Intimate Justice: A Critical Analysis of Sexual Satisfaction

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Abstract

This article elaborates an *intimate justice* framework to help guide research on sexual satisfaction. Using a critical historiography approach, I examine the etiology and development of the psychological construct of ''satisfaction'' over the last century and argue that social and political antecedents to satisfaction ratings are an essential and under-theorized aspect of research in this field. By examining what are considered to be the most influential definitions in life satisfaction research, I identify conceptual gaps, oversights, and disagreements that characterize this body of work, and specifically its theoretical treatment of inequity. Moving to the intimate domain, I argue that the field of sexual satisfaction must include theories and methods that systematically consider the role of social and sexual stigmas as antecedents to sexual satisfaction ratings. In the conclusion, building from existing social justice theories, I propose an intimate justice framework as a means to guide research that can highlight issues of entitlement and deservingness in sexual satisfaction research. This is particularly important as sexual satisfaction is increasingly used as an indicator of individual and relational well-being; however, this construct is presently limited and inadequately measured for women and men who experience limited sexual rights in the socio-political domain because of their gender and/or sexual minority status.

Sexual satisfaction is a provocative and complicated concept. On the one hand, it is a term people understand; it is usually considered privately, but the idea of being sexually satisfied is relatively self-evident and understandable to most. On the other hand, it is an intricate psychological construct, with multiple definitions, various operationalizations, and increasing importance in how quality of life is assessed. If you are asked to decide if you are sexually satisfied, you are being asked to reflect on a number of personal and inter-personal qualities. These might include assessing your genital health, your psychological state, as well as the quality of your intimate relationship(s) and sexual experience(s). Asked usually in the form of a single item (''how satisfied are you with your sex life?''), sexual satisfaction has become an increasingly common indicator of health and well-being in clinical, medical, and psychological research settings. For example, doctors rely on patients' sexual satisfaction ratings to indicate recovery trajectories in medical settings and to guide diagnoses of sexual dysfunction and treatment, including when to pharmaceutically and/or surgically intervene (Dennerstein, Koochaki, & Barton, 2006; Rosen et al., 2000; Tununtla, 2006). In sum, the psychological construct of sexual satisfaction aims to highlight whether a person has reached a level of fulfillment with their sexual life and has increasingly important consequences in people's lives.

What is interesting and too little understood in this research is the role that *expectation* plays when a person decides if they are in fact fulfilled. There is an implicit question lurking in the shadow of every satisfaction query: *how much did you expect?* In terms of sexual satisfaction research, this implicit question becomes especially important as expectations for a fulfilling sexual life are charged with social, political, and inter-personal significance. Sexual expectations are an individual's beliefs about his or her future sexual self,

including behaviors, relationships, feelings, and importantly, the quality of these sexual experiences (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004). Expectations are defined in terms of positive motivations for sexual experiences, including pleasure, intimacy, and increased competence (Ott, Millstein, Ofner, & Halpern-Felsher, 2006). Overall, studies have been able to determine that individuals expect varying outcomes from their intimate and sexual relationships (e.g., Bliss & Horne, 2005), but too frequently, the differential qualities of these expected outcomes has not been the focus of research.

For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) men and women contend with social stigmas related to their sexuality and sexual behaviors and are not afforded the same sexual rights in the political domain as heterosexuals (Herek, 2007). Diamond and Lucas (2004), for example, found that sexual minority youth developed low expectations for satisfying and fulfilling romantic relationships. The authors argued that contexts of homophobia and discrimination create "negative expectations about romantic problems, and [feelings] that they have little control over their romantic lives" (p. 315). In terms of gender, researchers have found various mechanisms linking gender norms with diminished sexual satisfaction (Bliss & Horne, 2005; Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006). For example, Sanchez and her colleagues found that heterosexual women implicitly associated sex with submissiveness, while heterosexual men did not. This relationship between sex and personal submission predicted women's lower rates of sexual arousal, autonomy, and enjoyment (Sanchez et al., 2006). Given the often inequitable contexts in which sexual relationships and activities occur, individuals' sexual expectations may significantly vary from, for example, peers who face fewer limits on their sexual rights. In other words, individuals' expectations for sexual fulfillment precede satisfaction ratings. Notably, for psychologists who are interested in satisfaction scores and particularly those evaluating group differences, these varied criteria and the role of expectations remain unmeasured in conventional satisfaction research designs.

Overview

To critically examine the construct of sexual satisfaction, I travel through a much larger body of literature – the history of research on life satisfaction. While these literatures on the surface do not share much in common, I argue that both bodies of research share the root construct of what it means to be "satisfied" and suffer from similar theoretical weaknesses that hinder effective measurement. I turn to the life satisfaction literature as a means to critically examine the etiology of sexual satisfaction and as a means to address problematic research decisions made in both fields.

