



# Reciprocity, Partner Pressure, and Emotional Labor: Women Discuss Negotiations Around Oral and Anal Sex

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## Abstract

Tensions between emotional labor, agency, entitlement, and coercion all underlie women's ability or inability to negotiate, consent to, and refuse oral and anal sex. In this study, we analyzed semi-structured interviews with twenty women from a diverse 2014 community sample collected in a large Southwestern U.S. city in order to examine the context around women's negotiations of oral and anal sex, particularly how, when, why, and with whom they engage in, and refuse, such activities. There were three themes in how women negotiated oral and anal sex with their partner(s): (1) not expecting sexual reciprocity; (2) partner pressure; and (3) emotional labor. Implications for how women negotiate sex, and what meanings they bring to these negotiations, are explored. Women's beliefs about (men's) sexual entitlement and cultural expectations for non-vaginal sex further complicate women's negotiations of oral and anal sex as well as their ability to enthusiastically consent to such activities. Clinical practice implications and the importance of clinicians both broadening definitions of sex and openly discussing women's entitlement to refuse sex are discussed.

**Keywords** Women's sexuality · Sexual negotiation · Reciprocity · Unwanted sex · Oral sex · Anal sex · Sexual health · Gender roles · Emotional labor · Rape Culture

## Introduction

Feminist understandings of power, sexual coercion, and consent point to the necessity for understanding the larger social scripts within which women negotiate their sexual lives. If traditional women's social roles demand that they please (male)

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partners, act as sexually giving, deny or minimize their own sexual needs or wants, or mold their desires to fit their partners' fantasies (Elliott and Umberson 2008; Muelenhard and Shippee 2010; Vannier and O'Sullivan 2012), how can we meaningfully understand women's "yes" or "no" to sexual acts when sexual acquiescence is often expected? A major question emerges when examining today's sexual culture of "consent" and negotiation: How, and in what ways, can women refuse or negotiate sex today? These questions are significant because they inquire about the ways that women have internalized (or not) their ability to negotiate or refuse sex in a context in which sexual agency is often stripped from women.

In this study, we utilized feminist perspectives on sexual negotiation as connected to women's narratives of having/doing oral and anal sex by examining qualitative narratives from semi-structured interviews with twenty women in the Southwestern region of the United States. By focusing on oral and anal sex instead of vaginal intercourse—as oral sex is often constructed as women's "job" (Fields 2008) while anal sex is increasingly commonplace as an expectation for women to engage in regardless of whether they enjoy it—we explored an understudied area of women's sexual negotiations that have a different set of "cultural baggage" attached to them. Different sexual acts often have different social meanings, as oral sex is often labeled as not "real sex", while anal sex is often ignored and hidden within sex education curricula. Specifically, in this study we looked at how, and in what contexts, women refuse oral and anal sex with men, and how this connects to gender, power, and agency. Conversations with women illuminated three themes in their experiences of oral and anal sex that showcase the powerful complexities of refusing and negotiating oral and anal sex, particularly within a culture that rarely acknowledges women's right to say no to sex outside of conservative discourses of purity and chastity.

## Literature Review

### Framing the Context for Sexual Negotiations

Women's ability to say no to sex—and to have a receptive audience that listens to women's "no" statements—is compromised by living in a context in which women's social roles dictate that they should or *must* say "yes" to sex. Women's access to sexual power is compromised by stories—communicated in mainstream media, family, religious institutions, and by gender relations—that strip women of sexual agency; that said, women negotiate their sexual experiences in complicated ways that highlights both their agency and their lack of agency along a continuum. Cultural norms of sexual access to women's bodies (Hill and Fischer 2001; Lewin 1985), where women's bodies are assumed to be available to men, impacts women's ability to internally evaluate or negotiate their sexual desires and wants. Similarly, women's silences about their own sexual desires (McGowan 2009) and the acceptance of sexual double standards for men and women (Kennett et al. 2013)—where women are "pure" and "chaste" and men are "players" and "promiscuous"—impacts how sex is seen or negotiated.

Beyond this, the general expectation for women to be passive before, during, and after sex (Kiefer and Sanchez 2007), which complicates how they can assert agency, makes it difficult to assess women's actual sexual desire. The story is further complicated by cultural beliefs that good wives and girlfriends say "yes to sex" (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008), which coincide with men's entitlement to sex (Martin et al. 2007) and men's willingness to encourage women to have unwanted sex in order to keep men happy (Kim et al. 2018), leaving women with clear cues about how they can (or should) imagine their own sexuality. Finally, lack of attention to women's positive and desirous sexual experiences (Fahs 2011; Wood et al. 2006) also greatly impacts women's sexual negotiations, as frameworks for sexuality emphasize negative or problematic aspects of sex rather than positive ones. Meaningful negotiations of sex—both the "no" and the "yes"—can only exist in contexts where the possibility of enthusiastic consent is encouraged and supported, as feminist scholars like Friedman and Valenti (2008) have argued.

