



Caring, Chemistry, and Orgasms: Components of Great Sexual Experiences

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Abstract

Sexual satisfaction is important to individual well-being and relationship satisfaction, making it a research topic relevant for sex clinicians and relationship therapists. The current study adds to sexuality literature by asking participants questions about the factors involved in “great sex.” We conducted 78 interviews via email or phone with participants ranging in age from 18 to 69. The sample included a diverse range of sexual orientations and identities, and various relationship statuses. Three primary themes emerged regarding great sex: orgasm, an emotional component, and chemistry/connection. Though some participants equated an emotional aspect as love; most participants made clear the difference between love and emotional elements in sex. Many participants shared their belief that a man only invests in his female partner’s orgasm when he also invests in her emotionally. Thus, some women explained that the emotional component helped them be present enough to orgasm. Others explained the emotional component as trust and affection. Participants also elaborated to define chemistry, which they regarded as out of one’s control and impossible to manufacture. A smaller number of participants stated unequivocally the lack of necessity of an emotional aspect to great sex; they stated instead that physical connection trumped an emotional component.

Keywords Great sex · Sexual pleasure · Sexual chemistry · Connection · Orgasm

Introduction

Sexual satisfaction functions as important to individual well-being and relationship satisfaction, making it a research topic relevant for sex clinicians and relationship therapists. Despite research examining what factors affect sexual dysfunctions in individuals and relationships, there remains a lack of research about

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sexual experiences that bypass what is functional or simply satisfactory into great and extraordinary (Kleinplatz et al., 2009). Popular media and porn often depict unachievable standards and sexual experiences (Wampold, 2014). And yet media representations often serve as the only source available to the general public, hungry for resources on this topic (Wampold, 2014). Thus, the current study adds to sexuality literature by asking participants questions about the factors involved in “great sex,” “good sex,” and the differences between them. This qualitative study used interviews of participants from a large range of ages, various sexual orientations and identities, and various relationship statuses. After qualitative analysis of interview data, three primary themes emerged regarding great sex: orgasm, an emotional component, and chemistry or connection.

The current study is a descriptive exploratory inquiry adding to the existing literature on sexual satisfaction and motivations for sexual activity. As Jones (2020) pointed out, though much work in other disciplines focuses on pleasure, “sociology has had very little to say about the importance of pleasure in shaping social action, the ways that society constructs what pleasure is, and how we experience pleasure.” This qualitative study contributes to the formation of a sociology of pleasure through giving voice to the lived experiences of our participants on this topic. Theory development in this area is sorely needed.

Sexual Satisfaction

Sexual satisfaction refers to “a subjective feeling of happiness with one’s sexual experiences” (Freihart et al., 2020; Lindley et al., 2021; Zegeye et al., 2020). There is a wealth of research investigating the factors which facilitate and inhibit sexual satisfaction. We can define the variables that affect sexual satisfaction as intrapersonal or interpersonal though the factors on both these levels often interact and affect one another (Pascoal et al., 2019). Factors positively correlated with sexual satisfaction on an intrapersonal level for men and women include education (del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes & Sierra, 2015; Zegeye et al., 2020), physical health (del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes & Sierra, 2015), mental health (Shahhosseini et al., 2014), sexual function and health (Holt et al., 2021; Velton & Margraf, 2017; Zegeye et al., 2020), sexual confidence (Holt et al., 2021; Zegeye et al., 2020), reaching orgasm (Freihart et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2021; Leavitt et al., 2021; McClelland, 2014; Pascoal et al., 2014, 2019), and mindfulness (del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes & Sierra, 2015; Leavitt et al., 2019). Conversely, factors associated with decreased sexual satisfaction in men and women include older age (Carvalho & Costa, 2015; del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes & Sierra, 2015), higher sexual dysfunction and sexual distress (Carvalho & Costa, 2015; Freihart et al., 2020; Velton & Margraf, 2017), and poor mental health (del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes & Sierra, 2015; Shahhosseini et al., 2014). Factors on an interpersonal level positively correlated with men’s and women’s sexual satisfaction include emotional expression and connection (Fischer et al., 2022; McClelland, 2014; Pascoal et al., 2014, 2019; Pronier & Monk-Turner., 2014), communication and disclosure about both sexual and nonsexual topics (Freihart et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2021; Mallory,

2022; Shahhosseini et al., 2014; Velton & Margraf, 2017; Zegeye et al., 2020), displays of intimacy (Carvalho & Costa, 2015; Freiharf et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2021; Pronier & Monk-Turner, 2014; Zegeye et al., 2020), frequency of sexual activity (Carvalho & Costa, 2015; Freiharf et al., 2020; Pascoal et al., 2014; Pascoal et al., 2019; Velton & Margraf, 2017), sexual compatibility with partner (Freiharf et al., 2020), relationship satisfaction (del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes & Sierra, 2015; Freiharf et al., 2020), and secure attachment style (Dosch et al., 2016; Sonmali et al., 2021). Factors negatively affecting men's and women's sexual satisfaction include difficulties with emotion regulation (Dubé et al., 2019; Fischer et al., 2022; Rellini et al., 2012), length of relationship (Carvalho & Costa, 2015; del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes & Sierra, 2015), and desire discrepancies between partners (Freiharf et al., 2020; Velton & Margraf, 2017) making them interpersonal sexual satisfaction inhibitors. Many of these factors remain consistent across cultures and sexual orientations (Carvalho & Costa, 2015; Holt et al., 2021; Pascoal et al., 2019).