Over the course of this discussion, I argue that social and political antecedents to satisfaction ratings are an essential and under-theorized aspect of satisfaction research and in particular the methods used in this research. While these issues of social and political context may seem especially salient for sexuality researchers who more obviously face issues of politics and stigma in their research, the role of varying expectations are essential for researchers studying satisfaction across all domains (Crosby, 1976, 1982, 1984; Steil, 1997, 2001). With this dynamic in mind, I reflect on aspects of the broader satisfaction literature to chart how definitions and operationalizations of "feeling satisfied" have been interpreted by psychologists both historically and more recently. I critically analyze what are considered to be the most influential definitions of satisfaction in psychology to identify conceptual gaps and disagreements in the field. This critical historiographic approach allows us as readers of research to evaluate how definitions of constructs move from theory, to method, to findings, and finally, to interpretation (Parker, 2007). In my

conclusion, building from prior research by social justice researchers, I propose an *intimate justice* framework to guide researchers to consider how issues of entitlement and deservingness can be theorized and measured in the field of sexual satisfaction research.

The Psychology of Satisfaction

Historical development of a construct

The discipline of psychology is tasked with studying the internal processes by which individuals appraise aspects of their lives. Satisfaction research has largely been the domain of psychologists because studies of satisfaction offer invaluable insight into how an individual perceives him or herself. Satisfaction provides, in many ways, the ultimate window into psychological processes because it contains within it emotional, cognitive, physiological, and inter-personal elements.

Satisfaction research has a long empirical history – dating back before the classic sociological studies of the American soldier after World War II (Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star, & Williams, 1949; see also Bliss, 1915; Burtt & Clark, 1923; Freud, 1920, 1950; Kitson, 1923, 1927; Poffenberger, 1925; Sherif & Cantril, 1945; Snow, 1925). In psychology, studies on satisfaction have largely been conducted in the area of consumer satisfaction (Chen, Rodgers, & He, 2008) and in research on well-being and happiness (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Ryff & Singer, 2006). This research has concentrated on defining satisfaction as a measurement technique that offers a subjective rating of a specific domain (i.e., marriage, life in general, work, etc.).

Psychologists have built a science around the concept of life satisfaction. Defined in terms of progress toward one's desired goals (George & Bearon, 1980), life satisfaction is often conceptualized as indicating judgments about the discrepancy between what one has and various social standards (Michalos, 1985). As theories of life satisfaction developed over the last twenty years, the issue of how an individual assesses their "desired goals" has become more elaborated. As a result, some theories conceptualize life satisfaction as the desire to change something about one's life (Alfonso, Allison, Rader, & Gorman, 1996; Medvec & Savitsky, 1997; Oliver, 1980). This theoretical framework can be observed in the common use of items such as: "If I had to live my life over, I would change nothing" (Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS); Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). In other words, life satisfaction is commonly concerned with the contrast between "one's actual outcome and the imagined outcome that might have been" (Medvec & Savitsky, 1997, p. 1285).

Similar to this process of evaluating regret, other life satisfaction theories evaluate relationships with imagined ideals (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Schwartz et al., 2002; Weaver & Brickman, 1974). There is some controversy in the field as to *where* these imagined ideals are generated, i.e., within oneself or with the help of social expectations. In a 1985 article on the development of the Satisfaction With Life Scale – considered by many to be the gold standard in life satisfaction assessment – Diener and his colleagues reflected on their theoretical stance on the role of making comparisons:

> Judgments of satisfaction are dependent upon a comparison of one's circumstances with what is thought to be an appropriate standard. It is important to point out that the judgment of how satisfied people are with their present state of affairs is based on a comparison with a standard which each individual sets for him or herself; it is not externally imposed (Diener et al., 1985, p. 71).

This description of life satisfaction clearly sets the individual within a self-imposed set of criteria. This definition concentrates on individual-level evaluations and not on how varying external contexts may affect these idiosyncratic evaluations (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Diener et al., 1999; Oishi, Schimmack, & Diener, 2001; Sandvik, Diener, & Seidlitz, 1993).

Turning from theory to measurement, researchers often include items such as ''I am satisfied with my life'' in self-report scales to assess one's level of life satisfaction (e.g., Alfonso et al., 1996). This tautological characteristic (i.e., using the term satisfied to measure satisfaction) speaks to how definitions of satisfaction are taken for granted and considered to be self-evident. While theories of life satisfaction focus on how individuals evaluate their satisfaction using idiosyncratic benchmarks, when items are included in research and group comparisons are assessed, participants' definitions of what constitutes feeling satisfied are frequently considered equivalent with their peers, as well as naturally equivalent to the researcher's own definition of feeling satisfied. While this method does allow for group-level assessments (i.e., Are men and women satisfied to the same degree?), there are important characteristics of these satisfaction judgments that remain obscured, including historical disadvantage, discrimination, and stigma.

