

Title: Faking, finishing and forgetting

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Abstract

This commentary on Thomas et al.'s article 'Faking to finish' which described the results of a small-scale qualitative study in which women reported 'faking' orgasm in order to bring 'bad' sex to an end, and on the accompanying media coverage, draws attention to the ways in which the 'problem' of heterosexuality which the practice of faking illuminates is culturally forgotten. Moreover, it discusses how some of the more nuanced arguments made by the authors – specifically about ambivalence around consent and the 'wantedness' of sex – are often obscured in media accounts in favour of more simplistic messages.

Key words: Faking, orgasm, heterosexuality, consent, wantedness

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“If you have a vagina, you’ve probably faked an orgasm at some point” (Miller, *Women’s Health Magazine*, 2016)ⁱ.

‘Faking’ orgasm is often simultaneously normalised as a widespread practice and problematised as a troubling feature of heterosexual relationshipsⁱⁱ. Thomas, Stelzl and LaFrance’s (2016) small-scale exploratory study on women’s accounts of feigning sexual pleasure to end unwanted sex generated a flurry of media attention which, for the most part, re-presented aspects of their key findings fairly and accurately. Specifically, that some women fake orgasms to end ‘problem’ sex – sex which is unwanted (i.e. because it is painful, unpleasant, or boring) but consensual (i.e. they did not say ‘no’). As such, the paper attracted media interest internationally, but not controversy.

As social scientists, we have reason to be curious about why this small study should receive such media attention – notwithstanding the high quality of the paper and the research reported therein. Maybe it’s as simple as ‘sex sells’. But there is a cultural fascination with the idea of ‘faking orgasms’ which continually grabs the media’s imagination. In her book *Orgasmology*, queer theorist Annamarie Jagose (2010: 527) argued that the ‘open secret’ of the sexual incompatibility of the heterosexual couple, evidenced through a myriad of social science surveys as well as popular self-help manuals and therapeutic expertise, remains slippery knowledge which fails to gain traction in the public imaginary – no matter how many times it is repeated. News about faking orgasm is part of the broader trend she identifies. News about women faking orgasm is problematic because it draws attention to

the failure of heterosex to deliver the reciprocal pleasure demanded by contemporary ethics of sexual relations. Thomas et al. deliver a 'double-whammy' by highlighting the practice of faking orgasm to bring to an end 'bad' sex. While feminist writers have drawn attention to the ways in which faked orgasms serve to prioritise male pleasure in which women perform a kind of emotional labour to protect the feelings of male partners and reassurance of their sexual skills (Roberts et al., 1995; Frith, 2015), therapists and educators have often highlighted women's culpability in 'lying' about orgasm which undermines attempts to develop 'good' sexual relationships (e.g. Strgar, 2010). In their paper on 'Faking to finish', Thomas and colleagues adopt a respectful both/and position which *both* acknowledges the utility of faking to individual women struggling to name their experiences of unwanted sex as a problem that warrants direct resistance, *and* recognises that this practice colludes with dominant discourses of heterosex which are detrimental to women at a societal level. Yet, while the authors work hard to hold these strands together, and to manage the complexities and uncertainties which their data reveal, media accounts of their research present their findings as both newsworthy *and* unremarkable at the same time – as something that everyone with a vagina has 'probably' done (see example above). This obscures the more nuanced arguments made by the authors in which they problematise the notion of consent and draw attention to ambivalence about the 'wantedness' of sex, whilst simultaneously drawing attention to the 'problem' of feigning orgasm. I briefly explore two of these messages.

Firstly, building on the work of other feminist scholars (Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007, Beres, 2007), Thomas et al. explore the complexities of consent (beyond 'no means no'), and how this intersects with the 'wantedness' of sexual practices. That women sometimes feign

orgasm to bring 'problem sex' to an end was reported in the media. What was missing was the careful explication by Thomas et al. of the problem of 'consenting' to sex which is unpleasant or painful, and the ways in which women problematised these experiences without explicitly identifying them as abusive (or as rape or coercion). The authors argue that an exclusive emphasis on consent (yes or no) 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. Yet, the media coverage typically (perhaps inevitably?) presents a less subtle picture:

"It goes without saying (or maybe it doesn't?) that you should never feel pressure to have sex with someone when you're not into it—no matter what. Make it known that you do not consent and get the hell out of there" (Miller, 2016).