### **Sexual Negotiation and Acquiescence**

Feminist theories of sexual agency have become more prominent in recent years, particularly in response to how conservative and religious campaigns to control young women's sexuality and delay first intercourse have contrasted with feminist efforts to encourage sexual freedom and flexibility (Friedman and Valenti 2008). This complicates the picture of why women often feel unable or unwilling to refuse unwanted sex (Frith, 1997). Theories about women's sexual refusal also differ greatly, with some emphasizing that women do not say "no" clearly enough (miscommunication theory), while others emphasize that women are reluctant to say "no" because they are protecting their male partner from feelings of rejection (emotion work theory) or that women respond to cultural expectations that women should refuse sex while men should want sex (sexual script theory) (Frith 1997). Evidence suggests that miscommunication rarely underlies sexual exchanges, and that ambivalence and coercion more often informed how and when women negotiated discrepancies in sexual desire (Beres et al. 2014). Further, *both* men and women could easily detect non-verbal cues about sexual refusal (Kitzinger and Frith 1999; O'Byrne et al. 2006). In part, women's feelings about negotiation may stem from their social scripts around emotion work and emotional labor, as they sometimes imagine they should tolerate sexual pain, fake orgasms, or minimize their own needs in the service of their sexual partners (Fahs and Swank 2016).

Recent literature on sexual negotiations has challenged the conceptualization of "just say no" by emphasizing that women's sexual refusals are often produced in contexts that value other ways of refusing aside from flatly saying "no"; for example, silences, compliments, redirecting male sexual attention to a non-sexual topic, or even weak acceptance may signal refusals or acquiescence to unwanted, undesired sex (Kitzinger and Frith 1999), though open communication and directness more effectively stopped men's sexual advances (Muehlenhard et al. 1996). Sexual rejections often follow a set of language rules that lessen the pain, disappointment, and shame to the sexual partner caused by women's refusal. Directly saying no to sex can

be seen as rude, callous, and demeaning; researchers have shown that women often use words that soften or justify the refusal (e.g., delayed acceptance, being unable to have sex, feeling sick, etc.) (Kitzinger and Frith 1999). Discourses of politeness encourage women to state their refusals indirectly or using modal expressions like “can”, “may”, “could”, and “should” rather than directly saying “no” (Johnson 2008). The romanticization of rape may also play a role in how women can and do say no to sex, as women’s expressions of sexual refusal may be seen by men as feigned or as a token resistance to sex that is hoped to be wanted (Hall and Canterbury 2011; Philadelphoff-Puren 2004), particularly in the United States (DeSouza and Hutz 1996). Sexual assertiveness training and rape prevention programs (largely starting in the 1970s) have emphasized that and that gender roles that emphasize women’s passivity and the prioritization of male sexual needs leads to women acquiescing to sex they do not want (Murnen et al. 1989). That said, sexual script theory suggests that women have difficulty “saying no” *not* because of individual interaction styles but because of the culture that prioritizes men’s sexual needs and desires (Conroy et al. 2015; Frith and Kitzinger 2001).

Literature on sexual compliance and sexual acquiescence—where women succumb to unwanted sex because they feel they must (either from a partner or from societal expectations)—further complicates notions of sexual negotiations (Basile 1999; Conroy et al. 2015; Vannier and O’Sullivan 2012). Unwanted sex within marriages, for example, has consistently appeared in women’s accounts of their sexual lives (Elliott and Umberson 2008; Johnson and Sigler 1997; Martin et al. 2007). Traditional heterosexual marriages have also at times undermined women’s sexual agency, as women were more likely to have unwanted sex with male partners when they believed that wives should defer to their husbands (Katz et al. 2010), when they believed husbands would leave them if they did not agree to unwanted sex (Basile 1999), or when they had an authoritarian relationship in which the man makes most of the decisions as a kind of social coercion that encourages sexual acquiescence (Conroy et al. 2015). Fear of physical violence or losing a partner’s affection also led many women to submit to male partner’s sexual demands (Basile 1999; DeMaris 1997; Kaestle 2009; Morgan et al. 2006).