A striking trend in these theoretical approaches is the fact that individual appraisals are taken at face value, meaning that even when temporal or social comparisons are considered, the etiology of the appraisal is not considered methodologically important. When social context has been discussed by those studying satisfaction, well-being, or happiness, disadvantaged groups are often described as ''making the best of a bad situation'' (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001), or as adaptive (Diener et al., 1999) and resilient (Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2006). High rates of satisfaction in impoverished or discriminatory settings are framed within models of adaptation or resilience as a means to explain why life stressors appear to have little effect on subjective well-being or satisfaction (Lyubomirsky & Dickerhoof, 2006; Ryff, Keyes, & Hughes, 2003). For example, in discussing ''unanticipated'' findings about gender discrimination, Lyubomirsky and Dickerhoof explained:

> All in all…women are happy, contended individuals. It is a testament to female resiliency that, in spite of numerous life obstacles, injustices, and prejudices, women…appear to be just as happy and satisfied as men (2006, p. 173).

Although these explanations may be compelling, explanations of adaptation and resilience in the face of stressors may, in fact, hide the etiology of satisfaction appraisals. Theories of satisfaction largely assume that the construct of satisfaction is *equally available* to individuals. As exemplified by Diener et al.'s (1985) definition of satisfaction as purely subjective, the bulk of satisfaction research ignores the contexts surrounding these decisions. While this strategy is very useful in assessing trends among large groups that share similar characteristics, it is less useful in determining more fine-grained analyses of individuals and/or groups that vary in how much they have come to expect.

Social status and satisfaction

There are a number of examples of research that have interpreted satisfaction ratings alongside historical disadvantage. Campbell et al.'s seminal text *The Quality of American Life* (1976) is one such example and offers a glimpse into how the construct of satisfaction was theorized 35 years ago. In a nationally representative study of 2,164 individuals, Campbell and his colleagues found that men and women reported equal levels of life satisfaction. However, the authors did not take these data at face value. Instead, they were, in fact,

suspicious of these findings and wondered about the role of history: ''Women and men grow up in different cultures, develop different expectations, learn different roles, and live different lives'' (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976, p. 395). The authors argued that different experiences create a set of expectations and aspirations, and importantly, a feeling of being satisfied when one's expected obligations are met. They explained:

> Who can doubt that the American culture has historically taught women to value the nurturant role of mother and homemaker and to be satisfied with obligations and rewards which are different from those it prescribes for men? And who can be surprised to find that most women seem content with a life style which has been accepted almost without question for generations? (Campbell et al., 1976, p. 442)

Along with this analysis of gendered expectations, Campbell and his colleagues utilized suspicion (Josselson, 2004) in the service of examining African Americans' levels of satisfaction. They found that African Americans over 55 years old expressed a good deal of satisfaction with their lives: ''Indeed, [older Blacks] form one of the most satisfied segments of the population'' (1976, p. 500). With these two findings – that women reported equal levels of satisfaction to men and that older African Americans reported being even more satisfied than whites – Campbell and his colleagues queried the meaningfulness of the construct of satisfaction across marginalized groups and made an important decision to lodge satisfaction within a set of *expected* outcomes. In other words, those who expected little may have been satisfied with little. Campbell and his colleagues argued that researchers had to account for people's ''ignorance of alternatives or the shrinking of aspirations through long-term accommodation to conditions which are, in any objective sense, bleak'' (Campbell et al., 1976, p. 499). This insight highlights the social conditions that operate within satisfaction judgments for specific subgroups. In doing so, the authors encourage us to question unstated assumptions about the nature of satisfaction data and our interpretations of these data.

With these insights in mind, I turn now from the global construct of satisfaction to a more specific domain of satisfaction research – sexual satisfaction. Sexual relationships are an especially useful means to study how individuals are influenced by the real, imagined, or implied presence of others (Allport, 1968; Orbuch & Harvey, 1991). This move to the intimate sphere allows for a closer analysis of how individuals' expectations for satisfaction are evaluated in research settings. When the scope of analysis shrinks to assess the intimate domain, how have researchers theorized the role of social and political conditions within individuals and within intimate relationships?

Sexual Satisfaction Research

Research on sexual satisfaction is still in its infancy. As of the end of 2009, there were 438 entries within PsycInfo that had ''sexual satisfaction'' as a keyword. As a comparison, the keyword ''marital satisfaction'' elicited 2,093 entries and ''job satisfaction'' produced 8,237 results. Of the 438 articles on sexual satisfaction, about three-quarters have been published since 1990. In effect, the field of sexual satisfaction is still very new and has grown very quickly in the last two decades.