Although research finds the factors mentioned above apply to both men and women, some variables regarding sexual satisfaction function as somewhat unique to each gender. Research examining factors influencing women's sexual satisfaction found that women report as important to their sexual satisfaction: control over sexual encounters and freedom (Elmerstig et al., 2012; Fahs & Plante, 2017; Pronier & Monk-Turner, 2014; Walker, 2017; Zegeye et al., 2020). This defies the current social narrative positioning women as passive surrenderers during sex. Women's acceptance of their own sexual identity also proves important to their sexual satisfaction (Holt et al., 2021). Despite the increase in approval of sex before marriage (Horowitz et al., 2020), in Western society, social expectations regarding sexuality remain entrenched in a double standard requiring more sexual modesty, sexual inexperience of women, and prohibit women from "seek[ing] sexual pleasure outside of committed relationships" (Armstrong et al., 2012, p. 483; Bay-Cheng, 2015; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Petersen & Hyde, 2010). While the sexual double standard has shifted somewhat, it still exists. "The sexual double standard (SDS) is a gender-related sexual phenomenon predominantly seen in Western cultures where society allows and even rewards men for their sexual promiscuity while stigmatizing and punishing women for engaging in the same behaviors" (Lentz & Zaikman, 2021, p. 1100). We judge harshly the women who defy these expectations. Men are similarly affected by social expectations. Men's sexual satisfaction relies upon their partner's orgasm and pleasure due to the demands of masculinity. Although women have also expressed the importance of their partner's orgasm and pleasure to their sexual satisfaction (Freiharf et al., 2020; Opperman et al., 2014), their motivations differ. Women who have trouble orgasming may emphasize the orgasm of their partners; men who focus on their partner's pleasure see it as a sign of achievement and validation of their manliness when their female partners orgasm (Chadwick & von Anders, 2017; McClelland, 2014; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014; Walker, 2020b). This follows the concept of men as the "givers" of orgasm and pleasure in heterosexual sexual experiences (Braun et al., 2003). Since sexual satisfaction refers to subjective personal experiences,

asking participants what separates their past experiences of great sex from good sex and bad sex provides insight.

Orgasms and Sex

Besides orgasms functioning as an important aspect of sexual satisfaction for men and women (Fahs & Plante, 2017; Freiharf et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2021; Leavill et al., 2021; McClelland, 2014; Pascoal et al., 2014; Pascoal et al., 2019; Walker, 2017), people also often consider them the “ultimate pleasure” (Opperman et al., 2014, p. 509). Research investigating attitudes about orgasms demonstrate that participants often see orgasms as the reason to have sex; in fact, some participants say that sex without orgasm is pointless (Opperman et al., 2014; Séguin & Blais, 2019; Walker, 2017). While some people consider orgasm as an optional sexual experience, many feel disappointment when it fails to occur or want their partner to reach it regardless of whether they themselves experience orgasm (Séguin & Blais, 2019; Walker, 2020b). Orgasm frequently also signifies the end of sexual activity during that session. In heterosexual encounters, both male and female partners often see the man’s orgasm as the end of sex, so much so that when he finishes, the whole act is over (Opperman et al., 2014; Séguin & Blais, 2019; Wetzel & Sanchez, 2022). This could be one of the contributing factors to what is known as the “orgasm gap”—a term referring to the disparity between men’s and women’s orgasms during heterosexual sexual encounters—between men and women along with the pressure for women to orgasm from vaginal penetration alone (Muelenhard & Shippee, 2010), the prioritization of penetrative vaginal intercourse over clitoral stimulation (Braun et al., 2003), women not feeling as free to enjoy sex as men (Armstrong et al., 2012), the focus on male pleasure (Wetzel & Sanchez, 2022), and lack of sufficient sexual communication (Wetzel & Sanchez, 2022). Despite the difference in orgasm frequency between men and women, both men and women usually desire orgasm during sex and consider it important in sexual encounters. Women listed expressed orgasm as part of happy and joyous sex (Fahs & Plante, 2017), and both men and women reported orgasms as part of “great sex” (Kleinplatz et al., 2009; Walker, 2017, 2020b). Research shows relationship factors and individual factors correlate with achieving orgasm. Research shows relational factors such as trust and comfort, and individual factors like emotional state or mood facilitate orgasm in men and women (Opperman et al., 2014; Séguin & Blais, 2019). Women’s orgasms correlate with sexual stimulation other than coitus, sexual assertiveness, and sexual pride (Lentz & Zaikman, 2021; Opperman et al., 2014).

