

# Social Identities as Predictors of Women's Sexual Satisfaction and Sexual Activity

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Received: 15 October 2009 / Revised: 9 July 2010 / Accepted: 9 July 2010 / Published online: 28 September 2010  
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**Abstract** While much research has examined sexual problems and dysfunction, far less research has examined intersections between sexual satisfaction and sexual activity, particularly as it relates to social identities. This study utilized secondary analysis of 1,473 women from the National Health and Social Life Survey to examine the way sexual satisfaction and sexual activity are at times misaligned. Using factor and cluster analyses, four groups of women defined by being high or low on satisfaction and activity were predicted by nine demographic variables, including socioeconomic class, racial/ethnic identity, age, marital status, education, sexual identity, geographical “coming of age” location, employment status, and number of children. Results showed that lower status women (women of color, working-class women, younger women, less educated women, women who worked full-time) reported low satisfaction and high activity. Women who reported high satisfaction and low activity represented the largest cluster of women, indicating that *more* women reported a disjuncture between satisfaction and activity than did those reporting a match between satisfaction and activity. Implications for clinical, sexuality, and social identity literatures are discussed.

**Keywords** Sexual satisfaction · Sexual activity · Women's sexuality · Social identity · Social status

## Introduction

While much research has examined sexual problems and dysfunction, far less research has examined sexual satisfaction, particularly as it relates to social identities. This study addressed two understudied areas of sexuality research. First, research on sexual satisfaction and sexual activity has typically argued that high sexual satisfaction explicitly correlates with high sexual activity (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004; Waite & Joyner, 2001) or that high sexual satisfaction is thought to itself *imply* high sexual activity (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Mansfield, Koch, & Voda, 2000; Young, Denny, Luquis, & Young, 1998). Little research has examined differences between women with regard to sexual satisfaction and sexual activity as two distinct, possibly misaligned, dimensions of sexuality. Instead, existing research has often either conflated sexual activity and sexual motivation (Hiller, 2005), thereby reductively assuming that sexual activity is universally pleasurable and rewarding, or it has combined satisfaction and activity as definitive markers of healthy sexual functioning.

Second, there are running debates about what predicts women's sexual satisfaction (Henderson, Lehavot, & Simoni, 2009; Schwartz & Young, 2009). While several studies have explored the role of psychological factors that promote sexual satisfaction (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Strelan, Mehaffey, & Tiggemann, 2003), we focused on how sexual satisfaction relates to social hierarchies like race, class, education, and other gendered systems. Accordingly, this study examined whether membership in privileged or stigmatized social statuses enhanced or inhibited women's sexual satisfaction.

The purpose of this study was twofold: first, we questioned whether sexual satisfaction and sexual activity were part of the same phenomenon among women; second, we examined the ways that social identity variables like race, class, gender, level

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of education, age, and sexual identity predicted women's reported levels of sexual satisfaction and sexual activity.<sup>1</sup> In particular, this study examined the social statuses of U.S. women who were most likely to report a divergence or mismatch between sexual satisfaction and sexual activity in order to illuminate the role of social status in predicting these aspects of women's sexual lives.<sup>2</sup>

### Sexual Satisfaction

The question of how to measure sexual satisfaction has long befuddled sex researchers, as much debate exists whether orgasm or the more abstract self-reported satisfaction measures more accurately represent satisfaction. Discussions of wanting, pleasure, and bodily satisfaction permeate the recent sex literatures (Crawford, Diener, Wirtz, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002; Fine & McClelland, 2006). Further, debates about what constitutes sexual function and dysfunction, and how researchers define sexual satisfaction, reveal how gender norms are integral to understanding sexual satisfaction (Bridges & Horne, 2007; McClelland, 2010; Tiefer, 2004).

Given this methodological complexity, it is not surprising that research on women's sexual satisfaction has yielded mixed results both about what constitutes satisfaction and what predicts satisfaction. Still, one consistent finding is that gender matters: women are less sexually satisfied than men (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997), and women also think about sex less, masturbate less, have fewer orgasms with partners, and fantasize less when compared with men (Baumeister & Tice, 1998; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2010; Sprecher & Regan, 1996). These gender discrepancies may stem from women's learned tendencies toward self-objectification, that is, conceptualizing their worth according to externally-perceivable traits and socially approved definitions of beautiful bodies. Self-objectification behaviors have been linked with eating disorders, depression, body shame, sexual dissatisfaction, and difficulty initiating sex (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Strelan et al., 2003). Women with poor body image reported more self-consciousness and rated the importance of physical attractiveness much higher (Ackard, Kearney-Cooke, & Peterson, 2000; Weaver, 2006). Those with positive body image were

less likely to internalize media images, were less depressed, and were more likely to have positive views of sexuality (Walker-Hill, 2000). These factors are a likely culprit in women's decreased satisfaction and activity compared to men.