Overall findings

In studies of overall sexual satisfaction, men and women often report being equally satisfied (Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994; Purdon & Holdaway, 2006; see Hyde, 2005 for

review). When group differences have been found, women often report higher satisfaction than men (Colson, Lemaire, Pinton, Hamidi, & Klein, 2006; Sprecher, 2002). As but one example, Dunn, Croft, and Hackett (2000) found that women were significantly more satisfied than men (79% *vs.* 70%) in a stratified random sample of individuals 18–75 years old. There is far less research on sexual minority sexual satisfaction rates, but existing research with gay and lesbian samples suggests that sex in committed relationships is similar to heterosexual marital ratings of sexual satisfaction (Deenen, Gijs, & van Naerssen, 1994; Holmberg & Blair, 2009; Kurdek, 1991; Lever, 1994). Kurdek (1991), for example, found no differences in sexual satisfaction among four types of couples: gay, lesbian, married heterosexual, and cohabiting heterosexuals. Researchers have found high rates of satisfaction among gay men (Peplau et al., 1997) and high correlations between frequency of sexual contact and rates of sexual satisfaction in this population (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004). In a recent study of sexual satisfaction in a sample of young adults ($n = 8,595$) reporting on sexual activities using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, McClelland (2009) found that both heterosexual and sexual minority men and women reported very high satisfaction ratings. There were significant differences, however. For heterosexuals, men reported higher sexual satisfaction than women, but, for sexual minorities, this was reversed: sexual minority women reported higher sexual satisfaction than men.

A major hurdle in evaluating this research is that definitions and measurement strategies of sexual satisfaction have not been consistent across studies. In the majority of studies of sexual satisfaction, sex is assumed to be or operationalized as heterosexual intercourse (Bridges, Lease, & Ellison, 2004; Frohlich & Meston, 2002; Meston & Trapnell, 2005; Pinney, Gerrard, & Denney, 1987). In other studies, an overall level of satisfaction is asked, with little or no detail on what the individual is evaluating in terms of their romantic or sexual life (Alfonso et al., 1996; Davison, Bell, LaChina, Holden, & Davis, 2008; Sprecher, 2002). Many fewer studies measure satisfaction with specific sexual activities or aspects of sexual relationships. In one notable exception, Apt, Hurlbert, Sarmiento, and Hurlbert (1996) found that approximately half of the married women in their sample (53%) described performing oral sex on their husbands as a satisfying experience.

Because of the variation of sexual activities that individuals engage in and the complexity it creates, more ''objective'' measures, such as orgasm consistency, are often used as proxies for sexual satisfaction because they provide a form of consistent and comparable data across individuals. Orgasm is often measured in satisfaction research because it is easily assessed by self-report (Haavio–Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Young, Denny, Young, & Luquis, 2000) and is strongly correlated with self-reports of sexual satisfaction (Edwards & Booth, 1994; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Sprecher & McKinney, 1993; Waite & Joyner, 2001).

Orgasm consistency, however, presents a complex set of decisions for a researcher to consider when examining sexual satisfaction. While the orgasm provides a certain kind of measurable outcome of sexual experience, it does not seem to correlate to the experience of satisfaction for all individuals. For example, women consistently report lower rates of orgasm frequency and high rates of sexual satisfaction (e.g., McClelland, 2009). Laumann and his colleagues may have said it best when they explained, ''if women do not expect orgasm to be a regular outcome of sexual activity, they are less likely to consider its absence of deprivation'' (1994, p. 118) and as a result, they tend to report high rates of satisfaction even in the absence of orgasm. On the other hand, orgasm consistency is not the only dimension of sexual satisfaction, and many individuals report high satisfaction based on numerous other criteria, including relationship closeness (Hurlbert, Apt, & Rabehl, 1993), the match between intercourse frequency and libido, and mutual enjoyment

(Daker-White & Donovan, 2002). In sum, the presence or absence of orgasm presents one way to measure sexual satisfaction, but does not necessarily adequately define the construct for all individuals.

Definitions

Sexual satisfaction has generally been defined in terms of positive affect, including: ''the degree to which an individual is satisfied or happy with the sexual aspect of his or her relationship'' (Sprecher & Cate, 2004, p. 236) and ''an affective response arising from one's subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one's sexual relationship'' (Lawrance & Byers, 1995, p. 268). Others have defined sexual satisfaction more directly in terms of individual expectations within the sexual domain, including: ''the degree to which a person's sexual activity meets his or her expectations'' (DeLamater, 1991, p. 62). These definitions, like many definitions of life satisfaction, identify feeling satisfied as subjective, meaning that the final decision rests within the person and theorized as emerging from a set of idiosyncratic experiences. This does not, however, preclude the notion that there are patterns to how individuals make satisfaction evaluations.

Theory and measurement

While some researchers have measured sexual satisfaction using individuals' appraisals of their sex life (e.g., ''I am satisfied with my sex life'' Alfonso et al., 1996; Bridges et al., 2004), most have operationalized sexual satisfaction to some extent, usually with a focus on physiological responses during or after sexual activity, as well as positive affect associated with sexual activity. I describe several examples in the following paragraphs to give a flavor of how each of these theoretical perspectives informs subsequent measurement decisions.

