women. She explains that sex not involving penetration and male orgasm was not considered real sex, despite that 70% of women do not usually reach orgasm from penetration alone (Maines). However, this was not a well-known fact prior to mid-twentieth-century research, and Maines believes this lack of knowledge may provide a partial explanation for why hysteria was so prevalent in the nineteenth century. She believes that “when marital sex was unsatisfying, and masturbation was discouraged or forbidden, female sexuality [...] asserted itself through one of the few acceptable outlets: the symptoms of the hysteroneurasthenic disorders” (Maines). Thus, the fact that penetration alone was unsatisfactory to women could be dealt with in such a way that questioned neither the authority of

the androcentric model of sexuality nor the conception of the penis as the “ultimate weapon of sexual warfare” (Maines). Because people assumed that what was sexually satisfactory for men and advantageous for reproduction was also satisfactory for women, “what Foucault calls the ‘hystericization’ of women’s bodies’ protected and reinforced androcentric definitions of sexual fulfillment” (Maines). Thus, while the vaginal orgasm remained congruent to what was considered to be normal female sexuality, clitoral stimulation was not even seen as being a part of real sex at all but rather was primarily used as a treatment for hysteric women, making it medicalized and therefore neutralized.

Psychoanalytic theory has played a significant role in the controversy surrounding clitoral versus vaginal stimulation. Freudian interpretations in particular asserted that “real women” experienced orgasms from vaginal penetration and would accept no substitutes for “the real thing” (Maines). Freud and other theorists believed that a woman’s ability to reach orgasm from vaginal stimulation was an indication of her personal maturity, whereas the ability to reach orgasm from only clitoral stimulation was regarded as evidence of personal immaturity, something she was expected to grow out of (Fisher 297). Thus, the vaginal orgasm has traditionally been seen as good and admirable, as fundamentally *normal*, whereas clitoral responsiveness has been assigned predominantly negative connotations.

Though science has come a long way since Freud and much more is now known about female sexuality, it would seem that the vaginal orgasm is still romanticized despite the fact that few women are able to attain orgasm from this method of stimulation alone. Even though Joffe and Lavie-Ajayi found that, for the most part, women’s magazines emphasized the importance of the clitoris and the importance of not accepting patriarchally defined standards of sexuality, many women still envision the vaginal orgasm as being more important and pleasurable than clitoral stimulation, even if this is empirically not the case. One woman in the study said, “I feel as though I should be able to have [vaginal orgasms] because all real women do” (Joffe and Lavie-Ajayi 103). The fact that many women place such importance on the vaginal orgasm demonstrates that outdated psychoanalytic concepts and androcentric constructions of sexuality are still part of a woman’s understanding of her body. This high level of importance associated with the vaginal orgasm “provides a vivid indication of how classical scientific writings can have emotional consequences for women” (105), even in contemporary Western cultures where understandings of female roles in society have progressed immensely over the past few decades. However, the fact that many women still seem to subscribe to androcentric notions of what constitutes “normal” and “real” sexuality demonstrates that much remains to be accomplished with regard to women’s understanding of their orgasms.

Though the pair-bonding account of the female orgasm is arguably biased in the ways in which it reinforces gender roles and stereotypes of femininity, not all adaptive accounts subscribe to this androcentric means of contemplating female sexuality. In an extensive examination of the evolutionary biology behind female sexuality, Thornhill and Gangestad came to the conclusion that a woman's orgasm may play a role in sire choice and the acquiring of good genes for offspring. Though it had previously been assumed that human females lost estrus (periods of high fertility) along the evolutionary line, Thornhill and Gangestad believe that this is in fact not the case and that estrus may play a role in female mate selection, subsequently aiding in the acquisition of good genes. Prior to recent decades, the notion that female choice played a role in gene selection was controversial in evolutionary biology and was thus neglected by researchers. It was not until the 1970s that biologists started to recognize the vital role women play in regulating competition for mates among males by choosing partners based on certain favoured features regardless of male competition. Before this discovery, many biologists "viewed females as mere vessels in which sperm of different males competed, rather than players with reproductive interests of their own that differed from those of males" (Gangestad and Thornhill 9). This notion of the female as a vessel is reminiscent of Martin's critique regarding the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in scientific discourses surrounding reproductive organs. According to this view of the egg as vessel, the egg, and thus the woman to whose body the egg belongs, is seen as "large and passive" whereas the sperm (and the man) is "invariably active" (Martin 87). Like the egg and the sperm, biological functions such as reproduction are described in ways that reinforce dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity and reaffirm gender roles. Significantly, these gender stereotypes often dominate medical discourses in overly pervasive ways so that it becomes difficult to look past them and form unbiased understandings, as can be seen by the fact that female agency in good gene choice was not widely accepted by the scientific community until the 1990s.