When examining differences between women, satisfied women reported more sexual assertiveness, earlier first sexual intercourse, and had nonreligious childhoods (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). They also reported less anxiety about the meaning of sex along with fewer intrusive thoughts (Purdon & Holdaway, 2006). Also, satisfied women had more satisfying romantic relationships, felt more intimacy with partners (Birnbau, 2007; Pinney, Gerrard, & Denney, 1987; Smith, 2007; Sprecher, Barbee, & Schwartz, 1995), and reported more reciprocal feelings of love and more intense orgasms with partners (González, Viáfara, Caba, Molina, & Ortiz, 2006; Sprecher, 2002). Satisfied women also reported more self-disclosure to their partners about what brings them pleasure (MacNeil & Byers, 2005), embraced more non-traditional gender roles (Pedersen & Blekesaune, 2003), and started out their relationships with more satisfaction (McNulty & Fisher, 2008).

Most research links women's satisfaction to frequency of orgasm during partnered sexual activity. Some studies suggest that half of women orgasm frequently or always (Hunt, 1974; Raboch & Raboch, 1992), yet in studies highlighting social identities, these numbers diverge depending on women's social locations. For example, Janus and Janus (1993) found that 56% of women ages 18–26, 67% of age 27–38, 66% of age 39–50, and 50% of age 65 or over reported frequent orgasm during sex. Other studies reported the percentage of women who frequently experience orgasm ranges from around 25–60% depending on age, race, and class backgrounds (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Hurlbert, Apt, & Rabehl, 1993; Schwartz & Young, 2009). Several recent studies found that older women reported much lower frequencies of orgasm compared to younger women (Lutfey, Link, Rosen, Wiegel, & McKinlay, 2009; Wilkins & Warnock, 2009), revealing the importance of examining social identities as predictors of satisfaction and activity.

### Social Identities and Sexuality

People's locations in the social order typically convey a litany of privileges, opportunities, obligations, and restrictions about their social roles. Although the social science literature has established that disadvantaged identities—women, people of color, sexual minorities, lower socioeconomic status groups, and so on—regularly face institutionalized discrimination in most familial, work, judicial, educational, and housing situations (Acker, 2006; Jackman, 1994; McCall, 2001; Pyke, 1996), questions remain about how issues of sexual satisfaction relate to race, class, education, and other social identity differences.

<sup>1</sup> To clarify, the term “social status” deals with a person's location in a social hierarchy while a “social identity” refers to an individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership in a social group or a given status (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Additionally, ascribed social statuses like race and gender are mostly determined at birth while achieved social statuses are obtained through some sort of actions (e.g., getting married or having children).

<sup>2</sup> Note that “mismatch” simply refers to a divergence and does not imply that sexual satisfaction and sexual activity should always be aligned; rather, “mismatch” readily describes the differentness of these variables.

While all women do not report equal levels of satisfaction, researchers disagree about which social identities support or inhibit greater sexual satisfaction. Women in lower social status groups reported less sexual satisfaction than higher status women (Martin & Purkiss, 2001), particularly with regard to race, socioeconomic status, education, sexual identity, marital status, and age. Studies have linked working-class backgrounds to less interest in marital sex (Rubin, 1994), more restrictive views of sexuality (Gordon, Schroeder, & Abrams, 1990), and greater premarital sexual experience compared to middle-class women (Janus & Janus, 1993). Upper-income women reported the most premarital sexual experience compared to both working-class and middle-class women (Janus & Janus, 1993). Though studies of work status do not directly correlate with socioeconomic status, research has shown that fatigue from long work hours, work-related stress, or dissatisfaction with work strongly predicted less satisfaction and less sexual frequency for both employed women and stay-at-home women (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995). One study, however, found that socioeconomic class did not predict differences in women's sexual behavior or attitudes (Weinberg, Lottes, & Gordon, 1997).

Correlations between race and sexuality also point to some interesting, and conflicting, results. Most studies have found strong similarities between black women and white women (Chadiha, Veroff, & Leber, 1998; Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994; Kalof & Wade, 1995; Oggins, Veroff, & Leber, 1993), except that black women more often endorsed non-traditional relationships (Kalof & Wade, 1995) and engaged more often in premarital sex (at all socioeconomic levels) (Fisher, 1980). Along racial lines, black and white women had more permissive sexual attitudes than Latina and Asian-American women (Fugère, Escoto, Cousins, Riggs, & Haerich, 2008) and Latina women faked orgasm less often than white women (Bryan, 2002). Compared to white women, black women also reported more desire but less sexual activity than white women (Huang et al., 2009). Henderson-King and Veroff (1994) found that, for black women, income was negatively correlated with sexual satisfaction, indicating that more financial resources strained their satisfaction.

Marital status and presence of children also influence sexual satisfaction, as married or cohabitating participants reported significantly more sexual and emotional satisfaction, and higher levels of physical satisfaction, than did single participants (Waite & Joyner, 2001), though married couples had sex less often than cohabiters (Call et al., 1995). Similarly, women with children reported less spontaneous sexual encounters and less sexual frequency (DeJudicibus & McCabe, 2002; Hyde, DeLamater, Plant, & Byrd, 1996), but largely had satisfying relationships with plenty of affection and warmth (Ahlborg, Dahlof, & Hallberg, 2005). Women with children also prioritized emotional intimacy and commitment over physical arousal and

excitement when compared to women without children (Means, 2001).