Emotions and Sex

Emotions and the expression of emotions influence many factors associated with sexuality such as sexual functioning, sexual desire, and sexual satisfaction (Fischer et al., 2022; Peixoto & Nobre, 2016). In Fahs and Plante’s (2017) study focusing on women and sex, the majority of participants said they required emotional connection

for good and enjoyable sex. Participants also specified the emotions involved in sex need not be positive emotions like love or affection; the sex just needed to be emotionally charged in order to be good. Séguin and Blias (2019) found emotional connection facilitates orgasm for men and women. Emotional expression positively correlated with sexual satisfaction (Denes et al., 2020; Fischer et al., 2022), and emotional suppression is related to sexual dissatisfaction and lower sexual desire (Dubé et al., 2019; Fischer et al., 2022). How negative emotions are expressed or regulated is also a significant influence. Previous research found an association between the display of negative emotions during sexual encounters and decreased sexual satisfaction, lower sexual response, increased sexual distress, and inhibited sexuality (Bancroft et al., 2009; Dube et al., 2019; Fischer et al., 2022; Nobre & Pinto-Gouveia, 2006).

Sexual Chemistry and Connection During Sex

Connection between partners correlates with sexual satisfaction. As described previously, participants in Fahs and Plante's (2017) study valued emotional connection. This was also true for participants in Pascoal et al.'s (2019) study and for participants in McClelland's (2014) study, who included emotional connection within their definitions of sexual satisfaction. McClelland's (2014) participants also spoke of connection in a more general way as well, saying that sexual satisfaction constituted more than just the act of sex and included the connection between partners. Soumali et al. (2021) alludes to this relational connection when discussing the positive correlation between family cohesion (which also includes couple cohesion) and sexual satisfaction. Orgasm also correlates with connection: emotional and physical. Participants in Séguin and Blias's (2019) study listed emotional connection as a facilitator of orgasm and said that the physical sensation of orgasm itself can be a connective experience. Sexual chemistry between partners correlates with sexual satisfaction. In Holt et al.'s (2021) study on female sexual satisfaction and sexuality, participants described chemistry as a vital component to sexual satisfaction.

Research Questions

The questions guiding this inquiry included: (1) How are experiences of great sex differentiated from experiences of good sex? (2) What traits distinguish great sex from good sex? (3) What circumstances and qualities are required for participants to rate a sexual experience as great?

Methods

We recruited sexually active adult participants for a study on the components of great sex from a wide variety of outlets for interviews after obtaining IRB approval. We posted recruitment calls on *YikYak*, *Twitter* and *Facebook*, and asked connections to share widely. The first author granted students extra credit

for sharing the study call on their social media accounts but requested the students themselves refrain from participation. Student researchers placed personal ads with the recruitment call in major U.S. cities on *Craigslist*. Data collection ran from October 2016 through May 2018. Those willing to participate in an interview contacted the first author by email. In response, they received a form letter describing the study with the informed consent form attached. The first author collected demographic information and assigned each participant a pseudonym. The first author conducted interviews via telephone or email. The bulk of respondents opted for email interviewing, which functioned as a virtual conversation. That is, the first author sent one question at a time via email, and participants responded to the question. Based on the response, the first author posed follow-up questions. A single interview often took weeks to accomplish.

Although conducting interviews via email may seem unconventional, email interviews are gaining popularity, especially during COVID-19 (Amri et al., 2021; Hensen et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). And many previous studies have also recruited from websites, and then conducted the entirety of their study online as well (Mohebati et al., 2012; Ramo et al., 2010; Siegel et al., 2011; Walker, 2014a, 2014b, 2017, 2020b; Walker & Kuperberg, 2022). Studies suggest that when researching sensitive topics, like sexual experiences, participants will reveal more information when they are not face-to-face with their interviewer (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Kim et al., 2003). Thus, email interviewing permitted the participants in this study to share more freely.

Email interviews self-produced transcripts, which the first author sent back to the participant for member-checking. Once confirmed, the first author identified transcripts only by the pseudonym and destroyed the electronic correspondence to ensure confidentiality. Interviewing continued until the first author assured saturation occurred. This sample includes a total of 78 interviews completed.

Limitations

While email interviewing provides many benefits, there are limitations. Interviewing via email requires a higher level of motivation and interest in the interview itself on the part of the participant (Chen & Hinton, 1999; Meho, 2006). The typing and reading required can be physically demanding. While the asynchronous nature eliminates scheduling issues, it requires extra time due to the reading, thinking, typing, and maintaining a thread throughout responses. Given the concurrent nature of email interviewing, the researcher must get a response onto the screen while simultaneously probing participant responses, keeping everyone engaged and involved, and asking all relevant questions. Denoting emotion and intonation through emoticons and acronyms requires the researcher's familiarity. A marked limitation of this methodology includes the lack of visual cues on the part of both participant and researcher. Email interviews lack the benefit of body language to help discern meaning and intent.

Email interviews can take weeks to complete. That longer timeframe sometimes results in participant frustration, loss of interest, and drop-out (Hodgson, 2004). Inadvertent delivery to spam or clutter folders thwart interviews. Cluttered and highly trafficked email accounts result in lost interview questions. Sometimes participants read interviewer emails but forget to respond. Online data collection necessitates computer access and literacy, which excludes certain groups.

Data Analysis

While the first author collected the data for this project, the second author's role in this study focused on the qualitative analysis, literature reviews, and detailing of the findings. We analyzed data that yielded information about the participants' perceptions of their experiences. We employed the grounded theory method of qualitative data analysis, which utilizes the constant comparative method credited to Glaser and Strauss (1967). With grounded theory, the researcher inductively analyzes data to understand the lived experiences of the participants and approaches the research without a hypothesis or predetermined theory regarding the phenomenon in question. Rather, the data itself guides theory formation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using this methodology, a repetitive comparison of concepts, themes, and experiences both between and within data is utilized (Merriam, 1998, 2002). In grounded theory, researchers conduct data analysis in distinct phases (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) as they analyze data on several levels, including description, category construction, and make inferences to explain the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 1998). We reviewed transcript documents line-by-line, identifying themes and patterns that shaped data. This coding, conceptualizing, and categorizing took place by hand, providing the means of "distilling large quantities of information to uncover significant features and elements that are embedded in the data" (Stringer, 2007, p. 95).