### **Emotional Labor and “Emotion Work”**

The concept of emotional labor, first introduced by Hochschild (1983), emphasizes that women workers often display friendly, deferential, and positive outlooks that affirm, enhance, or celebrate the well-being of others while suppressing their own emotional experiences (Hochschild 1983). This labor emphasizes the needs of others and occurs not only in the workplace (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002) but also within sexual and emotional relationships between people (Elliott and Umberson 2008). For example, many gendered scripts of sexuality demand that women direct attention away from their own needs and instead prioritize their partner’s needs, resulting in a variety of problematic symptoms of gender inequality such as: faking orgasm (Fahs 2014; Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010; Wiederman 1997), sexual compliance (Kaestle 2009), putting partners’ needs above one’s own needs

(Erickson 2005), sexual extortion and violence (DeMaris 1997), tolerating sexual pain (Elmerstig et al. 2008), and the prioritization of their partner's pleasure over their own (Nicholson and Burr 2003). Thus, emotion work is rooted in gendered inequalities that require women to value men's needs over women's needs.

Emotion work during sexual relationships can take many forms as women's ability to express their sexual needs and manage their partner's feelings and sexual needs complicates women's sense of refusing and consenting to certain sexual acts. Women often felt distrust, anger, and fear about talking to partners about their sexual needs and wants (Faulkner and Lannutti 2010), particularly when they perceived that their partners wanted to engage in sexual acts that women did not want to do (Fahs 2011). Elliott and Umberson (2008) described this as "emotion work" within marriages as women perform a desire to have sex even if they do not actually want to have sex. Women perform emotion work around a variety of sexual events including not labeling coercion as rape, performing as satisfied, and engaging in "performative bisexuality" (Fahs 2011), just as they also learned to accept a lack of orgasm reciprocity during sex (Braun et al. 2003) and to base their sexual satisfaction on their partner's approval (McClelland 2011; Sanchez et al. 2005). Ultimately, emotion work around sexuality can undermine women's and girls' sense of pleasure, autonomy, and satisfaction while also impacting how women directly or indirectly refuse or acquiesce to sexual pressure from partners (Fahs and Swank 2016; Tolman 2009).

## Oral Sex

The literature on oral sex has important implications for how women imagine their ability to refuse or consent to sexual acts, particularly in light of the pervasive inequities that exist for women and girls who perform and receive oral sex. Sexual scripts and the expectations for women to engage in emotional labor clearly influence women's negotiations of oral sex. Studies consistently show that heterosexual women *gave* oral sex more than they *received* oral sex (Chambers 2007), and women felt overwhelmingly responsible to give oral sex to men even while not receiving it or feeling deserving of it (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). Oral sex was also constructed as less significant and meaningful than vaginal intercourse (Vannier and Byers 2013), with only 20% of men and women believing that oral sex "counted" as sex (Hans et al. 2010) and 30% of youth believing they were still virgins if they had oral sex (Bersamin et al. 2007). The denial of oral sex as "real sex" has increased; a cross sectional study found that fewer young women labeled oral sex as "sex" in 2007 compared to 1991 (Hans et al. 2010).

Differences between cunnilingus and fellatio also appeared throughout the literature, as U.S. college student women reported that they expected cunnilingus in relationship but not in casual "hookups" and that they had to be assertive to get it (Backstrom et al. 2012). One study found that cunnilingus was rare unless reciprocated with fellatio and that, for heterosexuals, cunnilingus rarely occurred during interactions without vaginal intercourse (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2012). Women described oral sex as less intimate, less symbolic of love and commitment, and less

mutual than vaginal intercourse (Vannier and Byers 2013), while girls saw fellatio as a symbol of achievement rather than pleasure or choice (Burns et al. 2011). Expectations that women *should* perform fellatio, on the other hand, were internalized as “normal” (Chambers 2007; Fava and Bay-Cheng 2012).

Some important differences have emerged with regard to which women received and gave oral sex more often. Those in committed relationships felt more comfort engaging in oral sex (Chambers 2007) and received it more often than those not in relationships (Backstrom et al. 2012). Women who received oral sex felt more agentic, assertive, skillful, and gratified than those who did not receive oral sex (Fava and Bay-Cheng 2012). Similarly, young women’s sexual assertiveness was linked to having more lifetime cunnilingus partners and more cunnilingus experiences in the past 3 months (Bay-Cheng and Fava 2011). Younger women and those who did not feel love for their partner reported more negative emotions about receiving oral sex (Malacad and Hess 2010), just as women engaged in fellatio for emotional and insecurity motives while men engaged in cunnilingus for the purposes of physical pleasure (Vannier and O’Sullivan 2012). Ultimately, oral sex narratives show the complicated terrain around deservingness, entitlement, and emotional/emotional labor for women, as women often did not (or could not) refuse giving oral sex and ask for cunnilingus.