Age and life stage seem to also influence sexual satisfaction and orgasm experiences. While teenage sexuality has been shown to predict later sexual dissatisfaction (Seldin, Friedman, & Marin, 2002), other studies found that early sexual experience predicted sexual satisfaction and more frequent orgasm as adults (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). Studies of midlife sexuality have consistently connected older age with decreased sexual response, particularly for desire, arousal, enjoyment, frequency of sex, and orgasm (Call et al., 1995; Lutfey et al., 2009; Mansfield et al., 2000; Tomic et al., 2006). However, for coupled heterosexuals, better marital adjustment buffered the increase in sexual dysfunction that typically came with age (Hawton, Gath, & Day, 1994).

Level of educational attainment might also influence satisfaction and activity. Women with the highest education had the most sexual partners (twice as many as other groups) and the most sexual experience (including oral sex and masturbation) before marriage (Janus & Janus, 1993). In addition, Haavio-Mannila and Kontula (1997) found that sexual satisfaction correlated positively with level of education. Krull (1994) associated more education with more liberal views, more sexual promiscuity, and positive attitudes toward sexuality, though a recent study correlated higher education with “lower passion” for a partner (Tomic et al., 2006).

## Hypotheses and Research Questions

As shown in the literature, women's sexual satisfaction, activity, desire, and motivation may change in response to cultural expectations, gendered belief systems, partnered relationships, and internalized ideas about normative sexuality. Social identities like race, class, gender, age, education, and sexual identity probably alter women's relationship to their sexuality, though the literature yields highly inconsistent findings about how social identities correlate with sexual satisfaction and sexual activity. Though most sex research assumes that high sexual satisfaction correlates with high sexual activity, and that women are motivated primarily by the pursuit of pleasure, this research tests these premises by interrogating sexual satisfaction and sexual activity as separate, but related, factors in women's lives.

This study also examined how women's social identities might predict a match or mismatch with regard to sexual satisfaction and sexual activity. In other words, which of women's social identities predict *both* satisfaction *and* more frequent sex? Which social statuses predict women being *not* satisfied *and* having more frequent sex? Or, which women are satisfied but *not* having sex very often? And finally, which social groupings of women report little satisfaction *and* little sexual activity?

Specifically, we hypothesized that sexual satisfaction and sexual activity would not always be aligned, and that many women would report misalignment on these dimensions (e.g., high sexual satisfaction and low sexual activity or low sexual satisfaction and high sexual activity). In particular, because conformity to a partner's expectations for frequent sexual activity could be itself motivating yet not particularly pleasurable, we hypothesized that some women would report feeling unsatisfied despite frequent sexual activity. Conversely, because periods of less sexual activity are normative in sexual relationships, we also hypothesized that some women would report feeling satisfied with infrequent sexual activity. Because social identities clearly influence women's sexuality, we hypothesized that social identities would directly affect women's sexual satisfaction and sexual activity.

More specifically, though the literature suggested conflicting results about the relationship between social identities and sexual satisfaction/frequency, we predicted that lower status women would report lower sexual satisfaction compared to higher status women. Because high status is typically correlated with greater resources and more social validation, high status groups were hypothesized to report more satisfaction overall.

## Method

### Participants

This study analyzed data from the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs), a representative, national probability sample of approximately 3,432 U.S. adults. This survey had a 78.6% response rate, and was conducted as a face-to-face survey with an additional shorter pencil and paper instrument for items that could be considered shameful or embarrassing for some people. These data were collected in 1992 with the explicit goal "to undertake a broad investigation of sexual conduct in the age of AIDS...and to represent as much of the U.S. adult population as possible" (Laumann et al., 1994, p. 53). The NHSLs is the only national probability sample to date that addresses in detail the issues of sexual desire, sexual dysfunction, fantasy, and a diverse group of non-procreative sexual behaviors. The richness of the survey, and the sensitivity with which these kinds of questions were asked, made it a good instrument for examining the interaction among demographics, sexual attitudes, and sexual behavior.

Because the current study focused on the sexuality of women, we used a subsample of 1,473 women from the original 3,432 participants in the NHSLs. This sample included nationally-representative populations of women, and accounted proportionally for racial diversity, differences in sexual orientation,

marital status, and other important demographic features such as age and socioeconomic class.<sup>3</sup>

SPSS version 13 was used throughout this study. In order to maximize the study's generalizability, weights were applied for all analyses and inference tests, in order to make the analyses and computations of statistics comparable to what would be seen in the population that the sample was drawn from. Specifically, weights<sup>4</sup> were used to correct for any differences by Census region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West), gender (male, female), household size (one, two, three, four, five or more), age (in four intervals: 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–59), and race/ethnicity (in four categories: white, black, Hispanic, other) based on the 1990 census.

### Measures

Two groupings of items ("sexual satisfaction" and "sexual activity") were used to measure different dimensions of female sexualities. The four dimensions that defined "sexual satisfaction" included: physical pleasure, emotional satisfaction, feelings and emotions about sex, and frequency of orgasm. The two dimensions that defined "sexual activity" included: frequency of sexual activity and sexual variety. The sexual satisfaction composite index had an alpha coefficient of 0.75, while the alpha coefficient for the sexual variety variables was 0.71.