When sexual satisfaction is theorized as the experience of physical fulfillment, the body and the physical experience of satiation are imagined as the primary object of analysis. This model prioritizes physical and physiological responses, often with an emphasis on the experience of orgasm as the most easily measurable evidence of sexual satisfaction (Brody & Krüger, 2006; Guo, Ng, & Chan, 2004; Holmberg & Blair, 2009; Young et al., 2000). As one research team noted: ''[While] orgasm is only one facet of the total sexual experience, and many factors influence both orgastic capacity and sexual satisfaction…Orgasm nevertheless remains the most easily quantifiable index of sexual satisfaction'' (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997, p. 401).

Other researchers have focused on more general measures of physical pleasure, often relying on an item from the National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) and replicated in many studies since then (DeLamater, Hyde, & Fong, 2008; Liu, 2003; Waite & Joyner, 2001), which taps the amount of physical pleasure a person reports: ''…how physically pleasurable did you find your sexual relationship…?'' This item is frequently paired with a second item from that taps emotional aspects of the relationship: ''…how emotionally satisfying did you find your relationship…?'' (Laumann et al., 1994). Together, these two items are imagined as covering physical and emotional aspects of sexual satisfaction, although exactly what makes up these components is left undefined. In designing these two items, Laumann et al. (1994) explained that they were attempting to differentiate between physical and emotional satisfaction to gauge ''the extent to which sexual activity in a given relationship was

oriented toward to the physical aspects of sexual pleasure, emotional satisfaction, or some combination of the two'' (p. 118). While Laumann and his colleagues did not address the possible conflation of sexual and relationship satisfaction implied in these two items, recent research has consistently found a strong association between sexual satisfaction and emotional closeness (e.g., Sprecher, 2002), although the direction of this association is not yet well understood (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007). In addition to physical and emotion dimensions, other studies, for example, have used ''pleasurableness of sexual intercourse'' as a dependent variable, although the parameters of pleasure are left up to individuals to determine (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). These various theoretical models and measurement strategies have produced findings that are often inconsistent and plagued by definitional and conceptual issues (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004; Sprecher & Cate, 2004).

The interpersonal exchange model of sexual satisfaction

One of the more popular models used to evaluate sexual satisfaction has been the social exchange model, which developed out of equity theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and relationship research (Hatfield, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978; Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986). Equity researchers have long argued that individuals perceive situations to be fair when their rewards are seen as proportional to their inputs (e.g., Hatfield, Rapson, & Aumer-Ryan, 2008). Moving this same framework to the sexual domain, the sexual exchange model defines satisfaction as a balanced equation between sexual rewards, costs, comparison levels, imagined alternatives, and equality within the sexual area of the relationship (Byers, Demmons, & Lawrance, 1998; Byers & MacNeil, 2006; Byers & Wang, 2004; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Renaud, Byers, & Pan, 1997).

The social exchange model has inspired a great deal of research and consistently found that perceptions of equity are integral to individuals' sexual satisfaction evaluations. In their handbook chapter, Byers and Wang (2004) reflected on the overall findings in the field concerning the role of equity: ''It appears that the precise rules governing the exchanges (i.e., equity or equality) are relatively unimportant as long as partners perceive their exchanges to be balanced'' (2004, p. 207). This point − that the perception of balance is primary − highlights the role of expectation within the sexual domain. Indeed, Lawrance and Byers (1992) found that sexual rewards were compared to a ''general notion of how rewarding a sexual relationship *should be* (emphasis added)'' when evaluating their levels of rewards.

However, the general notion of how rewarding sexual relationships ''should be'' is determined within highly inequitable social circumstances: the influences of sexism, heterosexism, and sexual stigma are all but ignored in these models as potential precursors and antecedents to sexual expectations. The limitation of the sexual exchange model has been that individuals' perceptions are theorized only at the person level. This model lacks the ability to understand how rewards, punishments, and contexts are differently (and perhaps) unequally assessed. Feminist researchers have long argued that men and women use very different and unequal guidelines by which to judge what count as rewards and costs − especially within a heterosexual relationship context (Dion & Dion, 2001; Holland, Ramasanoglu, & Sharpe, 1998; Steil, 1997; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). This observation, however, has yet to be influential within the domain of sexuality research.