## Anal Sex

The limited literature on women’s experiences having anal sex with men also highlights the complicated stories about negotiations, agency, and power. Women’s experience, technical understanding of anal sex (e.g., using lube), and desire to have anal sex all influenced their feelings about having anal sex (Fahs and Gonzalez 2014). A longitudinal study of seven national random data sets found that heterosexual anal sex frequency increased from 1993 to 2008 (Petersen and Hyde 2010); another meta-analysis found similar results (Owen et al. 2015). In terms of frequency, most studies suggest that between 20 and 35% of women have engaged in anal sex, though the range has been reported to be as wide as 1% up to 42% (Mosher et al. 2005; Herbenick et al. 2010; Laumann et al. 1994). Frequent depictions of heterosexual anal sex in pornography, often without condoms, has been theorized as one primary influence for this change in behavior over time (Bridges et al. 2010; Weinberg et al. 2010).

Strong gender differences have emerged in feelings about heterosexual anal sex. Though heterosexual men and women engaged in anal sex at similar rates, heterosexual men fantasized far more often about having anal sex than did women (Halperin 1999; Hsu et al. 1994) while heterosexual women were seven times more likely than heterosexual men to have unprotected anal sex (Halperin 1999; Hsu et al. 1994). Further, women reported less pleasure overall from anal sex compared to men (Pinkerton et al. 2003), and had more pain during receptive anal sex compared to gay men (Rosser et al. 1998; Štulhofer and Ajduković 2011). One study found that 48% of women had to discontinue anal sex because of pain while only 12% of gay men reported doing so; 8.7% of women reported severe pain during every

instance of anal sex, while the majority of women reported not using enough lube during anal sex (Rosser et al. 1998). Heterosexual anal sex often prioritizes male sexual needs, as women have anal sex more often when their male partner decides what “good sex” is (Billy et al. 2009) or when they have male partners pressure them into anal sex (Fahs and Gonzalez 2014). Women were also four times more likely than men to report engaging in anal sex even if they frankly disliked it (Kaestle 2009). This suggests that sexual negotiations may be complicated by the amount of empathy, preparation, desire, and entitlement that men and women experienced prior to, and during, anal sex.

## Research Questions

The literature on sexual negotiations and refusals has presented a complicated picture of the cultural contexts in which women can say yes or no to sex, and in which they imagine sexual possibilities. Given that the literature differs about how to understand and measure women’s sexual agency and assertiveness, and the conditions in which they can refuse sex, questions arise about the conditions of sexual consent for women. Further, given that women often engage in emotional work and emotional labor, and because oral and anal sex have often been overshadowed by studies of penetrative vaginal intercourse, understanding sexual negotiations around oral and anal sex has paramount importance for understanding more about gender and power in women’s sexual lives.

Thus, given how little is known about women’s subjective narratives about women’s negotiations of oral and anal sex in particular, in this study we began with one key research question to guide its analysis: What do women’s narratives about oral and anal sex reveal about women’s experiences with emotional labor and sexual negotiation?

## Method

In this study, we utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women (mean age = 35.35, SD = 12.01, age range 18–59) recruited in 2014 in a large metropolitan Southwestern U.S. city. Participants were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings that reached wide audiences and was distributed free to the community as well as the volunteers section of the local online section of Craigslist. Craigslist is a site that is especially well-suited for finding people from stigmatized populations, see Worthen 2014. The advertisements asked for women ages 18–59 to participate in an interview study about their sexual behaviors, practices, and attitudes. As this study is part of a larger study on sexuality, participants were selected only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age. A purposive maximum variation sample (Patton 2005) was selected to provide greater demographic diversity in the sample: sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were intentionally oversampled and a diverse range of ages was represented (35% ages 18–31; 40% ages 32–45; and 25% ages 46–59).

The heterogeneous sample included 60% white women and 40% women of color, including two African–American women, four Mexican–American women, and two Asian–American women. The ad specifically said that women of color and sexual minority women were “especially encouraged to apply” and the researchers selected participants so that at least one-third of the sample were women of color and sexual minority women. For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 60% heterosexual women 20% bisexual women, and 20% lesbian women (though behavior and identity sometimes did not overlap). All of the women were included in the study as all women had had oral sex experiences with men, and 90% had had anal sex experiences with men. No participants were excluded. All participants consented to have their interviews audiotaped and transcribed and all received USD \$20.00 compensation. Identifying data were removed and each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Participants in the study discussed a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, employment histories, and parental and relationship statuses.