We measured sexual satisfaction based on both subjective and objective criteria, attending to prominent debates within sexuality literatures about what constitutes satisfaction (McClelland, 2010). In line with previous research (Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Sprecher & Cate, 2004), we imagine satisfaction to include dimensions of positive affect about the sexual exchange, positive expectations about future sexual events, and positive bodily reactions to sex. As such, each of these

<sup>3</sup> Interviews were conducted without matching interviewer/interviewee on key demographic features like race and gender, as there were no significant results for "matching" interviewers and interviewees (DeLamater & MacCorquodale, 1979). Some notable (and standard) exclusions to the original survey, due to difficulty reaching these participants by phone, included: persons not living in a "household," prison populations, military personnel, and Spanish-speaking (non-English-speaking) populations. The NHSLs did cover over 95% of the adult population aged 18–59. This survey also included an oversample of Blacks and English-speaking Hispanics (both groups = 273 cases).

<sup>4</sup> Frankel, the chief statistician, noted that the weight first adjusts for oversampling, and then a multidimensional "balancing procedure" is applied, which adjusts for any differences as needed. He also noted that the weight combines a sampling weight (for the oversampling of certain groups), an eligibility weight (for the household size), and a poststratification weight (primarily for differential nonresponse). The weights were scaled to sum to the actual sample size, so the average weight is 1.0 (Laumann et al., 1994).



dimensions is represented in our definitions of sexual satisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

Participants' scores were summed and standardized for both satisfaction and activity. The physical pleasure, emotional satisfaction, and feelings and emotions about sex dimensions were derived from questions about the participants' "most recent sexual partner." As a result, women who did not have *any* past sexual partners (approximately 82 women, or 5.2% of the population) were excluded. The frequency of orgasm variable asked directly about women's orgasm history in the past 12 months; 222 women (or 12.9%) were excluded from the analysis because they had no sexual partners in the past 12 months,<sup>6</sup> reducing our sample to 1,473 women.

For the reported physical pleasure variable, participants were asked, "How physically pleasurable did you find your relationship with your partner to be?" Participants rated their responses on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all pleasurable) to 5 (extremely pleasurable).

For the reported emotional satisfaction variable, participants were asked, "How emotionally satisfying did you find your relationship with your partner to be?" Participants rated their responses on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all satisfying) to 5 (extremely satisfying).

For the feelings and emotions about sex variable, participants were asked, "I would like to ask you how sex with your partner

made you feel. Please tell me if sex with your partner made you feel: satisfied, sad, loved, anxious or worried, wanted or needed, taken care of, scared or afraid, thrilled or excited, guilty." For each of these nine items, participants answered "yes" or "no." "Yes" responses on positive items received 1 point each (e.g., "yes" on "taken care of" would be coded as a "1"). The negative items were reverse coded (e.g., "no" on "scared" would be coded as a "1"), so that participants received one total score for all positive emotions about sex. Cumulative scores ranged from 0 (all negative feelings and no positive feelings) to 9 (all positive feelings and no negative feelings).

For the frequency of orgasm variable, participants were asked, "When you and your partner had sex during the past 12 months, did you always, usually, sometimes, rarely, or never have an orgasm, that is come or come to climax?" Participants rated their responses on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 5 (always).

For the frequency of sex component, participants were asked a single question: "About how often did you have sex during the past 12 months?" Participants rated their answers on an 8-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 7 (four times or more per week).

For the sexual variety dimension, participants were asked to report whether they had *ever* engaged in nine sexual behaviors (e.g., anal sex, group sex, etc.). Participants responded "yes" or "no" to each question. These answers were then summed, and participants were placed on a 10-point scale ranging from 0 (no sexual behaviors) to 9 (all sexual behaviors).

After creating scores for sexual satisfaction and sexual activity, we first performed a principal component analysis on the six dependent measures to determine whether sexual satisfaction and sexual activity would explain a large proportion of the variation between the participants. We predicted that the four sexual satisfaction variables would be highly correlated with each other, and that the two sexual variety variables would be inversely correlated with each other. Our analysis found that sexual satisfaction and sexual activity explained 49.32% of the variation between participants on the six dependent variables. The sexual satisfaction factor explained 34.54% of variance, while the sexual variety factor explained 14.78% of the total variance.

Nine social identity variables were expected to predict different patterns of female sexual satisfaction and activity. These social identity categories included: marital status, education, socioeconomic class, age, sexual identity, racial/ethnic identity, geographical "coming of age" location, employment status, and whether participants had children.

Marital status was examined as a dichotomous variable by dividing women into two groups: Married = 1, and Single/Divorced/Widowed/Separated = 0.

When asked about level of education, participants rated their responses on a 9-point scale ranging from 0 (8th grade or less) to 8 (other advanced degree).

