Exploring Gender and Class Inequalities in the Bedroom

Women’ Perceptions of their Sexuality through an In-Depth Interview Study
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Introduction

Working to achieve heterosexual norms with or without the direct help of the experts is an established pattern for women which predates the FSD label and pharmaceutical interventions into women’s sexual problems. Thus, while challenging the medicalization of women’s sexual problems under the FSD framework is key, greater changes in women’s material freedom at the macro-level, in addition to changes in sexual patterns at the micro-level, will be necessary for any radical disruption of the gender division of the labour of love’ (Cacciocioni, 2007).

What is known
• Female Sexual Dysfunction (FSD) is an emerging, although highly contested, label used to categorize women’s problems with sexual desire, arousal, orgasm and/or pain. Feminists’ studies critics are based on two major issues: the standard ‘script’ for heterosex and the power of medical ‘experts’ to define sexual norms.
• There is growing literature based on the concept of ‘sex work’ – the rationalization, improvement and mastery of sex in personal life – arguing that women are more likely to be submitted to it due to gender inequalities and power differences.

Aims

To present the findings of an empirical study in a qualitative approach with the aim of exploring the diversity of female perceptions of their sexuality, of women and men perceptions’ of female sexual problems and of their experiences of dealing with their perceived sexual difficulties in day-to-day life.

Methods

Design and Participants

Part of a multi-methods approach and data triangulation, with a sample of Sexual Dysfunction Observational Study in Portugal participants. This subset consists of 15 in-depth interviews with women with and without sexual difficulties complemented by 3 interviews with (unrelated) men whose partners had experience of sexual problems.

Data collection

• Interviews lasting between 45 minutes and one hour, audio-taped (with permission), took place in each patient’s health centre and were carried out by female (AB) and male (LR) interviewers for female and male patients, respectively.
• The discussion was guided by a topic guide that sought to draw out participants’ accounts of their personal experiences. The primary questions derived from a review of the literature and emerging themes from analysis of the first interviews were explored in later interviews.
• Background information of previous questionnaires helped plot various connections between experiences and perceptions of sexual problems and various facets of identity.

Data analysis

• Data is under analysis using a grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987).
• Discussions were partially transcribed by the interviewers, and reviewed by the first author (VA) that listened to the tapes and checked the transcripts as part of the familiarization process.
• Discussions were then catalogued according to broad themes (such as: sexuality representations; beliefs about treatments; intimacy and sexual satisfaction; masculinity/femininity perceptions) and a network of subordinate and super-ordinate themes was established. Recurrent themes were identified and coded (along with supporting quotes) independently and consensus was reached by discussion between researchers (Table 1).

Results

Data were catalogued according to broad themes:

• Female Perceptions of Normal Sexual Functioning and of Sexual Satisfaction
• Sexual Goals
• Men Perceptions about their Partners’ Sexual Difficulties

Table 1. Selected main themes and categories from participants’ sexual scripts framework

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<th>Sexual satisfaction</th>
<th>Sexual practices</th>
<th>Desire</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation to sexual intercourse</td>
<td>Traditional attitude</td>
<td>Associated with relationship satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relevance of partner’s experience</td>
<td>Resistance to specific actions</td>
<td>Similarity between genders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational satisfaction</td>
<td>Please the other</td>
<td>Not relevant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Common need</td>
<td>Variation of practices</td>
<td>Related to pleasure</td>
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<td>Myths towards some practices</td>
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<td>Care and love</td>
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There are different ways of perceiving desire relevance, depending on women’s age, social status and sexual satisfactions. In general women give importance to desire, as a condition to have sexual pleasure and to both partner’s sexual and emotional involvement. However desire is dependent from daily routines and personal cognitive variables and emotional state.

A multiple variety of perceptions and representations attached to sexual roles and a diverse range of sexual experiences emerged from the participants’ dialogues. Women’s sexuality was more complex and less genitally focused than men’s. In general, women pursue relationships and mutually satisfying sex, and more and more women chasse sexual agency and self love. All women want consensual sex being this an ultimate for sexual health and liberation. Men whose partners had experience of sexual problems were more challenging of normative sexuality and more focused on couple satisfaction.

Discussion and Conclusions

The complexity of female sexual problems experienced highlights that further research should take account of the many factors that can influence sexual negotiation and the importance of the social, psychological and relational context.

What this study adds

• Conceptions of desire, arousal, and satisfaction are complex constructions impacted by age, education and class.
• Shifting sexual roles could potentially contribute to decreased gender inequity in sexual and social arena, for both men and women.

References:

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