The questions featured in this study were part of this larger study of women’s sexuality. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 1.5–2 h, where they responded to 32 questions about their sexual histories, sexual practices, and feelings and attitudes about their sexuality and their body. For the purposes of this analysis, women were asked two questions: “Can you tell me about your experiences with oral sex?”; and “Can you tell me about your experiences with anal sex?” These questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about related topics, as follow-up questions, clarifications, and probes were free-flowing and conversational.

In this study, we looked at women’s experiences with agency, power, and negotiating oral and anal sex rather than looking at women’s general experiences with these activities. Also note that, while the study included sexual minority women, in this study we focused on women’s descriptions of oral and anal sex with men (previous or current partners); all of the women who identified as sexual minorities (lesbian and bisexual) had had at least one experience with men in the past (and these data reflect their experiences only with men).

We both served as readers and coders of this data. We discussed a broad coding scheme before each of us independently made an early list of tentative themes and appropriate quotes. After we both finished this initial task, we met again and looked for similarities between our early codes. We agreed on most of these initial codings, and in the one instance that we did not, we resolved that discrepancy by coming to an agreement after rereading the transcripts. Once these initial codes were generated, both of us reread the transcripts to see if each coded the same passages in the same way (similar to the recommendations of Campbell et al. 2013).

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis that draws from feminist theory and gender theory (Braun and Clarke 2006). This type of analysis allowed for groupings of responses based on women’s attitudes and feelings (e.g., reciprocity, timing, etc.). This method of analysis also supported an examination of the sometimes competing or contradictory beliefs women had about sexual negotiations, particularly around desire for refusal or the gendered social scripts around the need for compliance.

## Results

All but one woman reported having experienced oral sex with men at some point during their sexual lives, while 90% (18 women, notably including women currently identified as bisexual or lesbian) described at least one request for, attempt at, or experience with anal sex with a male partner. (Notably, no women described anal sex experiences with other women.) Our analysis explored four dimensions of how women negotiated oral and anal sex with their male partner(s): (1) Not expecting sexual reciprocity; (2) Partner pressure; and (3) Emotional labor. These themes are not mutually exclusive but are grounded in the temporal process of sexual negotiations: expectations *before* a sexual encounter; negotiating the *timing* of refusal and consent; the emotional labor *during* sexual encounters; and the role of anticipated aggression.

### Theme 1: Not Expecting Sexual Reciprocity

Nearly half of the women rarely expected sexual reciprocity for oral sex and framed themselves as the “givers,” suggesting that their expectations about sexual reciprocity focused on giving rather than receiving oral sex. For example, Gail (46/White/Bisexual) described her lack of expectations around receiving oral sex combined with her lack of expectations for sex to last long enough for her to receive cunnilingus: “I don’t even expect them to go down on me. I don’t really get the luxury of having long encounters so I don’t require it and I don’t expect it.” She went on to add that giving oral sex fit with her idea of womanhood: “I love giving more, because that’s how I am in my entire life. I’m a nurturer. My daughter says, ‘Mom, you don’t have to do everything for everybody,’ but that’s who I am, so I can’t really separate that in my sexual viewpoints any more than I can try to separate it in my regular life.” This suggests that the perceived identity of a “giver” impacts the ways that women negotiate for their own receiving of sexual pleasure.

Women described their ratio of giving to getting oral sex as quite skewed as well, with the majority of women saying that they certainly gave more oral sex than they received oral sex. Corinne (21/White/Bisexual) described her oral sex ratio as about her lack of expectations for cunnilingus and the lack of her partners’ skill: “My ratio is like 100 to 1 probably. I don’t expect it back. I figure if I do it, it’s ‘cause I want to. I’m not expecting anything back from it. And if they do it it’s ‘cause they want to...I’ve just never had anyone really be good at it.” Lila (36/White/Heterosexual) also strongly preferred giving to receiving oral sex, framing cunnilingus as anxiety-producing: “I was always more inclined to give oral sex than to receive it. I always felt very self-conscious with a guy being that close to my vagina and seeing it that close. I always steer them away into not having to do it to me.” These narratives establish a complex gendered politics around the frequency of giving and receiving oral sex; women may assert agency by steering men away from giving them oral sex, just as they might give up some agency by not expecting reciprocity. The following themes illustrate how this non-reciprocal arrangement is linked to the performance of traditional gender norms in sexual scripts.