<sup>5</sup> Previous research has shown that frequency of orgasm is strongly correlated with sexual satisfaction (Edwards & Booth, 1994; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; McClelland, 2010; Philippsohn & Hartmann, 2009; Sprecher, 2002; Waite & Joyner, 2001; Young et al., 2000), though Laumann et al. (1994) and McClelland (2010) argued that orgasm should not be used as the sole measure of satisfaction. As Laumann et al. (1994) said, "One can usefully draw an analytic distinction between the two aspects of sexual satisfaction [physical and emotional pleasure], even as we recognize that the two are likely to be highly interdependent.... [I]f women do not expect orgasm to be a regular outcome of sexual activity, they are less likely to consider its absence of deprivation" (p. 118). While orgasm can be considered an "objective" measure of sexual response, it also may include a variety of subjective confounds as well (e.g., participant's wish to be considered normative, shame about faking orgasm, etc.). To enhance our measurement of these subjective dimensions, our feelings and emotions about sex variable inquired about participants' specific emotions about sex with their partner rather than solely measuring emotional satisfaction based on a single item. In total, we included Laumann et al.'s original two measures of sexual satisfaction (physical and emotional satisfaction) along with frequency of orgasm and feelings/emotions about sex in order to address recent debates in the field as well as maximally represent the different dimensions of sexual satisfaction available in the Laumann et al. dataset.

<sup>6</sup> Excluded women did not differ significantly from the women in the sample on many major demographic characteristics (e.g., racial identity, sexual identity, education), but did differ significantly on marital status (those with no partners were, of course, less likely to have married,  $p < .001$ ). The women excluded from the analysis who did not have a sexual partner within the past 12 months did not differ from the women in the sample on many major demographic characteristics except racial identity (those with no partners in the past year were more likely to be white,  $p < .05$ ), and marital status (those with no partners in the past year were less likely to be married,  $p < .001$ ).

To determine socioeconomic class, participants were asked, “What (is/was) your usual wage rate, before taxes at this [current] job?” Total family annual income was calculated and participants were scored on a scale ranging from lowest income to highest income. Income was measured on a 9-point scale ranging from 0 (\$0 per year) to 8 (over \$75,000 per year).

Race was measured through a dichotomous dummy variable. Participants were divided into two groups: those who identified as “White,” and, as a second group, those who identified as any other kind of racial or ethnic category, including Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native/Native American, Biracial, or Other.

Sexual identity was coded in a binary fashion, as participants were divided into two categories, heterosexual and sexual minority, based on their answers to three questions: “Are you attracted to other women?,” “Have you ever done anything sexual with another woman?” and “What is your sexual orientation?” Participants who answered “Yes” to either of the first two questions, and/or those who identified themselves as bisexual or homosexual were scored as “sexual minority” while those who answered “No” to both of the first questions *and* identified as heterosexual were scored as “sexual majority.” Though this does not necessarily mean that all of those within the sexual minority group self-identified as homosexual or bisexual, it nonetheless reveals openness toward same-sex sexual relationships.

To assess participants’ metropolitan backgrounds, they were asked about their geographical location at age 14. Responses were placed into two categories: those who lived “in a suburb near a large city” and “in a large city (over 250,000)” were deemed metropolitan, while other responses were considered non-metropolitan (e.g., “on a farm,” “in a small city or town (under 50,000),” and “in a medium-sized city (50,000–250,000).”

To trace employment status, participants’ work hours were divided into two groups: those who reported working full-time or part-time, and those who reported not working.

To determine whether participants were parents, participants were divided into two groups: those with children/those without children. Location of children (i.e., whether children resided in the home) was not considered.

## Procedure

Using sexual satisfaction and sexual activity, we performed a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward’s method to divide participants into four clusters based on their values on the two dependent variables. To account for the appropriate weights of each individual variable within the dependent variables, factor scores (based on the regression model) were used to perform this hierarchical cluster analysis. This analysis divided participants into four clusters based on their values for sexual

satisfaction and sexual activity.<sup>7</sup> Cluster analysis assigns each participant to a particular cluster of participants who share similar responses on the dependent variables (e.g., participant #1 would be assigned to the cluster of women with high satisfaction and low activity). This technique highlighted the social identities most common to each cluster, as it compared the qualities of women who belonged to the separate clusters. Ward’s method of cluster analysis is a type of cluster analysis that is especially efficient at maximizing between-group differences by using analysis of variance (ANOVA) techniques.

For our analysis, participants’ overall *z*-scores (factor scores) assigned them to a particular cluster using Ward’s method. This analysis produced four distinct clusters based on the initial Ward calculations (i.e., high satisfaction/high activity; low satisfaction/high activity; high satisfaction/low activity; and low satisfaction/low activity).

After establishing the four clusters, we then compared the clusters using ANOVA, multiple pairwise comparisons, and  $\chi^2$  tests for our specified independent variables. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was not emphasized for these analyses because MANOVA can only be used for continuous variables and therefore cannot be applied to dichotomous or categorical variables, and because MANOVA assumes a single underlying dimension in the data and therefore does not accurately reflect the complexities that can be illuminated in univariate analyses. Instead of using MANOVA on the continuous variables, we chose to conduct one-way ANOVA tests on these variables in order to more fully explore the range of results. For each ANOVA, we performed six pairwise comparisons, using the Bonferroni correction to prevent inflation of Type 1 errors.<sup>8</sup> As such, this analysis did not single out specific independent variables as singularly predictive of either dependent variable (satisfaction or activity). The distinctiveness of each cluster emerged from a combination of variables derived from multiple one-way ANOVAs, pairwise comparisons, and  $\chi^2$  tests.

