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COMMENTARY

Toward a Social Science of Sexual Satisfaction: Commentary on “Virginity Lost, Satisfaction Gained? Physiological and Psychological Sexual Satisfaction at Heterosexual Debut” by Jenny A. Higgins, James Trussell, Nelwyn B. Moore, and J. Kenneth Davidson

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Higgins, Trussell, Moore, and Davidson (2010) expand our understanding of sexual satisfaction by showing that first vaginal sex is more likely to be psychologically than physically satisfying and by revealing differences between women and men and similarities between African Americans and Whites. Their analyses highlight the need for further theory-building, explicating the dynamics of change over time, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, and articulating implications for public policy. These are crucial steps toward developing a social science of sexual satisfaction. More research that focuses on positive aspects of sexuality, such as satisfaction, should be encouraged.

Higgins, Trussell, Moore, and Davidson (2010) offer a compelling and thoughtful analysis of young women's and men's physical and psychological satisfaction (or lack thereof) with their first experiences of vaginal intercourse. They focus, in particular, on the effects of gender and racial and ethnic background, finding considerable “gender asymmetry,” with women reporting lower levels of satisfaction than men, but relatively muted differences between African Americans and Whites. (Regrettably, their four-university sampling frame did not yield a sample sufficiently diverse to include Latinos or Asian Americans in their statistical analyses. Nor, for similar reasons, were they able to explore satisfaction with first sex among lesbian, bisexual, or gay individuals.)

There is much to appreciate here. Merely by addressing satisfaction—a critical aspect of sexual life (just ask anyone you know!), but one that is woefully understudied, particularly in relation to sexual initiation—Higgins et al. (2010) make an important contribution to the literature. Also welcome is their effort to distinguish between the physical and emotional/psychological dimensions of satisfaction.

Notably, they find that physical and emotional satisfaction, although closely related, are by no means coterminous. Emotional satisfaction was considerably more common for all participants, and both dimensions of satisfaction were more common for men than women. Moreover, by including men in the study and by asking, “Why do men enjoy sex so much?,” in addition to the customary question, “Why don't women enjoy sex more?,” they are able to reveal that “[B]eing in relationships strongly and significantly enhanced both women's and men's sexual psychological satisfaction at first intercourse” (p. 9).

Yet, although this article expands our understanding of sexual satisfaction and initiation in important ways, it is not the last word on these topics. Indeed, it highlights a number of areas that could benefit from further inquiry and development. Higgins et al. (2010) themselves note the need to extend their analyses to other racial and ethnic groups and to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender women and men; to explore the effects of meanings attributed to first sex; and to look at important variables like orgasms. Additionally, I would like to see more attention to theory-building; unpacking the dynamics of change over time, especially regarding gender; integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches; and explicating implications for public policy.

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Theorizing Sexual Satisfaction

Although clearly well-versed in the empirical dimensions of their subject, Higgins et al. (2010) take a largely atheoretical approach to gendered (and racialized) sexuality. Yet, much additional insight could be gained by drawing on theories that integrate both performative and structural aspects of sexuality and gender (e.g., Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). For example, the article explains the association between guilty feelings and lower sexual satisfaction among women in largely psychological terms, as deriving from young women's greater propensity (compared with men) to internalize guilt about sex, especially given the pervasive double standard. Surely, this is part of the explanation; however, interactional factors, such as the degree to which women who "fail" to express guilt about sexual activity find their femininity called into question by partners and peers, may also be at work. Structural factors, such as the lingering understanding of heterosexual marriage—a legal, religious, and community-sanctioned status—as the "proper" location for childbearing, may affect women's responses as well.

Moreover, although this analysis points to life-course processes—Higgins et al. (2010) themselves note that satisfaction with sexual initiation is probably related to satisfaction with earlier and later experiences—it stops short of developing their full theoretical implications. For example, we might ask whether gender differences in sexual satisfaction among adults result from cumulative processes or chains of events set in motion by or (more likely) before virginity loss. It would, therefore, behoove scholars to begin measuring satisfaction in contexts other than respondents' current relationships or most recent sexual encounter (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Bringing a life-course perspective to bear on sexual attitudes, activities, and identities represents a burgeoning and potentially very fruitful direction in the field (e.g., Carpenter, in press; Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis, & Dillard, 2001; Wade & DeLamater, 2002). Furthermore, analyzing particular sexual experiences, like first sex, in the context of other (sexual and nonsexual) life experiences would help to counteract the potentially harmful tendency, common to scholars and lay people alike, to assume that a single experience can necessarily "make or break" an entire lifetime (for a critique regarding virginity loss, see Carpenter, 2005).

Gender, Race, and Change Over Time

Indeed, this article's discussion of gender and change over time points toward the usefulness of a life-course perspective. As Higgins et al. (2010) note, the strong gender asymmetry in sexual satisfaction they observed contrasts with research (including my own) suggesting

that gender differences around sexuality may be on the decline. Such discrepant findings underline the need to conceptualize gender in more multidimensional terms and to explore its nuances, including its intersections with race and social class, in greater depth. For example, gender differences in the meanings attributed to virginity may be decreasing even as differences in satisfaction persist or increase. A life-course perspective would not only look at cumulative (dis)advantage processes, but also locate individuals' attitudes and actions in the context of broader social-historical changes, including those with (potentially contradictory) impacts on gender relations.