Qualitative methods produce data reflective of experiences and meanings that are culturally- and socially-shaped. The results of grounded theory analysis can provide insight into social norms, but the shared nature of these meanings and experiences limit our ability to isolate which influences are sociocultural and which are individual (Rothe, 2000). This methodology allowed us to discern the meaning-making of the participants in the study and to examine their experiences and contributions to the existing knowledge on this topic.

Qualitative Sample

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 69. Seventy-eight participants completed interviews, a large sample for qualitative work (Dworkin, 2012). Another 52 started but never finished interviews, a common phenomenon in email interviewing (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015; Hershberger & Kavanaugh, 2017; Walker, 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Walker & Kuperberg, 2022); we discarded those.

Of the 78, 49 (63%) identified as women; 28 (36%) as men; and one (<1%) as genderqueer or genderfluid. When considering sexual orientation, 52 (67%) participants identified as heterosexual, while 24 (31%) identified as non-heterosexual (e.g., 15 [19%] bisexual). Thirty-one (40%) reported they had a bachelor's degree or higher. Thirty-six (46%) reported having children. Twenty-four (31%) reported being married; another 10 (13%) reported being partnered (e.g., engaged, living with someone, ongoing monogamous relationship), while 24 (31%) were single and 15 (19%) reported being single after a previous partnership (e.g., divorced, separated, widowed). Only ten (13%) reported a racial identity other than White. Participants self-reported their claimed racial identities, and we have reported those as stated by participants.

Results

Interviews revealed orgasm, an emotional aspect, and chemistry/connection figure prominently as the top necessary components of great sexual encounters. Participants elaborated to define chemistry, which they regarded as out of one's control and impossible to manufacture. A smaller number of participants stated unequivocally the lack of necessity of an emotional aspect to great sex; they stated instead that physical connection trumped an emotional component.

Orgasms

Forty-nine participants listed orgasms as an essential characteristic of truly great sex. Most felt no need to elaborate beyond stating orgasms function as a required aspect of great sex. However, some extended their description. Aubrey (39, White, female, heterosexual, married) explained, "I think [orgasm is] required for [sex] to be great because it releases tension." Some participants specified that their own orgasm mattered most. Amy (23, White/Native American, female, bisexual, single) said:

Great sex definitely requires an orgasm. I have had a lot of really passionate, fun sex, but when it ends when he climaxes, the whole thing is ruined for me. It shows me that my partner didn't care about me, he just wanted to get some. Sex without an orgasm is just a huge letdown. I don't like to get all worked up to just be let down without release.

Amy verbalizes a well-known phenomenon known as the orgasm gap (Andrejek & Heath, 2006; Bouchars, 2021; Mahar et al., 2020; Wade, 2015; Wade et al., 2005; Wetzel, 2023; Wetzel et al., 2022). Wade et al. (2005) found among a sample of college students that women orgasm 39% of the time during penetrative intercourse versus men who do so 91%. Ritchers et al. (2006) analyzed data from a national survey of people in Australia and found women consistently orgasmed less often than men during penetrative vaginal intercourse. Thus, the importance Amy places on her own orgasm makes sense.

Other participants focused on their partner's orgasm. Eric (46, White, male, bicurious, single) explained, "I do not require an orgasm if I'm able to completely satisfy my partner. I find it incredibly stimulating to watch and feel my partner orgasm." Men often report women's orgasm as a top sexually satisfying experience (Braun et al., 2003). Further, men often rely on their partner's orgasm to reify their masculinity (Walker, 2020a). Hunter (20, white, male, heterosexual, single) added, "For me, I don't have to orgasm for the sex to be great. But if my partner doesn't orgasm at least once then, to me, that is 'bad sex.'" When a sexual encounter lacks an orgasm for their partner, many men experience this as a negative sexual experience (Walker, 2020b). Research shows both men and women perceive a women's lack of orgasm as troubling mainly due to its impact on the male partner's ego (Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). One female participant reported that former male partners convinced her that they did not need orgasms for great sex. Poppy (45, White, female, heterosexual, separated) shared, "I would always have said that orgasm was important to have great sex. But two lovers more recently have showed me that, for them, even without orgasm sex can be incredible." Salisbury and Fisher found in 2014 that "male and female participants also agreed that men have the physical responsibility to stimulate their female partner to orgasm, while women have the psychological responsibility of being mentally prepared to experience the orgasm" (Salisbury & Fisher, 2014, p. 616).