## Results

Participants in this study varied widely in terms of all major demographic categories (see Table 1 for complete description). Notably, 60.4% of participants were married, 20.9% graduated from college (5.7% had an advanced degree), 27.8% had a total household income of \$50,000 or above, 91.8% identified with an organized religion (with 44.3% attending at least 2–3 times per month), 77.7% were white, 96.8% identified as heterosexual, 29.9% lived in large cities or suburbs at

<sup>7</sup> The primary goal of cluster analysis was to derive a small set of clusters of observations, such that between-cluster differences were maximized, and within-cluster differences were minimized.

<sup>8</sup> Though not a central part of these analyses, MANOVA results for Table 1 showed a significance of  $p < .001$ .

**Table 1** Social identity variables: estimated means and ANOVA results

Variable	HS-HA M (SD)	LS-HA M (SD)	HS-LA M (SD)	LS-LA M (SD)	F-test
Education	2.37 (1.04) <sup>a</sup>	2.35 (1.01) <sup>a</sup>	2.70 (1.05) <sup>b</sup>	3.05 (.99) <sup>c</sup>	$F(1, 12) = 76.87^{***}$
Class	4.92 (2.14) <sup>b</sup>	4.05 (2.36) <sup>a</sup>	5.29 (2.10) <sup>b</sup>	5.11 (2.36) <sup>b</sup>	$F(3, 1238) = 11.11^{***}$
Age	38.84 (11.16) <sup>b</sup>	33.66 (11.75) <sup>a</sup>	35.65 (10.03) <sup>a</sup>	35.14 (10.16) <sup>a</sup>	$F(3, 1468) = 8.88^{***}$

All variables, with the exception of age, are reported on a five-point scale, with 1 representing lower scores on that variable, while 5 represents higher scores

HS-HA high satisfaction, high activity, LS-HA low satisfaction, high activity, HS-LA high satisfaction low activity, LS-LA low satisfaction, low activity

<sup>a,b,c</sup> Superscript numbers indicate clusters that are similar in terms of the reported means. For each row, numbers with different letters were significantly different

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

age 14, 63.4% reported working on a regular basis, and 72.9% had at least one child.

Four clusters from the dependent variables were generated from the cluster analysis in order to allow us to look specifically at the relationship between social identity categories and the intersections between sexual activity and sexual satisfaction. The high satisfaction/high activity cluster had 16.1% (237 participants). The low satisfaction/high activity cluster had 8.7% (128 participants). The high satisfaction/low activity cluster had 59.0% (869 participants). Finally, the low satisfaction/low activity cluster had 16.2% (239 participants). This suggests that the majority of women (59.0% and 8.7%) reported a mismatch between their sexual satisfaction and their sexual activity, and that this latter group (low satisfaction/high activity) was, importantly, engaging in frequent sexual activity without satisfaction. Alternatively, these findings suggest that 32.3% of women reported a match between satisfaction and activity (16.1% and 16.2%). However, the vast majority of women (67.7%) were mismatched on dimensions of sexual satisfaction and sexual activity.

All social identity variables reached significance ( $p < .001$ ). Table 1 shows the results of the one-way ANOVAs comparing the derived clusters in terms of means on the continuous social identity variables of interest. Differences worth noting are marked with superscript numbers to indicate which clusters were significantly different from the other clusters. For example, the education variable yielded three statistically distinct groups, with high satisfaction/high activity women and low satisfaction/high activity women representing one group (means of 2.35 and 2.50), while high satisfaction/low activity women represented a second distinct group (mean of 2.70), and low satisfaction/low activity women represented a third distinct group (mean of 3.05). This is meant to indicate not only that a significant difference exists between the clusters, but to also point out which particular clusters differ from each other. For example, in the social class variable, the distinctive group was only low

satisfaction and high activity (mean of 4.05 compared to means of 5.12 and 4.92). Statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) were found for all of these variables, including education, socioeconomic class, and age. In making sense of these findings, women with low satisfaction/high activity tended to be less educated, had lower socioeconomic status, and were younger than high satisfaction/low activity women.

Table 2 shows the results of the  $\chi^2$  tests comparing the derived clusters in terms of means on the categorical social identity variables of interest. Statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) were found for many of these variables, including marital status (and specific variation within the category of “single” on the marital status variable, such as single, divorced, widowed, or separated), racial/ethnic identity, sexual identification, geographical location, and children. Statistical trends ( $p < .10$ ) were noted for employment status. Most notably, women with low satisfaction/high activity, when compared with high satisfaction/low activity women, tended to be unmarried or divorced, more urban, and less of them worked or had children. Additionally, women with lower levels of satisfaction and activity included white women, women who worked full-time, and those who resided in larger metropolitan areas.

As predicted, a substantial number of women reported that sexual satisfaction and sexual activity were not aligned. Moreover, these incongruencies related closely to women’s social identities. Most notably, lower status women clustered most heavily in the low satisfaction/high activity cluster, though they were also represented in the low satisfaction/low activity cluster. Higher status women clustered most heavily in the high satisfaction/low activity cluster, though they also appeared in the high satisfaction/high activity cluster. In particular, the assortment of features that predicted low satisfaction/high activity—or engaging in sex despite not enjoying it—included women who were unmarried, less educated, working-class, younger, non-white, unemployed, and did not have children.