## Theme 2: Partner Pressure

Building on (lack of) sexual reciprocity (due to women refusing oral sex and men not initiating it or refusing to give it), women sometimes flatly said no, but often felt pressure to factor in their partners' needs and wants before they could later refuse. Some women refused when their partners brought it up verbally in conversation before sex, while others refused immediately before or during the action itself. For example, four women talked about flatly refusing anal sex directly when a partner first initiated anal sex or brought it up in conversation. For example, Emma (42/White/Heterosexual), refused outright and in an unambiguous way, saying, "I simply tell them no, it's not gonna happen. But every boyfriend I've had is obsessed with it. I hear them say, 'You'll like it, you'll enjoy it' and I tell them, 'You go find out for yourself and then come back and let me know.'" Related to this, three women described that their partners pressed them verbally or physically but they insisted on refusing anal sex. For example, Joyce (21/Filipina/Bisexual) described her boyfriend reasoning and begging her for anal sex but she nevertheless refused: "The partner I lost my virginity to wanted anal sex and kept saying, 'Oh, it's not like you're really losing your virginity if it's anal sex' and I felt pressured into it but I have never given in. I didn't really express it but in my head I was kind of mad, like, 'That logic doesn't even make sense so why are you trying to convince me?'" In these examples, negotiations occurred more directly and immediately, suggesting that some women felt entitled to overtly refuse anal sex and to share their feelings with their partner(s).

In contrast, a few women described feeling pressure to have anal sex, initially giving into anal sex, and then refusing later on during subsequent sexual encounters. Rachel (39/White/Bisexual) described the negotiations with her partner to try anal sex where she intermittently accepted and refused: "My husband definitely tries to wiggle in there. He'll make the motions and I'll go, 'Well, I don't know, I'm not sure,' and he'll say, 'Come on, you know you like it. You know I can make you say yes.'" And it's this game and so sometimes I'll give in and sometimes I'll say flat out, 'No seriously, it's not gonna happen,' and he'll go 'Oh, okay.' He knows he can push that grey zone sometimes." In this example, negotiations about anal sex appeared as a pendulum between ambivalent consent and firm refusal, highlighting the complex ways that refusals get communicated to a partner and how women imagine their right to refuse and to negotiate and renegotiate sexual agreement.

## Theme 3: Emotional Labor

Women's descriptions of oral and anal sex also tied into their feelings about emotional and emotional labor or the belief that women should suppress their emotional needs in order to validate and prioritize the sexual desires of their partner (Elliott and Umberson 2008), as some women felt obliged to give in while others felt that they could refuse. A quarter of the women described oral and anal sex as a kind of emotional labor that was expected of them; thus, refusing a sexual practice that they did not always enjoy became difficult. For example, Yvonne (41/

Mexican–American/Heterosexual) described that she refused only if fellatio lasted too long, but she otherwise felt obliged to give oral sex: “I’m not that into giving oral sex. There’s always this little salty taste to it and I don’t feel comfortable. He wants it though. I don’t mind for a little bit, quickly, and then he’s ready to get to other business, but if there’s a guy that wants me down there for like 5, 10 min, no, not that into it.” Similarly, Lila (36/White/Heterosexual) described anal sex as unenjoyable but as required to please men: “When I was younger I was more about pleasing the other person so even though I never really wanted anal, when the guy showed that he wanted it, I just said ‘Okay.’ I never really liked it and felt a little painful and then just very uncomfortable. But that’s just what you do for guys you’re with.” This sense of feeling obliged to have unwanted sex demonstrates that sexual negotiations are complicated by sexist assumptions about women as emotional laborers—providing, for example, emotional work *and* sex to men—and the belief that men’s desires matter more than women’s desires.

Several women also talked about oral sex as something they did out of obligation but not personal pleasure, showing the belief that emotional labor and “surface acting” is expected of women when they perform oral sex. For example, Bea (37/Filipina/Heterosexual) described oral sex as an expectation rather than pleasurable: “I’ve never been able to get anyone off with oral sex. It’s always just been something we do before actual intercourse, like foreplay that’s expected. It’s something I’ve gotta do.” Martha (52/White/Heterosexual) also described an unpleasant experience with giving oral sex where she felt she did not meet expectations of her but nevertheless felt obliged to give oral sex: “I gave him a blowjob once, back in my high school before his track meet, and he came and I spit it out. I’ll lick it, but I can’t put the whole thing in my mouth even though that’s the expectation. I know you’re supposed to do that.” These narratives showcase the feelings women have that they *should* engage in certain sexual acts to meet their partner’s (or the culture’s) expectations about sexuality; the gauge for whether they choose to have sex centers on pleasing others and others’ expectations.