Other participants explained that great sex requires orgasm for both parties. Morgan (38, White, female, heterosexual, cohabiting) elaborated, "Great sex is when you totally connect with someone physically, please each other, enjoy each other, and ultimately both orgasm (even better if you can orgasm at the same time)." Morgan's comments reflect a cultural fascination with simultaneous orgasm. Popular magazine articles on the simultaneous orgasm abound. Brody and Weiss (2011) found an association between simultaneous orgasm and satisfaction in multiple areas. Paige (21, mixed race, female, heterosexual, single) echoed the sentiment that both parties needed to orgasm, though not simultaneously: "I think to consider sex great both people need to orgasm." And Kevin (28, White, male, heterosexual, partnered) echoed the importance of orgasm equality: "It would definitely have to be not just me having [an orgasm], it would have to be both of us." Further research on orgasm equality is warranted.

Twelve participants specifically spoke about multiple orgasms. Some women, like Paige (21, mixed race, female, heterosexual, single), explained that "Since I (currently) almost always orgasm at least once I would say for me to consider it great, I would have to orgasm more than once." Thus, for women aware of their own capability for multiple orgasms, that experience existed as a foundational requirement for great sex. As Jessica (45, White, female, heterosexual, married) explained, "Sex without multiple orgasms would be a complete waste of time." Gérard et al. (2021) found that multi-orgasmic women reported higher levels of sexual motivation. Darling, et al. (1991) found that roughly 43% their respondents reported the capacity for multiple orgasms, and that multi-orgasmic women described themselves as more likely to be satisfied by penetrative vaginal intercourse. Cerwenka et al. (2021) found that multiple orgasms correlated with higher sexual satisfaction. Thus, women's knowledge of their capacity for

multiple orgasms likely renders sexual experiences with only one orgasm less pleasurable.

One participant reported a desire for her own multiple orgasms and those of her male partners. Chloe (30, White, female, heterosexual, partnered) explained, “For me, great sex ends in orgasm, preferably multiple for the both of us.” Wibowo and Wassersug (2016) reviewed the literature and found that multiple orgasms among men is rare (less than 10% among men in their 20s; less than 7% of men older than 30). However, Dunn and Trost (1989) posit “it may be our traditional expectations regarding the possible limited range of male orgasmic capacity have profoundly influenced men’s behavior as well as research in this area” (377). Perhaps this explains our single female participant with this ideal.

Four men in our study explained that great sex requires multiple orgasms for their female partners. William (61, White, male, heterosexual, divorced) said:

During great sex, my female partner has to have at least several orgasms. I would be personally disappointed if I could not bring her to that. I need to get my woman off well and often, and my pleasure in that, as well as the pleasure she is giving me, is intense and wonderful and not dependent on whether I have an orgasm any particular time or not.

For William, an absence of multiple orgasms for his partner proves more important than his own pleasure. This echoes the narratives of men in previous research (Walker, 2020b). Like previous participants in previous research, Jeff (62, White, male, married/poly) framed his preference as a personality trait: “For me an orgasm is not required but nice. For my partners, orgasms are minimum requirement! It is that pleaser thing in me.” In Walker (2020b), participants explained in great detail that they needed their female partner to orgasm, but their own orgasm remained unnecessary, and explained that perspective as their “pleaser” personality. While Bruce (37, White, male, heterosexual, married) wanted his own orgasm, he needed his partner to have multiples.

“Great sex” for me does include orgasm for myself and preferably multiple for my partner. I think that I would say that great sex includes obvious enjoyment by my partner, so good that I’m trying to hold back my orgasm. Taking my partner to multiple orgasms.

As discussed previously, female orgasms serve as a marker of men’s masculinity (Chadwick & Anders, 2017; Lamb et al., 2018; Savoury et al., 2022; Walker, 2020b). Men often experience them as accomplishment (Walker, 2020b). These responses echo that research. Finally, Michael (48, White, male, heterosexual, married) explained that his prowess proved so great that “it’s almost certain she will be having an amazing multi-orgasmic time.” Later, Michael described himself as “kind of a sexual god” when describing a sexual encounter. Roughly eleven participants expressed this great confidence in their own sexual skills.

Orgasm Not Required

Conversely, twenty participants made clear that orgasms were not required for sex to be great. Three women shared this sentiment. Harper (37, White, female, heterosexual, married) sums up those sentiments well:

To me, great sex has always been about how it makes me feel. If I feel a connection with the person on a physical level as well as emotional, there is sensuality, kissing, touching, a general desire to please the other person, then to me it doesn't really matter whether I orgasm or not. If I orgasm, then it's a lot more likely to fit into the "great" category, but I've not been able to climax during intercourse for many years and it hasn't stopped me enjoying sex.

Wetzel, et al. (2022) found that women who orgasm less often lower both their expectation and desire for orgasm. Further, Grace Wentzel explains "our expectations are shaped by our experiences. So, when women orgasm less, they will desire and expect to orgasm less" (Melore, 2022).

Emotional Component

Fifty-two participants explained that great sex requires an emotional component. Many stated this very simply: "There must be an emotional component. It cannot just be physical." Others elaborated. Marshall (47, White, male, heterosexual, separated) explained, "[the emotional component] may be the underpinning of the whole thing." Some participants clarified that the connection need not be romantic. Kirk (22, White, male, bisexual) said, "The emotional part isn't always love. Great sex is totally possible without romantic love, or any love for that matter, although I vastly prefer to be at least good friends with sexual partners." Citing an emotional component echoes previous research (Dogan et al., 2018; Epstein et al., 2009; Fahs & Plante, 2017; Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2007; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2012). However, this delineation between emotional, romantic, and love echoes previous research on women participating in infidelity, who sought an emotional connection absent love (Walker, 2017). Malik (33, Middle Eastern, male, heterosexual, single) echoed this sentiment: "[Great sex is] mostly physical. But there are 'emotional' elements such as passion/lust, but not necessarily how much I love the person." These participants made clear the difference between love and emotional elements in sex.

