

The Embodiment of Female Sexual Pleasure: Body as Object and Body as Instrument

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Abstract

This paper will consider how models of embodiment can contribute to an understanding of the experience of sexual pleasure. Data was collected from thirteen women aged 21 to 53 years based in the UK, interviewed in a semi structured style about their experiences of sexual pleasure. This research questions models of embodiment which categorise the body as made up of three bodies: the objectified body, the experiencing body and the experienced body. Instead this paper proposes a model of only two female bodies: the body as object and the body as instrument, which emphasise the difficulties of experiencing female sexual desire and pleasure within a culture of sexual propriety and objectification. Specifically highlighted was the importance of the situational and relational context in which sexual pleasure can be achieved for women was paramount in understanding what factors were conducive to attaining a positive sexual self-image.

This research highlights important points of connection between the body as: object of desire; site of experience of emotion and sensation; as well as the vehicle through which the sexual is defined. These three competing roles of the sexual body reflect the multiple ways in which bodies are required to re-invent themselves daily through their role as both source of contact with the material world, and site of interpreting and constructing the social world. By connecting these two worlds, sexual pleasure is conceptualised as being reflexive; influenced through social interaction and experiences, leading to female bodies being reconstructed in multiple ways in the pursuit of sexual pleasure. With those women who have achieved their own state of sexual pleasure, they have experienced this as a point at which the self-conscious body as object is dispelled so that the sexual body can be fully enjoyed.

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Key Words: Embodiment, sexual pleasure, female, sociology.

1. Background

Over history female sexual pleasure has been a highly politicised issue, medicalised as long ago as the 5th century BC when the definition of hysteria was agreed upon, wherein aspects of women's sexuality which do not serve men's desires, or are not wholly related to reproduction, have been consistently denied in public discourse (Maine, 1999). It has been argued that historically women are seen through the male gaze as the object of desire, their bodies devoid of subjectivity, lacking their own separate sexuality, contingent upon male desire and competing for male approval (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992; Levy, 2005). This leads many feminists to consider the objectification of women as a process undergone from childhood whereby girls are made aware of the need to control their bodily movements from a young age (Young, 1990). Some researchers go so far as to say that one of the first lessons taught to women in a patriarchal society is to view oneself as an object in a process of self objectification (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Young (1990) has concluded through her phenomenological research into female movement, that women experience their bodies with an "ambiguous transcendence" aware of themselves as objects under the male gaze of unwanted attention (p. 153). Masters and Johnson (1970), leading sex researchers of their time, described a process of 'spectatoring' as "the loss of sexual agency through viewing oneself as a sexual object" which "impedes sexual functioning because it distracts women from their own pleasure" (in Sanchez, 2006: 514). The connection between the objectification of women, self-objectification and sexual pleasure will be explored in this paper.

Jackson and Scott (2001) argue that in order to interpret one's own body (as well as the bodies of others) as sexual, we need socially agreed norms defining what is sexual. However, in exploring the social norms surrounding sexuality, it becomes apparent that there are often one set of rules for the goose, and quite another for the gander. The term 'sexually schizophrenic society' describes the ways in which society holds sexuality to be both a source of dirt, disease and denigration as well as a gateway to ecstasy, enlightenment and emancipation. This conflict has been argued to be

more acutely felt by women, needing to be both chaste and pure, as well as sexually available and attractive at the same time (Queen, 1997:130). Women are expected to walk a 'very narrow tightrope' of sexual propriety that is controls the expression of female sexual desire or pleasure (Attwood, 2007). So that despite our society being proliferated with messages of sexualised women there is a 'missing discourse of desire' for women whereby they have little awareness of what constitutes their own desire or sexual pleasure. Socialised to be sexually attractive and available (Irigaray, 1996; Tolman, 2001) women are encouraged to present an appearance of socially approved female sexuality. This paper considers gender and sexuality as empirically related but analytically distinct categories in line with Gagnon and Simon (1974). By viewing sexuality as socially constructed, it must be seen as produced through the production of gender, so that "sexual pleasure is socially mediated and embodied selves are reflexively constructed and reconstructed through social interaction in specific social settings" (Jackson and Scott, 2001:100). In this way all interaction is embodied as well as gendered, and all sexual relations occur in a nexus of social relations

2. Embodiment

Embodiment theory highlights the centrality of the body in experiencing and communicating with the social world, making it impossible to dismiss the body when theorising the social world (Williams, 1998). However the question of how to conceptualise the body is a complex one, McNay (1999: 98) states the nature of this problem within sociology:

"As the point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological, the body is a dynamic frontier. The body is the threshold through which the subject's lived experience of the world is incorporated and realised and, as such, is neither pure object nor pure subject. It is neither pure object since it is the place of one's engagement with the world. Nor is it pure subject in that there is always a material residue that resists incorporation into dominant symbolic schema".