Regarding the Higgins et al. (2010) study, a closer examination of response bias might also produce a more nuanced analysis by gender and race. Do women and men feel the (possibly unconscious) need to respond to questions about sexual satisfaction in ways that match gendered cultural scenarios, thereby reproducing current constructions of femininity and masculinity (at individual and cultural levels)? Could such tendencies be relatively independent from actual levels of satisfaction (which could be narrowing across gender due to changing gender socialization or structural factors)? Might a parallel dynamic occur across race, whereby African American participants respond to questions about satisfaction in ways meant (consciously or not) to disrupt or confirm stereotypes of Blacks as hypersexual? How might dynamics around gender and race or ethnicity further intersect with social class? For example, could structural factors, like differential rates of marriage across race and class, affect actual or reported satisfaction levels? The rich and growing literature theorizing and explicating the relationship among race, gender, class, and sexuality will prove especially helpful to scholars interested in these matters; I particularly recommend the work of Collins (2004) and Pascoe (2007).

Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses

As Higgins et al. (this issue) themselves remark, much can be learned about sexual life by combining quantitative analyses of survey data (such as they present) with more qualitative investigations. Because of its inherently subjective nature, sexual satisfaction may be particularly ripe for such a complementary approach. Whether people are satisfied with their sexual encounters and relationships depends a great deal on their expectations, which depend, in turn, on their social locations and the meanings they attribute to particular phenomena. For example, the article notes that the different expectations women and men, on average, harbor for their virginity loss encounters may be one factor underlying the differences in satisfaction that observed. A qualitative inquiry targeting men's and women's expectations could help reveal subtle but important patterns beyond what

quantitative analyses can accomplish alone. Do men and women anticipate similar levels of pleasure? On what grounds? The common assumption that first vaginal sex often involves pain and bleeding for women, but not men, surely shapes expectations, reducing women's—even as the extent to which U.S. culture emphasizes virginity loss as a key sexual transition may cause inflated hopes, resulting in greater dissatisfaction, particularly for girls and women, who are typically taught to value their virginity more than men. On the other hand, two individuals with remarkably different experiences could express similar levels of satisfaction with first sex insofar as they, respectively, “got it over with” and “solidified our love.”

Policy Implications

Although Higgins et al. (2010) touch upon certain policy implications of their research, it is well worth specifying some of these implications further. Based on their finding that women and men who initiate sex in a relationship report higher levels of psychological satisfaction than those who do not, they recommend that we “continue working to overcome gender inequality in the bedroom and recognize the importance of trusting and loving relationships in facilitating satisfaction at first intercourse” (p. 10). Few (at least in the research community) would disagree. However, what such efforts would look like on the ground should be considered with care. For example, could sex education curricula that emphasize relational sex's positive effects on emotional satisfaction result in the further demonization of casual sex? Or in the reinforcement of the belief that women can (or should) not enjoy sex outside of romantic contexts? As Hamilton and Armstrong's (2009) recent analysis of sexual life on one large university campus demonstrates, given the power dynamics that often inhere in heterosexual relationships, for many women, having sex with a boyfriend is not necessarily better than participating in “hooking up.”

The findings about contraception use and sexual satisfaction also seem ripe for application to public policy. In these analyses, contraception use was not associated with psychological satisfaction for any study participants, and with physical satisfaction only for Black men, who reported significantly greater satisfaction if they did not use condoms. These patterns are interesting in light of my own research finding that U.S. teen magazines treat contraception as an unpalatable but necessary precaution, whereas German teen magazines frame contraceptive use, especially of condoms, as “adult” and as enhancing enjoyment of sex (Carpenter, 2001). These cultural-level patterns are arguably related to German teens' higher rates of contraception use and lower rates of unintended pregnancy, compared with their U.S. counterparts. Revamping

U.S. policies regulating the advertising of condoms and oral contraceptives so that pleasure could be a central theme (as in current ads for erectile dysfunction medications and personal lubricants) might help to propagate an understanding of contraception as enhancing satisfaction.

Additional Variables

Finally, I second Higgins et al.'s (2010) call for further examination of the role gender differences in orgasm may play in satisfaction (with first sex and sex in general). In addition to asking whether gender differences in the likelihood of orgasm during first sex (much greater for men) are responsible, in part, for different levels of satisfaction (especially physical), researchers should investigate whether different patterns obtain for individuals who have had orgasms (with partners or via masturbation) prior to first sex—gender differences are likely to be profound. I also recommend attending to the immediate context of sexual encounters. For example, is first sex more or less satisfactory if it occurs in a car versus in a bed, or in a location where the couple worry about being interrupted by others (e.g., in a parent's home)? (The anxiety variable used in the Higgins et al. study may tap at such issues, but it is so general that it surely points to quite different phenomena for different people.)

Conclusion

In sum, Higgins et al. (2010) have taken important strides toward an improved understanding of satisfaction with first vaginal sex. Future research, addressing the issues enumerated above, will help to advance the social science of sexual satisfaction. Historically, sexuality scholars have focused on negative aspects of sexual activity (e.g., sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy) and avoided sex-positive topics like satisfaction, often due to fear of academic or political reprisals or of having their own morality called into question. The appearance in mainstream research venues of studies that do not shy away from such potentially explosive topics is an extremely welcome development.

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