Gender played a role here as well. Two female participants claimed an emotional connection trumped orgasm. Harper (37, White, female, heterosexual, married) recounted:

To me, great sex has always been about how it makes me feel. If I feel a connection with the person on a physical level as well as emotional, there is sensuality, kissing, touching, a general desire to please the other person, then to me it doesn't really matter whether I orgasm or not.

Stacy (32, White, female, heterosexual, single) echoed this sentiment: "Emotional connection does make sex better. Even when I have had sex with someone

I am not romantically attached to I have always developed feelings. Orgasm isn't required for great sex, but a strong emotional connection is." As previously mentioned, many women discount the importance of orgasm for themselves based on previous experiences absent orgasm. But some women made clear that both orgasm and an emotional component mattered. Lexie (56, White, female, heterosexual, widowed) explained, "[Great sex is] the ability to experiment and have fun and feel intimate, where both parties are trusting and comfortable. Intimacy is necessary for great sex along with the orgasm." And others made clear that the emotional connection meant a greater likelihood of their orgasm. Taylor (44, white, female, heterosexual, married) elaborated, "A man who achieves orgasm first and then is intent on making sure you do as well. But I think that only happens if you have some kind of emotional connection. Not necessarily a deep one, but one nonetheless." Some men in the study equated an emotional connection with concern for their partner's pleasure as well. Jeff (62, White, male, married/poly) said, "[Great sex includes] both physical pleasure and the mental message that I do love and care about their pleasure when it comes to sex!!!" This supports some of our participants' idea that a man only invests in his female partner's orgasm when he also invests in her emotionally. Some women explained that the emotional component helped them be present enough to orgasm. Bianca (21, White, female, heterosexual, not married) said, "I have to feel emotionally close to the person to really stop worrying about how I might look and just enjoy the physical side of things." Thus, participants used the term "emotional" to indicate a range of characteristics.

Love

Eight participants specifically equated an emotional component with love. Bianca (21, White, female, heterosexual, not married) added, "Probably if I'm in love with them and if I have an orgasm while having vaginal intercourse, with those things sex is great and without them it's good at best." For these participants, great sexual experiences require feelings of love.

Annabeth (21, White, female, demisexual, single) explained, "[During great sex] I want to feel connected and in love and comfortable with being vulnerable for a moment. Emotionally, it is great to feel connected, relaxed, and present." These narratives echo previous research showing the importance of reciprocal love in sexual satisfaction (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). Participants across age cohorts reported this. Donna (60, White, female, heterosexual, married) added, "Great sex is when your lover whispers, 'I love you' and you know he means it." Both male and female participants reported this effect. Brandon (36, White, male, heterosexual, engaged) said, "I don't think I've ever had great sex with anybody that I didn't love. I think that I need that super intense passion that I think comes with loving somebody, and being in a committed monogamous relationship." And David (59, White, male, heterosexual, married) added, "Great sex is with your partner when there is deep passion and love involved." For some participants, love served as the most important characteristic of great sex. Poppy (45, White, female, heterosexual, separated) explained, "I think if an emotional connection is present too [along with

physical pleasure] then that heightens the pleasure enormously. All my best sex has been with someone I love.” Though some researchers found that emotional reasons such as expressing love factor more prominently for women (Buss, 2003), equal numbers of men cited the importance of love in our inquiry.

Still others delineated that “emotional” meant something besides love. Pete (60, White, male, heterosexual, married) explained, “But I am convinced the most important part of great sex, at least for us, and as reflected through her experience, is trust and affection.” Trust came up more than once. Jessica (45, White, female, heterosexual, married) echoed this sentiment: “Merely ‘good’ sex can become great sex if it includes an emotional connection, strong communication, implicit trust, and chemistry that includes both passion and humor.” Thus, the emotional component required for “great sex” meant a variety of things to participants.

Emotional Component Not Required

However, sixteen participants specifically said great sex did not require an emotional component. For these participants, the physical component of sex proved most important. Cary (32, White, female, heterosexual, married/separated) explained, “I think the physical component is the most important part of great sex. An emotional component can add to it, but I do not think emotional connections are necessary to have great sex.” Some believed this due to previous experiences. Scarlett (37, White, female, heterosexual, married) said, “I have had great sex with guys I didn’t love. I’ve had it with guys I didn’t really like. So, I’m going to say it’s more physical.” Participants in this category felt that it difficult to quantify great sex in general. As Jack (27, Hispanic, male, homosexual, married) explained:

Sex can be great either way, emotionally involved or just physical. They both have different elements that just make you feel good. Knowing someone has a physical attraction to you only and wishes to use you can be arousing itself, and knowing someone loves you and is willing to go out of his way to make you feel good is also fulfilling. I don’t think it can be easily categorized.