The model of female sexuality that Thornhill and Gangestad propose focuses on active female choice and does not seem to promote or reinforce stereotypical gender roles. They argue that because women may still have estrus, there would be a certain point in the ovulation cycle when the female body is more fertile and consequently these women would be more interested in mating with genetically strong males (though not necessarily with *more* males). In one of their studies, Thornhill and Gangestad measured women's levels of attraction to men other than their primary partners (such as exes, strangers, friends, and acquaintances) during times of high fertility and compared this data to what is termed "extended sexuality,"

also known as the rest of the ovulatory cycle. The results demonstrated that women who have physically attractive partners and with symmetrical facial features, usually a visible signifier of good genes, did not show more or less attraction to other men at times of high fertility, whereas women who had respectively unattractive and asymmetrical partners did show significantly more attraction to other men during estrus (247). There is no evidence that relationship satisfaction played a role in this tendency. These results are supported by a study done by David Puts and his colleagues that discovered that men's objective masculinity and attractiveness positively correlate with their female partners' orgasm frequencies and timings. The study references a variety of evidence that suggests women's orgasms may play a role in promoting conception. For example, Puts and his associates refer to Baker and Bellis's study showing that the female orgasm predicts greater sperm retention (Puts et al. 1). By running pictures of male participants' faces through a computer program that measured objective attractiveness, facial symmetry, and masculinity (traits associated with good genes) and comparing these results with the female partners' reported orgasm frequency, the authors concluded that attractiveness and masculinity significantly predict women's orgasms. In light of these studies, Thornhill and Gangestad posit that female orgasm may cause women to engage in selective mating for good genes, especially during estrus, because they are more likely to experience orgasm with some males than others (Thornhill and Gangestad 257). Though the evidence for this or any function of the female orgasm remains inconclusive and much research on the matter is required, the theory does function to return agency to the female in terms of the evolutionary biology of sexuality; in this model, she is seen as an active player in mate choice and in good gene selection for potential offspring. Whether this adaptive account of the female orgasm is accurate or not, it provides an alternative view of female sexuality. The woman is no longer constructed as a passive body and vessel whose primary role is to look pretty and wait for a man to penetrate and impregnate her.

Of course, this adaptive account of the female orgasm has a variety of potential holes and unanswered questions, as do the pair-bonding accounts. Most notably, neither of these theories accounts for what is known as the "orgasm/intercourse discrepancy" (Lloyd 59), which states that most female orgasms do not occur during coital intercourse. As Lloyd notes, the idea that female orgasm is adaptive does not account for the fact that masturbation is so often done in a way that does not imitate intercourse. Additionally, this adaptive theory of the orgasm does not account for preliminary research that suggests that lesbian women may actually have a higher and more consistent orgasm frequency than heterosexual women do, with the mean rate of orgasm occurrence standing at 61.6% for hetero-

sexual women and 74.7% for lesbian women (Garcia et al. 2645). The reason for this discrepancy remains largely unknown, as very little research has been done on the variation of orgasm according to sexual orientation, potentially due to a bias in scientific research toward heterosexual sex, and especially intercourse, rather than the female orgasm. Similarly, there is a significant absence of research examining the variance of orgasm in women of different ethnicities and races, which could potentially provide more insight into the way the female orgasm is perceived and represented by women from different backgrounds. Though one of the initial studies done concerning female sexuality and orgasm occurrence by Kinsey considered a variety of potential sociological factors that may influence sexual responsiveness, such as age, religion, education, and social class, there have not been many studies that have followed up on his findings. Though Fisher references Kinsey's study, noting that social class and education seem to be the only factors to have a possible correlation with orgasm frequency, his speculations as to why only certain factors affect orgasm frequency remains largely inconclusive.

It is clear that the female orgasm and female sexuality have been constructed by various narratives throughout history, scientific or otherwise, that often result in overly negative perspectives of the female body. From Victorian notions that women should not have desire at all to androcentric ideologies of what constitutes "real" and "normal" sexuality, understandings of the female orgasm have never solely derived from a biological context. Although many of the adaptive theories concerning the evolution of the female orgasm function to reinforce gender biases and stereotypes of women as passive and dependent, and the medicalization of the orgasm (in particular, the idea of "orgasmic disorder") has been the cause for anxiety and feelings of inadequacy for some women, the future of research on the subject appears optimistic. The fact that scholars such as Thornhill and Gangestad, Martin, and Lloyd among others are beginning to realize just how much historical and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity influence the ways in which scientific discourse interprets aspects of human sexuality suggests that significant steps are already being taken toward eliminating bias in the study of human bodies. Women should not have to feel as though they are inadequate or somehow defective simply because of a bodily function that has been overemphasized or shamed in a variety of contexts throughout history. Despite studies that utilize this hotly debated phenomenon to naturalize gender roles, there is ultimately no such thing as the "normal" orgasm, and certainly no "normal" female sexuality. Each woman's embodied experience of sexuality is different, and whether she regularly orgasms or not (and even why the female orgasm occurs in the first place) should not be a defining feature of femininity. Human bodies are inextricably linked to

cultural discourses in infinitely complex ways. This essay then has been an attempt to reveal some of the ways in which medical and cultural discourses influence one another, for what we often perceive as being purely biological is rarely so. Rather, we ourselves are the ones who construct ideologies of masculinity and femininity and notions of normalcy. As such, we must constantly challenge these assumptions and stereotypes to prevent that which is common from becoming confused with that which is natural.

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