**Table 2** Social identity variables:  $\chi^2$  results

Variable	HS-HA (%)	LS-HA (%)	HS-LA (%)	LS-LA (%)	$\chi^2$
Marital status					
Married	77.4	39.4	73.1	48.3	109.83***
Never married	13.0	35.5	16.3	30.5	119.40***
Divorced	6.1	16.3	6.6	13.9	
Widowed	2.2	1.1	1.4	1.3	
Separated	1.3	8.7	2.6	6.0	
Race					
White	69.0	60.6	82.2	84.7	50.02***
Heterosexual	100	100	99.0	84.6	144.21***
Metropolitan	29.8	28.3	26.4	37.1	25.11**
Occupation					
Work	57.5	62.1	64.7	69.3	7.64*
Children	83.3	69.7	78.0	62.8	34.12***

HS-HA high satisfaction, high activity, LS-HA low satisfaction, high activity, HS-LA high satisfaction low activity, LS-LA low satisfaction, low activity

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

## Discussion

When addressing our dependent variables, the most central finding was that sexual satisfaction and sexual activity were more often not aligned, highlighting how women's social location related to sexual satisfaction and sexual activity. The finding that low status groups clustered in the low satisfaction/high activity cluster (8.2%) suggests that low social status predicts frequent, less satisfying sex rather than no sex at all. This suggests that many women may have felt pressured or coerced into sex on a regular basis despite lack of sexual desire. Perhaps this group prioritized their partners' satisfaction over their own (Nicolson & Burr, 2003). Conversely, the low satisfaction/low activity cluster (16.2%) engaged in low frequency of sex while also not feeling very satisfied. This suggests that far more women—nearly twice the amount—disengage from sex when not feeling satisfied. Also, women may choose not to couple or their partners might have lower sexual desire so they have sex less often together.

Our explanatory analysis also highlighted some other insights. When considering issues of social status as it relates to satisfaction and activity, the data worked as predicted. Low status women engaged in frequent, less satisfying sex more than high status women. Compared to the other low satisfaction cluster, which included a diverse mix of low status groups (e.g., unmarried, more likely homosexual or bisexual) and high status groups (e.g., highly educated, upper-class, mostly white, primarily urban), the low satisfaction/high activity group included the most low status groups.

When examining the reasons for this divide, several possibilities come to light. Perhaps low status women lack knowledge or education about sexuality, subscribe to more traditional gender roles, or inhibit sexual satisfaction. These results could reflect qualities about low status women's partners, particularly attitudes toward sexuality and gender, as well as sexual histories (e.g., younger men generally have less sexual experience). Also, because women typically couple with partners of the same age,

social class, and racial backgrounds, possibly their partners have internalized the hyper-aggressive and domineering aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Pyke, 1996). These results may also reveal power imbalances in couples and the larger society, as women (particularly low status women) have less social power than men. As The New View group has argued (Kleinplatz, 2001; Tiefer, 2001), occupying lower social status in the public realm can blend into matters of sexual satisfaction in their personal lives (e.g., pay inequities, working long hours), as these factors can hinder the conditions that make sex enjoyable. Lower status women may lack resources to escape sexually unsatisfying relationships, particularly in terms of financial, legal, and familial constraints. Disadvantaged women may be resigned or accustomed to engaging in sexual activities they do not enjoy.

Lower status women may face structural inequalities, but they may also have a strong desire to please their (male) partners, face internal pressures to perform sexually, feel like sex is something one *should* do, do not expect to be satisfied from sex, are undereducated about how to derive sexual satisfaction from partnered sex, and feel the need to support the male partner's pleasure or sexual needs. Low satisfaction/high activity women may have sex more often with cohabitating boyfriends and one-night stands, which could potentially yield lower satisfaction scores. Other research could examine why the high satisfaction/low activity cluster tends to include high status groups. Perhaps these women do not have frequent access to a partner, are more okay with infrequent sexual encounters, or have learned how to maximize their opportunities for sex by prioritizing their satisfaction. Further, given that the most educated women reported low satisfaction and low activity more often, this could reflect time constraints, an ability of educated women (and all women with more power) to refuse unwanted sex, or lack of eroticizing educated or "successful" women compared with more traditional women.

Women in the high satisfaction/high activity cluster, relative to other clusters, had a notable assortment of features that predicted dependent relationships with a male part-



ner<sup>9</sup>: married or widowed, less educated, older in age, heterosexual, did not work outside the home, and had children. Economically-speaking, these women may have less ability to assert autonomy and power in their relationships due to educational and income factors. Also, married women more often engaged in frequent sexual activity than unmarried women, as consistently available partners predicts sexual activity (though unmarried cohabiters were not distinguished in our analysis). Their older age may predict traditional views of gender, though these findings bode well for the association between age and satisfaction. That said, older cohorts of women in 1992 came of age before the second wave of feminism, so they may have lower expectations for “good lovers” compared to younger women. Frequent, satisfying sex is something expected from them in their roles as traditional wives, and they seem willing and able to fulfill these roles.

Issues of self-reporting must be considered when examining women’s ideas about their sexuality. Research has shown that both men (in their perceptions of) and women (in their reported experience of) over-report frequency of female orgasm (Laumann et al., 1994). Pressure to orgasm is particularly strong in relationships characterized by traditional gender roles. Laumann et al. also noted that, though they made concerted efforts to maximize accurate self-reporting, many people over- or under-reported certain aspects of their sexuality, due to emotional factors (shame, guilt, embarrassment, pride), social factors (pressure to seem “normal,” religious or familial norms, gender roles), and other factors.