One of the unintended outcomes of research using social exchange models in sex research has been that group differences in sexual outcomes are interpreted as natural. This is most easily seen in naturalized interpretations of infrequent female orgasm (see Lloyd, 2005 for review) and the rise of evolutionary theories of human sexuality, such as

Sexual Strategies Theory (Buss, 1994, 1998; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). For example, the classic Clark and Hatfield (1989) study that found men agreed to have sex more readily with strangers than women is commonly used as evidence of men's greater desire for sexual variety (Buss, 1998; see Conley, 2009, for critique). Research paradigms that examine only the manifest content of men and women's physiological and behavioral responses (such as frequency of orgasm) and ignore the social and historical production of those responses will continue to reinforce sexual inequality as a ''natural'' outcome.

While psychologists have regularly studied how partners in intimate relationships perceive conditions of fairness (Lerner & Lerner, 1981; Poeschl, 2007; Steil, 1997, 2001), it has been the work of feminist psychologists who have looked behind considerations of fairness and ''nature'' and assessed exactly who defines what is ''fair'' and how durable disparities are normalized and continually reframed as natural (Opotow, 1990).

Relative deprivation and entitlement

A relative deprivation framework offers a way to understand the limits of contemporary sexual satisfaction models, much as it has guided critical assessment of satisfaction in other domains (Corning, 2000; Crosby, 1976, 1982, 1984; Steil, 1997, 2001; Steil & Hoffman, 2006). This framework asks, ''When do those with less feel that they have been unjustly treated and when do they feel that they are simply inadequate? What, in other words, regulates feelings of self-blame?'' (Carrillo, Corning, Dennehy, & Crosby, in press, p. 28). In sum, in order for a group to recognize that there is discrepant quality (i.e., satisfaction is not equivalent), they must first recognize that observed differences are not naturally occurring. This is an early step in recognizing relative deprivation.

While a number of researchers developed models of relative deprivation that described various factors as necessary to feeling deprived (Davis, 1959; Hopper & Weyman, 1975; Morrison, 1971; Runciman, 1966; Stouffer et al., 1949; Walker & Smith, 2001), Crosby's (1976, 1982) model explicitly engaged considerations of entitlement and deservingness as the necessary preconditions to feeling deprived and made the link from deprivation to gender explicit. In a more recent articulation of relative deprivation, Crosby and her colleagues explain the potential and power of this theory to interrupt normalized disparities: ''if people blame themselves for their own failures, then they are unlikely to feel deprived, angry, or dissatisfied (except with themselves)'' (Carrillo et al., in press, p. 14).

In her early research on employment satisfaction, Crosby found what she called the paradox of the ''contented female worker'' (1982). Employed women reported being equally satisfied with their pay as their more highly paid male colleagues. Women reported feeling more positively about all aspects of their jobs, including their lower pay. This finding reflected a trend found in women's reported levels of satisfaction in the workplace (Deaux, 1979; Desmarais & Curtis, 1997; Ebeling, King, & Rogers, 1977; Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1984), despite lower wages and documented sexual discrimination. Crosby demonstrated how gender norms restricted female workers' sense of being deprived and led to unequal expectations for satisfaction within the workplace (1982). With these data, Crosby fashioned a model of relative deprivation that highlighted the interlocking influence of both wanting something and feeling entitled to it. Without these as preconditions, an individual is not likely to experience dissatisfaction and is likely to report feeling satisfied. Echoing Campbell et al.'s (1976) findings described earlier, Crosby used her findings to re-theorize the construct of satisfaction – using a model of relative deprivation as her organizing framework.

In addition, social comparison theory has generated a body of work, which places the individual and his or her satisfaction judgments within a specific set of social contexts. This theoretical perspective maintains that judgments about the self are highly influenced by those that are imagined as benchmarks used for self-comparisons. ''Social comparisons are considered central to perceptions of justice and satisfaction, in part, because they affect what a person feels she or he deserves or is *entitled* to receive'' (Bylsma & Major, 1994, p. 242). This theory attends to how individuals rely on social cues to determine the extent to which they are content or deprived. Major (1994) has argued that women rely on similar and same-sex others to establish appraisals of fairness or satisfaction. For example, she has found that women pay themselves less in experimental situations for the same work and report feeling satisfied (Bylsma & Major, 1992, 1994; Major et al., 1984). Her work traces how women develop a constricted set of referents and end up feeling satisfied within this narrow range. She explains, ''As a result, they derive and use lower pay standards than men do to determine what they deserve and how satisfied they are'' (Bylsma & Major, 1992).

Researchers such as Crosby (1976, 1982, 1984) and Major (1994) have argued that the social construction of ''fair'' and ''just'' is an essential element to consider in psychological research. It is not enough to ask whether outcomes are perceived to be distributed equally; we must also inquire as to the nature of the benchmarks being used, the history of the groups and individuals being assessed, and evaluate how each is deciding what is ''good enough.''