For Jack, previous experiences of great sex included both incidents where physical components proved more important and sessions where the emotional took center. Multiple participants put forth the idea that one could have great sex absent both an emotional component or even liking the other person. Meredith (24, White, female, bisexual, engaged) added, “Yes, I can have great sex with someone that I don’t like, it’s not very intimate (if that makes sense) it just feels great.” For these participants, the physical ranked above all for great sex. Andie (18, White, female, heterosexual) explained, “I think you can have great sex with someone you don’t like on an emotional level, but I personally believe you have to be physically attracted to a person to have great sex with them.” They made clear that an emotional component fails to guarantee great sex. Lila (46, White, female, heterosexual, married) said:

Hmm. I really think [great sex is] mostly physical. I can be madly in love with you and have terrible sex with you. Then again, I've never had great sex with anyone I wasn't really attracted to. But attraction isn't necessarily emotional either. It can be chemical. So I think it's physical and chemical, but not necessarily emotional.

For these sixteen participants, physical components proved most important.

Within this category as well, one woman specifically said while great sex failed to require an emotional component, neither did it require orgasms. Natalie (26, White, female, pansexual, single) explained, "Orgasms are not required [for great sex], but neither is an emotional connection." While another participant made clear that an emotional component was not required, but orgasms certainly were. Maya (43, African American, female, heterosexual, divorced) said, "Great sex does equal an orgasm. I have had orgasms from a purely physical attachment." As previously discussed, the discounting of an importance of orgasm for women may stem from past experience and socialization.

Chemistry/Connection

Thirty-six participants reported that chemistry or connection served as a top ingredient of great sex. Sexual chemistry receives little attention in research and proves difficult to define. Leiblum and Bresnyak (2006) defined sexual chemistry as "non-specific, subjective description of a mysterious, physical, emotional and sexual state that feels driven and mostly pleasurable existing in the context of an interpersonal relationship" (57). Thus, chemistry requires an emotional experience for the individual as well as a physical one. Two participants specifically described a connection as an emotional component. Danielle (47, White, female, heterosexual, divorced) said, "There is a big emotional component for me. When I have trust and a connection, I can relax, let go, and that's when truly great sex happens." Meanwhile, Cherilynn (39, White, female, bisexual, married) preferred the physical over the emotional in great sex, but explained the need for chemistry, which she described as emotional: "The components for me are mostly physical but there also has to be a certain level of chemistry or emotional connection." While many discount the importance of chemistry, Cassell (2008) claims that sexual chemistry serves as a foundation for long-lasting relationships.

Many participants talked at length about the importance of chemistry and connection. Stella (38, White, female, bisexual, divorced) tried to clarify:

Great sex: what a difficult question. To me, I want a connection with a person. Whether it's a new relationship or I know the person quite well, there has to be a connection. Some sort of "spark" or "chemistry," which usually means I dig them physically, yes, and more importantly, I dig something about them intellectually. I like who they are, what they say, their persona, what they stand for, etc. We have an ease of talking and sharing information which to me is sexy. If that connection is there, it sets a foundation for good and great sex.

As Leiblum and Bresnyak (2006) mention, chemistry proves challenging to define, to quantify, or to explain. But our participants tried nonetheless. Some participants focused on the physical aspect of chemistry. Maya (43, African American, female, heterosexual, divorced) said, "For me, it's connection and that is established in the first few seconds. I can tell from the first kiss. I can feel whether we will have a connection from the first touch. Sex for me is based on connection from the beginning and throughout the experience." Zhana Vrangalova, a sexuality and relationship scientist explains that some people experience sexual chemistry immediately, while for others it develops over time (Kassel, 2022).

Chemistry proves elusive. Participants acknowledged that it cannot be manufactured. Trevor (26, mixed race, male, straight, single) explained:

You need a natural connection, like you have to fit together. Overall, it's like a situational thing, as well as a natural thing. Some people are just more inclined to have great sex with each other because of whatever their personalities are or what their physical makeup is. I kind of like to describe it as a lock and key thing. No matter the effort you put into it with some people, they just fit better together.

Thus, for these participants, chemistry is either there or it is not there. Monica (43, white, female, bisexual, married) summed it up: "I think for me 'great sex' is the chemistry between myself and the other person. I think it's either there or it isn't." But they made clear that you cannot control with whom you have chemistry, and delineated the emotional aspect of chemistry from the emotional component many require for great sex. Lila (46, White, female, heterosexual, married) explained, "So I think it's [great sex is] physical and chemical, but not necessarily emotional. Chemistry. You have attraction to other people that you have no control over. It's just chemical." The belief that chemistry remains out of our control persisted as salient.

Participants explained that chemistry includes liking the person and trust, and that with that, you can let go and be present. Michael (48, White, male, heterosexual, married) said, "Liking a person is important to have that connection." Women spoke more about the need for trust to be able to be present during sex. Danielle (47, White, female, heterosexual, divorced) explained, "When I have trust and a connection, I can] relax, let go, and that's when truly great sex happens." They spoke about how chemistry and connection allow for vulnerability. Annabeth (21, White, female, demisexual, single) said, "[During great sex] I want to feel connected and in love and comfortable with being vulnerable for a moment. Emotionally, it is great to feel connected, relaxed, and present." Like in other categories, a small number of women said this characteristic trumped orgasm as a qualifier for great sex. Harper (37, White, female, heterosexual, married) said:

To me, great sex has always been about how it makes me feel. If I feel a connection with the person on a physical level as well as emotional, there is sensuality, kissing, touching, a general desire to please the other person, then to me it doesn't really matter whether I orgasm or not.