This fundamental difficulty in reconciling the binary of bodies being both subject and object within the social world makes embodiment theory

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illuminating in researching sexualities, and specifically sexual pleasure. As stressed by Jackson and Scott (2001: 102), bodies in themselves are not meaningful within sociology, rather they are embodied within a specific social context which “profoundly affects both how we see our own and others’ bodies and how we experience our actual embodiment”. Sexual pleasure can provide a point of connection between competing aspects of embodiment wherein the subject and body become blurred within practices such as being aware of being viewed in a sexual way, perceiving situations as sexual and feeling sexual. This article will go on to explore the relationship between the subject and body through examining the three part model of embodiment proposed by Lindemann (1997).

In constructing a three part model of the body, Lindemann (1997) describes the objectified body; a visible and concrete gestalt, the experiencing body which perceives through the senses including sight, touch etc. and; the experienced body which feels a sense of self without conveying sensory perceptions. While this model was primarily concerned with addressing embodied issues surrounding the everyday reproduction of human gender, specifically considering the body to be a spatial phenomenon, it can be useful in highlighting areas of interest within the construction of the embodiment of female sexual pleasure. As adapted by Jackson and Scott (2001), Lindemann’s model highlights how the objectified body and living body are reflexively linked, stating that how the objectified body is perceived affects how the living body is experienced and vice versa. This interpretation states that sexual experience can change both how objectified bodies are defined as sexual, as well as how experiencing bodies experience sexual encounters. This highlights the potential for discontinuity between perceptions of what appears to be ‘sexy’ (in the objectified body) and what is experienced as sexy (by the living body).

This three part model has many strengths, including the ability to acknowledge the potential distance between portraying an objectified appearance of sexual behaviour and experiencing this as sexual, and the potential for reconstructing interpretations of what is sexual. However, following on from the findings of this research there is one important element missing from the model discussed by Lindemann (1997) and Jackson and Scott (2001) which is the role of agency. In this model the experienced body represents the sense of one’s own body, experienced without conveying any

signs of sensory perception. While the experiencing body feels through the senses including touch, taste, sight etc.. The combination of these into the living body leads to the body knowing where it is located, in an absolute location without the need for spatial relations or relative distances from other objects, in other words it has a discrete sense of self. However, this awareness of self does not go on to then be aware of the objectified body in any meaningful way, but is limited to only being oriented towards the construction of the objectified body through cultural formation. So that conscious awareness of the body is alienated from the objectified body and located solely in the living body. The discussed research uses the experience of female sexual pleasure to question this understanding of embodiment.

3. Methods

In exploring the issue of embodied sexual pleasure, qualitative methods were employed in order to discuss this topic with sensitivity in an open and reflexive manner. Semi-structured interviews were used following a loose life-time trajectory with all thirteen participants, aged between 21 and 53 years, discussing their memories of their sex lives beginning from when they first became aware of themselves in a sexual way. This method allowed participants to reflect on key stages in their live when their sexuality was influential in their self-identity, or specific incidents which changed how they experienced this. Through the development of rapport, the interview data collected was very detailed and personal with all, bar one, respondent discussing their pleasant surprise at the level of insight they had gained from taking part in the interview process. Interviewees were recruited through word of mouth and therefore most lived in or around the researchers home town of Edinburgh, with a small number being based the north of England. All participants were contacts of friends of the researcher, therefore a level of trust was established by proxy through extended friendships leading to high levels of confidence by participants as regards the role and intentions of the researcher within the interview setting. This convenience sampling method led to a sample of seven middle class and six working class participants, with women deciding their own class based on their life trajectories to date, all of whom chose pseudonyms with which to be identified in the research. While the interview structure was concerned with life-time trajectories of factors affecting women's sexual pleasure, the theme of embodiment, a theory which

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has been widely recognised as very difficult to directly investigate, was focused on through the specific question asked in the interview context: 'have you ever felt alone during sex?'. This question gave rise to a high level of response, with all respondents citing specific occasions or relationships in which they had felt alone during sexual activities, with detailed accounts of how this felt and under what circumstances this occurred provided to the researcher. However, in order to investigate the nature of the embodiment of female sexual pleasure, several areas of convergence from among the thirteen life trajectories must be taken into account.