Here, women's 'right' to refuse sex is reiterated as a matter-of-fact – one that shouldn't (but perhaps does) need repeating. Given the relatively recent establishment of this right in law (for example, it was only in 1991 that rape within marriage was criminalised in the UK and only in the 2003 Sexual Offences Act that consent was given a legal definition in England and Wales), this is an important message. But knowing that you have a 'right' not to consent is not the same as enacting this right or having this right respected. The chatty style of addressing the reader directly as 'you' adopted by (in this case) women's magazines serves to personalise and individualise the negotiation of consent - with problematic implications. Telling women that they should never feel pressure to have sex may encourage women to dismiss as illegitimate uncomfortable feelings of coercion since the source of the pressure remains unnamed and unexplored. While feminist scholars – including Thomas et al. – have worked to make visible the subtle ways in which societal discourses serve to obscure and

legitimise coercion, and to problematise the conditions under which consent is given and withheld, this simplistic message that consent is a right obscures the processes by which consent happens.

Secondly, the media reports of 'Faking to finish' often draw on an ideal of sexual relationships 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. This model rests on assumption that people make unambiguous assessments of desire/wantedness, and then clearly communicate their consent to sex to another – in this order. The problem of 'faking' orgasm, then, is that it is not good, honest communication. Faking orgasm is positioned as an unwise practice which is self-defeating for women: "It's not really a recommended practice (open communication will most likely bring you better results), but it happens" (Miller, 2016). Open communication is presented as a panacea for good sex – being honest about sexual desires and consent will result in reciprocally pleasurable, fairly negotiated, satisfying sex. Or so the story goes. Yet, women's ambivalence about wanting or not wanting sex forms a central part of Thomas et al.'s argument, as well as being a key strand of feminist debates about young women's sexual empowerment over the last few years (Lamb, 2010; Peterson, 2010; Lamb and Peterson, 2012). Women and girls frequently experience ambivalence and uncertainty about their sexual wants and desires. Uncritically adopting a model of open communication, risks denying or pathologizing ambivalence in ways which will be detrimental or harmful to women. Lamb and Peterson (2012) eloquently discuss the need to avoid a version of sexual empowerment in which young women are called upon to "become a super-teen with regard to sexuality (always knowing and understanding her desires, pleasure-seeking, and strongly

able to say no or yes in a myriad of positions and situations) (p. 705). In 'Faking to finish' the authors do an excellent job of explicating the ways in which, by focussing exclusively on consent and overlooking desire, "a range of troubling sexual experiences are eclipsed from view and rendered unintelligible" (p. 4). They were struck by the ways in which women struggled to give voice to their experiences in the 'absence of adequate vocabularies' and how they sought to problematic the 'bad' sex they experienced whilst avoiding the only available categories of rape and coercion. While this difficulty was often reported in the media coverage, ultimately (as in the example above) reports reverted to 'open communication' as the solution rather than staying with the messiness of ambiguity and ambivalence. Admittedly, ambivalence about consent and desire is a risky position to take in the context of recent and hard won entitlements, especially when these entitlements do only part of the work of ending sexual violence and exploitation. Nonetheless, a model of sexual relating which idolises open communication is problematic in the face of evidence which suggest that much communication about consent happens non-verbally in both gay (Beres, Herold and Maitland, 2004) and straight relationships (Hickman and Muehlenhard, 1999), that such indirect messages are widely understood by both men and women (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; O'Byrne, Rapley, and Hansen, 2006), and that attempts to formalise communication about consent in the form of 'guidelines for practice' are rarely uncontested – although they often open up more nuanced discussions of consent (see for example, Bares, 2007 talking about Antioch College's sexual consent policy, and Barker, 2013 or Williams et al. 2014 talking about consent in BDSM). Despite much criticism of 'miscommunication' as a convincing explanation for sexual violence and coercion (Frith and Kitzinger, 1997; Beres, Senn and McCaw, 2013), and despite the fact that the burden of

communication seems to fall more heavily on women in heterosexual, commitment to the idea of communicating 'better' is unwavering.

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ⁱ Miller, K. (2016) The Disturbing Reason Why Some Women Fake Orgasms: This is a pretty unsettling finding. *Women's Health Magazine*. July 11th 2016. <http://www.womenshealthmag.com/sex-and-love/disturbing-reason-women-fake-orgasms>. Accessed 23/11/2016.