An ''Intimate Justice'' Framework for Sexual Satisfaction Research

> When failed by societal norms, how do partners decide what they have a right to expect from one another? (Desmarais & Lerner, 1994, p. 43)

To conclude, I propose an alternative theory to guide sexual satisfaction research. *Intimate justice* is a theoretical concept that encompasses the physical and psychological dimensions of a person's intimate and sexual life. At one level, this theory describes how proximal and distal experiences of inequity impact individuals' sexual and relational well-being. Intimate justice also concerns the development of entitlement to justice in the intimate domain – including both freedom from harm and coercion, as well as experiences of pleasure and satisfaction. In other words, intimate injustice focuses our attention on how social and political inequities impact intimate experiences, affecting how individuals imagine, behave, and evaluate their intimate lives. Without explicitly pairing intimacy and justice, intimate matters are often examined at the individual level, using theories and methods that strip the social from view. After all, intimate matters are often seen as the ultimate expression of selfhood. Theoretical and methodological models are needed which allow us to consider the individual as social agent – even as they inhabit and enact intimate experiences. This requires careful consideration of how physical and psychological outcomes are both reflections of individual beliefs and behaviors, as well reflections of social constraints that may, at times and under certain conditions, over-determine what individuals believe they want, what they need, and what they deserve.

Intimate justice has roots in several related theories that are themselves rooted in feminist and anti-discrimination research. In particular, this lineage includes four theoretical contributions: *thick desire* (Fine & McClelland, 2006) – a framework that links sexual well-being with economic, educational, and social conditions; *relative deprivation* (Crosby, 1976, 1982) – a theory that describes how inequity becomes normalized, particularly

through self-blame; *sexual stigma* – an articulation of how heteronormative public policies negatively impact the development of LGB lives (Herek, 2007); and finally, *social comparison* (Major et al., 1984) – a theory that attends to how individuals rely on social cues to determine the extent to which they are content or deprived. Intimate justice links these theories to highlight the synergy of this previous work and to draw attention to three specific dimensions: the socio-political conditions of sexual development, psychological self-evaluation processes, and norms concerning the distribution of justice. Together, these dimensions ask us to attend to the development of intimate and sexual expectations in disparate socio-political conditions and to address the inherent challenges of assessing normalized conditions of injustice in research settings.

In addition to social and political factors, person-level issues have been found to be associated with individuals' sexual satisfaction and some theoretical models more convincingly capture the complex relationships between the person and the social contexts in which they operate. For example, the minority stress model links sexual inequality (and related experiences of discrimination, stigma, and rejection) with decreased well-being, frequently observed through increased rates of depression (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Meyer, 2003). Other individual factors such as negative emotional states (Beaber & Werner, 2009), childhood sexual abuse (Lemieux & Byers, 2008), and sexual dysfunction (Althof et al., 2009) have also been shown to negatively impact sexual satisfaction in diverse populations. Additionally, interpersonal relationship dimensions are regularly associated with sexual satisfaction. Looking for specific elements within the relational dynamic, researchers have found that characteristics such as emotional closeness and love (Kaestle & Halpern, 2007) play an important role in determining sexual satisfaction. For example, Waite and Joyner (2001) found that relationship investment – measured in terms of how long the relationship was expected to last – was significantly associated with physical pleasure for both men and women above and beyond any demographic or background characteristics.

Within psychology, the question remains how to effectively study human behavior, taking personal experiences seriously, while still accounting for the continuous role of the social. How, then, can we combine the power of research that reveals group differences and still account for the social construction of the ideas being studied? In terms of sexuality research, I propose three guidelines in an effort to encourage researchers to ask questions and use methods that address social, relational, and political inequities while studying the intimate.

(1) Measure entitlement to sexual pleasure alongside sexual satisfaction

A number of researchers have developed methods for linking individuals' expectations with subsequent ratings. For example, Raphael, Rukholm, Brown, Hill–Bailey, and Donato (1996) developed a quality of life measure for adolescents that blended how important a domain was to the individual with how satisfied they were in this domain. This model holds enormous potential for measuring how these two dimensions are related. As the investigators explained, ''Importance scores serve as a weight for converting satisfaction scores into quality of life (QoL) scores'' (Raphael et al., 1996, p. 368). In this research design, a low satisfaction score weighted by a high importance score, results in a low QoL score. Conceptually, while importance is not equivalent to entitlement, this model offers a first step in measuring satisfaction as relative to an integral dimension concerning an individual's expectations within that domain. However, even if researchers were to include measures of entitlement or importance in their studies of sexual

satisfaction, this would only be a first step. Findings would still need to be analyzed alongside dominant discourses of what "important" means to specific groups, for example, with considerations of the costs of imagining sexual satisfaction as important for some, the potential burdens of sexual identification for others, etc. With these limitations in mind and the complexity that would be required, I nevertheless recommend sexual satisfaction be measured alongside additional dimensions, such as entitlement, importance, or "level of aspiration" (Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944), which would offer investigators necessary insights into the otherwise flat sexual satisfaction scores.