4. Research findings

Starting from the point at which women first became aware of their own sexuality, a central issue of communication at home arose. This was recognised as contributing greatly to how women valued their sexuality. This research found that the more a daughter is encouraged to think of her sexualised body in a positive way, the more likely she is to go on to experience sexual pleasure. This correlation between attitude at home towards female sexuality and, subsequent ability to experience sexual pleasure was very strong. In contrast, women reflected on conflicting messages they received from the media as regards their sexuality, stating their need to appear sexually available, often expressed through messages about body image, and being sexually attractive. Research into the sexual content of primetime television has revealed "women, can, do and should objectify themselves, exploiting their bodies and looks were portrayed as important, if not necessary, to attract male suitors" (Kim et. Al., 2007: 151). These messages contained in television often directly contradict messages young women received at home, both explicit and latent. The resulting discrepancy between mass media and family values led to the women feeling confused about their newly sexualised bodies and how they should behave in sexual contexts. Talking about how they had experienced great conflict as regards how they 'should be'; either as a physically attractive, sexually available, passive object to allure men, as presented to them in the media. Or a 'good girl' who is careful not to present herself as sexual at all, as encouraged by their family background in most cases, was presented in most life trajectories. Sexual desire or potential for pleasure from sexual activity

were not messages discussed by the women when describing their youth, supporting the concept of a 'missing discourse of desire' for young women.

Women who received positive sexual messages at home in contrast, exhibited a greater sense of control over their bodies when they went on to experiment sexually. The central issue of control is shown primarily through a couple of women who felt able to refuse, avoid or get out of sexual situations they did not want or were not enjoying. However, as found by previous research (Welles, 2005), the first sexual experiences of most women in this study were not enjoyable. The conflicting messages received by young women from media and family, highlighting the 'sexually schizophrenic society' led to them feeling confused in what they wanted to achieve with their newly sexualised bodies.

This research found that the impact of early sexual experiences on future ability to enjoy sexual pleasure is great. Those women who had less control over their first sexual encounters have gone on to have more difficulties in experiencing sexual pleasure. Sexual harassment from leering to rape (a highlighted by Liz Kelly's Continuum of Sexual Violence,) was cited as a very common experience for the women interviewed, especially when young (Kelly, 1992; McHugh, 2006). These experiences resulted in women sensing their sexualised bodies as problematic, leading to several women creating a deliberate distance between themselves and their sexuality. Every woman in this research gave a description at some point of receiving unpleasant sexual attention and or enduring negative encounters over their life course. Through these incidences many women came to conceptualise their sexualised bodies as a source of betrayal, pain and unwanted attention, as highlighted by Tinkerbell when she says:

“When it comes round to the whole dressing and being and feeling, because quite a lot of feeling sexy makes me feel quite uncomfortable. I guess because it triggers, it's such a double-edged sword, in my head I'm very ambivalent, is the word I would use, to my sexuality. I can love it or loathe it, and if that's not something in my head when I'm doing things then I can be much more confident.”

Research into sex workers, found that they develop coping mechanisms to manage the tensions of negative sexual situations. These

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coping mechanisms largely involve “separating the body from ‘the self’” so as to manage difficult emotions which surface through their day to day working lives (O’Neill, 2001). This finding was supported by the discussed research which found that women who have had more of these negative experiences find it much harder to expect sexual experiences to be pleasant. Instead these women experience their bodies as remote objects out with their control, as described by Chloe Taylor discussing a one night stand:

“When I was drunk I thought oh, he’s really funny, and he’d be a great laugh in the bedroom, and it’s not turned out like that I’ve just felt like, well, I don’t know why I’m doing this, but it’s not that bad, so I’ll just drift off”

Or Claire discussing sex in a long term 5 year relationship:

“Being in relationships, I was just kind of going through the motions, as opposed to it being something that I was terribly into. I very often found myself sort of absent, and having sex very much aware of my responsibility as a girlfriend, as opposed to it being something I actually wanted. And I think I would even say I’ve had times when I actually felt violated because I was doing it because it was expected, but I really didn’t want to.. I think you just kind of separate yourself, just go ahead just kind of zoned out.”

In considering this experience of ‘drifting off’ within the context of Lindemann’s three part model of the body, this example highlights that there is a connection between the objectified body and the living body. Rather than the body being made up of two discrete entities sharing the same space and time, by pointing directly at the point at which an awareness of self distances itself from the body as an object. This process highlights that the living body as described by Lindemann (1997) has an awareness of the connection it has to the objectified body in a reflexive way. It is this awareness of the objectified body by the living body that leads to the reformulation of Lindemann’s (1997) model into two constituent parts: the body as object and the body as instrument. This example of women choosing to ‘drift off’ during unpleasant sexual encounters in order to escape negative sensations and emotions, we can demonstrate how the proposed two part model of

embodiment can more successfully conceptualise the experiences of these women. In contrast to Lindemann's (1997) model, the proposed two part model questions the necessity of differentiating between the ability of a body to experience physical sensations (the experiencing body) and the ability to have a sense of one's own body without conveying sensory perceptions (the experienced body).