But others made clear the importance of chemistry and orgasms. Tammy (49, White, female, heterosexual, divorced) said, “Great sex equals great chemistry, perfect penis size, g-spot orgasms and mutual satisfaction.” Cherilynn (39, White, Female, bisexual, married) echoed that sentiment: “Great sex involves multiple ingredients: good chemistry, a build of sexual acts, intensity, and multiple orgasms.” Ariel (41, White, female, bicurious, married) added, “Great sex for me needs to have equal components of charged chemistry, compatible attitudes, interpersonal intellectual compatibility, mutual orgasms and high levels of desire on both sides.” So, like previous categories, the importance of orgasms varied among participants.

Participants claimed chemistry permeated an encounter. Erin (35, White, female, heterosexual, common law marriage) described it: “There is undeniable chemistry and passion behind every kiss and touch.” Chemistry permitted honesty. Whitney (19, African American, female, homosexual, single) explained, “And there’s like a connection between the two [during great sex], like we both are comfortable with each other, so we can be completely open and honest.” But chemistry also tapped into a different level. Meredith (24, White, female, bisexual, engaged) explained, “Other components [of great sex] include mutual intensity, or an almost primal need to share each other’s bodies. That chemistry or passion, whatever you wanna call it, where you let go of composure and sensibility.” But they agreed great sex required chemistry and connection. Kirk (22, White, male, bisexual) explained, “I think it’s difficult, if not impossible, to have great sex with someone for whom you feel no connection.” For these participants, chemistry and connection proved critical for great sex.

Discussion

Past research looks at factors that facilitate and inhibit sexual satisfaction. There exists a lack of research about extraordinary sexual experiences despite the existing research showing that pleasure serves as a motivation for sexual activity (Browning et al, 2000; Meston & Buss, 2007, 2009; Sumter et al., 2017), for participation in hookups (Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2021), casual sex (Lyons et al., 2014; Regan & Dreyer, 1999), sex within marriages (Lodge & Umberson, 2012) and sex within extra-relational affairs (Walker, 2017, 2019, 2020b). Teenagers also reported sexual pleasure as a motivator for sexual activity (Ott et al., 2006). Sexual pleasure proves important in individual experiences of and motivations for sexual activity. This study sought to investigate experiences of extraordinary sexual encounters and adds to the scant literature on the sociology of pleasure and what makes sex satisfying. Unlike previous literature examining the components of great or exceptional sex, we address the interactions of the components participants listed and how they shaped participants’ experiences (Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2007; Kleinplatz et al., 2009, 2022). Our data reveals orgasm, an emotional aspect, and chemistry/connection feature prominently in participants’ experiences of extraordinary sex. New theory must be developed.

The current study also expands the literature on the topics of orgasm, emotions during sex, and sexual chemistry and connection during sex. We found mixed results of women who care more about orgasming (including women who are multi-orgasmic) and women who care more about emotional connection, both of which echo previous literature on women's orgasms (Fahs & Plante, 2017; Holt et al., 2021; Séguin & Blais, 2019). Our participants felt that both parties should orgasm during sex, a topic requiring more research. Our findings on gendered differences of personal and partner's orgasm remain consistent with previous literature stating men find validation in their partner's orgasms (Braun et al., Salisbury & Fisher, 2014; Walker, 2020a). Among our participants, an emotional component proved important to both men and women; many believed that great sex did not require romantic feelings or love, and some professed that an emotional component was not always required for sex, contrasting to popular depictions of the interactions of emotions and sex. We add to literature attempting to define sexual chemistry and how people conceptualize it in their lived sexual experiences, and we address the concept of connection during sex, a concept largely ignored in the study of sexuality. New theory must be developed to expand the sociology of pleasure.

Conclusion

Sexual satisfaction figures prominently in relationship satisfaction and personal well-being. Thus, research on the factors necessary to generate great sex exists as an important topic of inquiry. Popular depictions of sexual activity frequently present unattainable standards and unrealistic sexual experiences (Wampold, 2014). This study asked participants to consider the features of "good sex" versus "great sex." A large sample of participants varying in age, sexual orientation, identity, and relationship status permitted a rich and insightful inquiry.

Most participants listed orgasms, an emotional component, and chemistry and connection as characteristics of great sex. Both men and women listed orgasm as a necessary aspect of great sex, although gendered differences in the importance of partner orgasm existed with men reporting more concern for their partner's orgasm than women. Participants also felt that both parties should orgasm during sex, suggesting a desire for orgasm equality. Although most respondents indicated great sex included an emotional component, participants' definitions of the emotional component varied from trust and affection to feelings of love. Contrasting with common gender expectations, both men and women valued this emotional component. Sixteen participants not only preferred the physical over an emotional component, but they also claimed great sex often excluded the latter. Defining chemistry proved difficult for participants. However, they tended to regard it as involuntary and outside of one's control, pointing out that manufacturing chemistry is impossible. Participants also discussed the desire for connection during sex and experienced similar difficulties defining exactly what this meant. This study contributes to the scant existing literature on people's perceptions of what makes sex great and the sociology of pleasure. We call for theory development on sexual pleasure.

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