## Discussion

In this study, we found that negotiations around oral and anal sex, and specifically under what circumstances women felt that they could refuse these acts, were informed in meaningful ways by (traditional) gender roles. Qualitative studies on how women refuse unwanted sex are relatively rare, and studies of this sort have not been applied to the specific practices of anal and oral sex (Kitzinger and Frith 1999). Specifically, women’s constructions of themselves as the altruistic “givers” of oral sex, the ambivalent way that they refused, and expectations for women’s emotional labor combined with partner’s feelings of entitlement to oral and anal sex all made women’s sexual negotiations complicated and surprisingly nuanced. The results of this study showcased some of the complexity for women to negotiate oral and anal sex in a culture that expects them to provide their partners with access to their bodies and emotional labor, particularly when women have sex with men (Hill and Fischer 2001; Lewin 1985). In this study, we also questioned how women can refuse

oral and anal sex in a culture that largely ignores their “no” answers, expects them to give rather than receive, and largely teaches them to internalize that their sexual and emotional labor is a requirement of their gender role (Cacchioni 2007). This interface between individual sexual preferences and broader sexual scripts appeared vividly in these women’s narratives about oral and anal sex.

In the broadest sense, the results of this study highlights the importance of studying oral and anal sex and the scripts women attached to these actions (particularly when fellatio and anal sex were not inherently seen as pleasurable to women themselves). The findings here—that women seemed more able to clearly refuse anal sex than oral sex, and that women framed both actions as typically in service of male pleasure—suggest that oral and anal sex may have similar scripts (e.g., “for my partner,” “I shouldn’t refuse”) and different scripts (“I can say no to anal but not to oral sex”). This opens up fruitful territory for re-imagining women’s sexual agency in light of how they negotiate oral and anal sex; for example, might it be useful for scholars to study and look for anal sex differently (not, for example, as a “sexual event” but as an *attempted* sexual event? Is oral sex a territory where women assert their agency by refusing to allow men to perform oral sex on them, or is that a form of inequality and internalized oppression?

Most notably, the findings of this study on women’s sexual negotiations showed that women flatly refused oral and anal sex less often than they deferred or delayed refusals (Kitzinger and Frith 1999); when they did refuse, their refusals were too often met by persistent partners with statements of “Try it anyway!” or “You’ll like it” or “I know best.” The powerful sense that women *should* engage in oral and anal sex to please partners, and that lack of reciprocity for oral sex is not only acceptable but expected, also paints an interesting portrayal of women’s sexual agency. Note that other research has found that women gave oral sex more than they receive oral sex (Wood et al. 2016); further, research has also found that women often engage in sex for the purposes of avoiding negative outcomes, including a partner’s disappointment or perceiving that they will lose their partner (Muise et al. 2017). The data in this study suggest, in part, that some *women have sexual agency but men often refuse to listen to or accept what women say when they exercise their agency*. We can infer that men can and do understand women’s direct and indirect refusal messages (O’Byrne et al. 2006) but women perceive here that men simply ignore them. Women’s feelings about refusing oral and anal sex revolve around either trying to refuse and sometimes succeeding in being listened to, feeling resentful and *not* saying no, or agreeing to oral/anal sex and feeling unhappy in doing so. None of these options seems ideal in a culture that supposedly values women’s sexual empowerment and sexual agency, as they can lead to unhappy relationships and poor mental health for women (Conroy et al. 2015). Most importantly, even when women expressed agency, men at times ignored them; literatures on consent and refusals need to account for this problem more fully.

Similarly, the results of this study bring up complicated questions around issues of reciprocity and the give/take of sex (Braun et al. 2003). While “quid pro quo” does not necessarily symbolize equality during sex—as even when sexual acts are reciprocated, power imbalances around choice, pleasure, and agency can persist—the absence of reciprocity is not itself problematic. Some people may not inherently

enjoy giving or receiving oral sex, and some may even want their partners to make sexual decisions; still, women's narratives about reciprocity as combined with the other themes around sexual coercion, performance, and entitlement reveal that sexual negotiation is immensely complicated and laced with cultural "baggage" around women's ability to have voice or express their needs. Gavey's (2013) notion of the "cultural scaffolding" of rape (where gatekeeping becomes one of the socially-acceptable ways that women enact sexual agency) and ideologies about the production of sexual scripts (Frith and Kitzinger 2001) help to more fully fill out these complexities, as the available avenues for women to assert agency are at times limited or wrapped up within scripts of sexual gatekeeping; if gatekeeping is the main way women can assert sexual agency, enthusiastic consent is less likely to occur.