The findings of this research suggest that women experience their bodies in a more cohesive way, unable to separate their awareness of physical sensations from their sense of self, but with a discrete ability to discern between whether they are fully engaging with their physical bodies or not, essentially with a sense of presence. This leads to the breaking down of Lindemann's model, stripping components of each of her three bodies and reconstituting these into two bodies: a body as object; aware of emotions, sensations and pain but unable to actively define situations as sexual, and: a body as instrument; able to perceive through the senses, including an ability to experience desire, a sense of agency and control over its actions and able to actively define situations as sexual. This reformulation is able to accommodate the experience of women drifting off during sexual encounters as it facilitates the distinction made by these women of being at one point present in a sexual encounter, in their body as instrument, fully engaged and present mentally and physically, but then deliberately distancing themselves from their body, leaving the body as object behind in order to avoid intense negative emotions.

This model can be further illustrated by considering the experience of female sexual pleasure, and the main factors which can affect this. The issue of performance becomes key in this example, as these women were effectively performing a version of their own sexuality, yet not experiencing desire or pleasure, highlighting their ability to self-objectify their sexualised bodies. This model of two bodies highlights the role of agency within conceptualising female sexual pleasure. Agency in this sense is defined as:

“the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or the ‘power within’” (Kabeer 1999:438).

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Within a sexual context agency relates specifically to actions such as to be aware of and act upon personal sexual desires, to take the initiative in sexual situations, choosing to not engage in certain behaviours. Agency refers to the motivation and thinking behind behaviours and actions as well as any actions carried out. This highlighting of the non-physical, and potentially unspoken, elements of agency are important in researching sexuality. The ability to express sexual pleasure is seen as evidence of sexual agency as the circumstances and conditions required for women to be able to experience this were found to be contingent on a level of control over their sexual encounters. The main areas identified in this research as predicting the ability to experience sexual pleasure are communicating about sexual issues, trusting your partner emotionally and feeling equal to your partner.

A major finding of this research is that women who regularly communicate what they want in bed with their partner orgasm more easily and value orgasm more highly than those women who did not communicate with their sexual partners. While orgasm is not definitive of sexual pleasure, it is a strong indication of this. This finding is congruent with the expected influence of agency – women who are able to recognise and communicate their sexuality find it easier to experience their own sexual desires and pleasure. Additionally, trust was cited as the most consistent element necessary to sexual pleasure, with all female participants mentioning the importance of this to their relationships. The relevance of emotional trust seems to be directly related to the body as instrument once again: women who trust their partner to listen to them, take their time and be open emotionally do not feel it necessary to perform an idealised version of their sexuality or ‘act sexy’. Trust in a relationship negates the need to perform as a sexual object, enabling women to stop self-objectifying and experience their body as an instrument of their own pleasure.

In order to understand the impact sexual pleasure has on women we must consider firstly the impact this has on their relationship with their partner and the relationship they have with themselves. Many women described how good sex can make them feel closer to their partner. In focusing on the role of sexual pleasure in women’s sense of sexual self identity, many women described sex making them feel relaxed, chilled or at peace. This calm and peace was described as rare moment when women can be devoid of an awareness of the body as object, when women can simply be

in their body, at one with their potentially conflicting sexual identity as described by Biker Chick when she describes her sexual pleasure:

“It’s that feeling of being totally and completely in your own body, in your senses, in this moment now. And there is no thinking, or buzzing on whatever. But the ideal moment is afterwards when you just, it spreads through your body, every sense, every pore, every cell in your skin feels like you fit your skin completely.”

The process of reconciling the binary of the body as object and the body as instrument is centrally the reason why sexual pleasure is powerful and important to women. It provides a site at which women can reclaim and redefine their sexuality, sexual desires and sexualised bodies in a continually reflexive way so that positive sexual encounters can enable women to re-conceptualise their bodies in less objectified ways. By no longer feeling a need to perform an idealised version of female sexuality as attractive and passive, women can assert their agency and interpret their own desire and pleasure in their own terms.

5. Conclusions

The embodiment of female sexual pleasure is a highly complex, socially mediated process. Women construct and reconstruct their sexuality from many sources of interaction within a ‘sexually schizophrenic society’ wherein they experience their bodies as both instrument through which to act in the social world with agency, and as object, through which they enact a passive performance of female sexuality, able to flick between these at any time. However this research concludes that the experience of sexual pleasure is only possible through the body as instrument, as the body as object is overly self-reflexive rendering it distant to the senses. Objectification and self-objectification ensure that women are alienated from their inner self, constrained within social norms that expect them to perform rather than experience desire and pleasure. These conclusions highlight the importance of challenging social norms which encourage the objectification of women or perpetuate the missing discourse of desire experienced by some of the women in this research. Through encouraging women to reclaim and redefine their sexuality, out with the confines of the popular media messages of

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appropriate female sexuality, female sexual pleasure can be recognised as liberating. This paper raises questions about the complicated nature of sexuality and specifically sexual pleasure. It highlights the need for greater attention to be paid to the ways in which we all experience our bodies and how this is socially constructed, and can thus be reflexively reconstructed through life experiences.

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