(2) Study the anchors

What counts as low and high sexual satisfaction is essential to understand if we are to understand how participants are interpreting items. It is also important to understand how item responses relate to the social and political conditions of individuals. There are a number of methods for collecting systematic data on the psychological structures individuals use to organize and order an idea (Rogler, 1999).

For example, in her study of sexual satisfaction in a sample of young adults, McClelland (2009) used a modified version of Cantril's (1965) ladder in which participants were asked to define what "less" and "highly" sexually satisfied meant to them. While this sample reported high satisfaction on close-ended measures, there were a number of definitional differences in terms of gender and sexual minority status. For example, female participants described the low end of the scale in extremely negative terms, using terms like "depressed," "emotionally sad," "pain," and "degradation." No male participants used terms with this degree of negative affect. The more common descriptions used by men addressed issues such as, loneliness, having an unattractive sexual partner, and insufficient sexual stimulation. These data revealed that men and women imagined a very different low end of the sexual satisfaction scale. While women imagined the low end to include the potential for extremely negative feelings and the potential for pain, men imagined the low end to represent the potential for less satisfying sexual outcomes, but they never imagined harmful or damaging outcomes for themselves. In sum, when responding to a Likert scale of possible sexual satisfaction, men and women seem to be employing very different baseline expectations when assessing their own experiences.

(3) Attend to construct validity issues

Psychology has a long history of examining its operationalizations and the limitations of any measurement strategy (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Construct validity is an assessment of how well you have translated your ideas or theories into actual measures (Simms, 2008; Trochim, 2006). This history requires us to be attentive to the relationships between our constructs and our operationalizations (Loevinger, 1957). In the field of sexual satisfaction and function, the move to physiological indicators has revealed problematic translations from theory to method. For example, vaginal plethysmography (which measures blood flow to the vaginal area) is used as a measure of arousal in women (Levin & Wylie, 2008; Wouda et al., 1998). In men, the presence of an erection is equated with sexual desire and satisfaction (NIH, 1993; Rosen, Cappelleri, & Gendrano, 2002). However, there is reason to believe that blood flow to the genital region is not the same as arousal or desire – these may be indicators of these states, but are not equivalent (Basson, 2007; Chivers, Seto, Lalumière, Laan, & Grimbos, 2010; Ferenidou et al., 2008; Wood,

Koch, & Mansfield, 2006). Definitional issues, operationalizations, and examination of proxies used in research settings are essential (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999; Sanders et al., 2010).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that sexual satisfaction scores may stand in for a range of other experiences, including feelings of deservingness, entitlement, and expectation. An intimate justice framework encourages researchers to look for group differences *and* to insist that thresholds and definitions used by individuals (and groups) to determine levels of equity also be routinely examined. When a person decides that something is *good enough*, he or she is establishing demarcations for themselves and for others. These demarcations indicate where demands will be made, in essence stating: "below this threshold is not enough and I will demand more, above this threshold is enough." If these thresholds are dramatically different, demands are also dramatically not equivalent; this difference should be documented, analyzed, and not mistaken for being simply diverse, or worse yet, "natural." In the debates over gender differences and sexuality, we must not lose sight that diversity is one thing, but demanding less is another. Sexual satisfaction is, therefore, an especially trenchant topic for consideration and an intimate justice framework is required.

The notion of what it means to be "satisfied" is an important concept in psychology because it has the potential to signal inequality among individuals and groups. However, for women and sexual minorities, evaluations of what is "good enough" in their sexual encounters can be especially treacherous. For these groups, the very act of being sexual is too often assumed to be dangerous, dirty, contagious, and illegal. Sexual satisfaction represents the culmination of sexual rights – it is the insistence not only enacting the sexual, but insistence on enjoying the sexual. An intimate justice framework requires that the researcher contend with these socio-political antecedents to individuals' evaluations. It is not enough to simply arrive at the conclusion that subjectivity rules that day and that people evaluate their lives according to idiosyncratic definitions. Intimate justice insists that we develop methodological practices to systematically observe and interpret individual assessments as they occur within disparate social conditions. Without this framework, we risk confusing what people say they want with what they think they deserve.

Short Biography

Sara I. McClelland is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies and a Post-Doctoral Scholar in the Michigan Society of Fellows at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on the links between sexual health, psychological research methods, and issues of social justice. Her work has appeared in *Harvard Educational Review, Emory Law Journal,* and *Social Justice Research* and is forthcoming in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* and the *Handbook of Health Psychology*. Current research involves developing new methodological approaches to studies of sexual well-being across the life span with a focus on how social marginalization due to age, gender, race/ethnicity, class, and/or sexual orientation affect individual and group-level experience of sexual health. In addition, she is co-investigator on a National Institutes of Health study investigating female sexual quality of life after cancer. She received her Ph.D. in Social/Personality Psychology from The Graduate Center, City University of New York.

Endnote

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