Several features of these results, however, make sense when considering them at face value. For example, those who have very narrowly defined social roles (high satisfaction/high activity women) reported high satisfaction and high activity, as they can successfully fulfill these social roles. Those women who worked *and* had children—women taxed for their time and likely more exhausted—clustered most often in the high satisfaction/low activity. This does not, however, necessarily indicate dissatisfaction with their sexual relationships (Ahlborg et al., 2005). Longitudinal data would better reveal whether women change clusters over time depending on their children’s age or the changing demands of their career. Logically, the majority of women (59.0%) would cluster in high satisfaction/low activity, given prominent social trends to pursue the dual roles of career and motherhood. Also, celibacy or low sexual frequency may be *positive* for women, particularly when over-taxed with other responsibilities.

### Limitations and Future Directions

This study was limited by the fact that these data were collected in 1992; sexual norms may have changed significantly since

<sup>9</sup> High satisfaction/high activity women were actually 100% heterosexual, so we can refer to all of their partners as men.

then. This dataset, however, was the only nationally-representative probability sample of its kind that sufficiently addressed issues of desire, satisfaction, orgasm, and pleasure across all populations in the United States, making it generalizable to all populations of women. In addition, because this study utilized secondary data analysis, this prevented the addition of other questions about women’s sexual experiences. Also, the very low number of participants who identified themselves as lesbian or bisexual (less than 2%) represented a serious limitation, as diversity in sexual identity could not be adequately addressed. These numbers may not accurately reflect women’s lived experiences with same-sex eroticism, particularly as these norms evolve (e.g., high rates of women performing as bisexual at parties to feel socially normative—see Fahs, 2009). Other measurement limitations affected our findings as well, in that most satisfaction questions failed to address women’s entire sexual biography throughout their lifetime. Also, our measures of activity may conflate variety and frequency even though these may represent different behaviors. Likewise, our measure of social class focused on family income, which may have disguised women’s stay-at-home status or changing occupational roles. Also, a dichotomous racial identity variable does not fully explore differences and nuances between women of color in this sample (e.g., Latina, Asian-American, Native-American, African-American, biracial, etc.).

This study suggests that conceptualizing satisfaction and activity as possibly different dimensions of women’s sexual experience helps better illuminate the relationship between social identity, sexual satisfaction, and sexual activity. It suggests that many women (upwards of 65%) had divergent satisfaction and activity, contrary to the portrayal of female sexuality in most sexual health and popular literatures. The specific group of women with low satisfaction and high activity provided a framework for questioning the coupling of satisfaction and activity by suggesting that low status women engage in less satisfying, frequent sex. Certain questions arise: Why do women with less social power experience less sexual satisfaction? Moreover, why would some continue to engage in frequent bouts of less satisfying sex? On the other hand, the high satisfaction/low activity finding suggests that many women feel satisfied by having infrequent sexual activity, which may call into question the common clinical constructions of more sex = more satisfaction (Tiefer, 2001).

This study might also inspire a new round of multivariate relationships, as researchers could better explore the inter-correlations among race, education, income, and marital status. Also, future research could examine how these findings translate for men. Some of the basic questions could include: Does a gender gap exist in levels of sexual satisfaction? Do men experience a similar degree of mismatch on sexual satisfaction and sexual activity? How would education correlate with sexual satisfaction for men, given different values placed upon monetary success and upward mobility for men? Would

lower status men be overrepresented in the low satisfaction/high activity cluster? Given research on the value men place on sexual frequency (McNulty & Fisher, 2008), would men show similar results to women?

Future research could examine the implications of these findings for the clinical literatures and the sex therapy literatures. If infrequent sexual activity often correlates with high sexual satisfaction, this nuances the claim that over 40% of women are “sexually dysfunctional” (Shifren, Monz, Russo, Segreti, & Johannes, 2008) by suggesting that, despite low desire or other “dysfunctions,” women may not be particularly bothered by those issues. Research should ask women what they want to change about their sexuality, or what would improve satisfaction; too much research focuses exclusively on frequencies of behavior instead of subjective accounts of women’s sexuality.

Of central importance to sex research is the examination of the interplay among social identities, political beliefs, sexual satisfaction, sexual behavior, and sexual ideologies. How can we make sexual relationships more egalitarian, not only between genders, but also between races, classes, ages, and sexual identities? The framing of sexuality as a social justice issue needs more attention, not only within the field of sex research but also within psychological, sociological, and political science fields in general. Longitudinal research that addresses evolving and changing social norms could illuminate the ways in which social norms shift throughout time, particularly for different identity groups. Additional research on women’s sexual partners and perception gaps between couples could also prove useful in exploring the relationship between satisfaction and activity. Finally, further research about the ways that women’s sexuality interacts with social norms and ideologies—including gender beliefs, openness to alternative lifestyles, fluidity of sexual identity, and political beliefs about pornography, abortion, homosexuality, and feminism—could more fully situate sexual satisfaction and sexual activity in their sociopolitical contexts.

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