The results of this study also pointed to the difficulty of "finding" and measuring sexual refusals, as women did not typically verbally refuse sex and then stop having sex. Rather, the more common description involved women wanting to refuse sex and feeling unable to do so, or more insidiously, believing that they could not refuse because cultural/social/sexual expectations of them were too strong or important to allow for individual choice. This brings up the difference between "surface acting" (e.g., knowing that one is acting) and "deep acting" (e.g., acting that becomes internalized as real so that the person no longer recognizes it as acting) (Elliott and Umberson 2008; Hochschild 1983) as well as the powerful implications of emotion work and emotional labor to support a male partner's experience of sex (Cacchioni 2015; Thomas et al. 2017). Sexual refusals, or specifically the lack of sexual refusal related to oral and anal sex, may relate more to deep acting, where women no longer recognize the labor they perform but instead see it as "real" or "true." In both cases (surface and deep acting), these are less than ideal conditions for women to explore, experiment, or feel joy and pleasure with their sexuality.

### **Clinical Practice Implications**

The results of this study also offer two key implications for practicing clinicians. First, these findings suggest that broadening definitions of "sex" when working with clients is crucial. Discussing oral and anal sex with clients—and the particular ways that these may be attached to discourses of pleasure, pain, negotiation, satisfaction, and so on—is a crucial step toward recognizing the relationship between couples' lives and their sexual negotiations. Secondly, these findings suggest that researchers ask clinicians to look more closely at the ways that women engage in, and refuse, certain sexual activities. Oral and anal sex are often under-examined in clinical contexts, particularly given that there is much cultural emphasis placed on penile-vaginal intercourse. The data in this study also suggest that clinicians may miss important information about power, relationality, mutuality, and reciprocity by not asking specifically about oral and anal sex when couples are discussing sexuality and power. These data suggest that women may have complicated sexual scripts about oral and anal sex that perhaps differs from how they view other sexual activities with partners.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Certain research decisions may have affected this study's results, as the choice for wording the interview questions certainly only captured some, but not all, of women's experiences with sexual refusal of oral and anal sex. As we did not directly ask about refusal per se, women's narratives could be quite different if refusal was directly interrogated. A longitudinal study might help us better understand the dynamic ways that women want or do not want certain actions at certain moments in their lives.

In this study, we gleaned information about refusal from broader questions about oral and anal sex. Similarly, we purposefully did not examine women's refusals of vaginal intercourse or "sex" in general, but instead chose to examine oral and anal sex; future research could look at women's refusals of sex more broadly (or specifically, in the case of vaginal intercourse). Researchers could also look more closely at oral and anal sex separately, or look at how women feel about sexual scripts around chastity, purity, virginity, and "slut shaming." Finally, while we drew upon a sample far too small to draw any conclusions about differences in refusal along race, class, and sexual identity lines, future research could test this using quantitative measures and could use a much larger sample size to assess such patterns along social identity lines; this may yield important information about which women are more likely to feel that they can consent, refuse, have agency, and choose their sexual experiences. We know, for example, that lower status women are more likely to have *frequent* unsatisfying sex rather than *infrequent* unsatisfying sex (Fahs and Swank 2011).

Ultimately, the results of this study suggested that women have a complicated language around, and understanding of, saying no to oral and anal sex, and that they clearly feel that they must engage in sexual acts that they do not always enjoy or want. Why women feeling these obligations, and how this impacts their sense of sexual satisfaction, points to refusals as a key area for future feminist research about sexuality. The study of women's sexual refusal, at a broader level, brings in larger discussions of sexual negotiation, reciprocity, emotional and emotional labor, agency, and sexual scripts, all of which are worthy of attention in future studies on this topic. For example, if the social and cultural stories of women's sexuality dictate that they cannot say no, how can they enthusiastically say yes to oral and anal sex? (In other words, how can women move more toward saying yes when they want to, and no when they want to, in a culture that demands their consent yet shames them when they do want sex?) What is at stake in the 'yes' when women are performing as emotional laborers, engaging in unwanted acts, or negotiating with partners who feel entitled to oral and anal sex? This study highlights the central importance of the "enthusiastic yes" in a culture that largely ignores women's right to say no (and be heard and respected for saying no) outside of purity discourses. These blind spots produce a culture prone to sexual violence, encouraging of sexist power imbalances, and purposefully unaware of the symptoms and practices that disempower and degrade women and their sexual choices.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** Breanne Fahs and Eric Swank declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures were performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study.

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