Research Article

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The Sexual Body as a Meaningful Home: Making Sense of Sexual Concordance

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Abstract: The past 20–30 years have provided plenty of new empirical data on women's sexuality, a topic often theorised as puzzling and unexplainable. In recent discussions, a controversial issue has been the phenomenon of sexual concordance, i.e. the correlation between the self-reported, subjective assessment of one's sexual arousal and the simultaneous bodily response measured directly on the genitals. In laboratory-based assessments, sexual concordance has been observed to be on average substantially lower in women than in men, although the reasons for the considerable gender difference are still open to debate. Drawing on a phenomenological approach to culture-dependent meaning-formation and on feminist social theory of everyday sexuality, I argue that the reasons behind women's low sexual concordance can be found neither in their minds nor their bodies but in the way meaning-making processes function in human sexual experiences. Women's first-person perspectives on their own sexuality have historically played only a marginal role in the creation of socially endorsed sexual meanings, yet these shared meanings have a profound influence on how individuals make sense of their bodily experiences in sexual situations.

Keywords: phenomenology, sexuality, sexual concordance, sexual arousal, meaning-making, body, embodiment, home, feminist philosophy, feminist theory

1 Introduction

In philosophical debates on women's lived experiences, reference is often made to a certain feeling or condition of homelessness that results from a historical lack of cultural representation of women's thoughts, experiences and practices as seen from their own perspective.[1] Miglena Nikolchina quotes a range of prominent female authors who have felt homeless in their cultural and historical environment in the way I have in mind:

> "I am the first of a new genus" (Mary Wollstonecraft). "When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me" (Mary Shelley). "I look everywhere for grandmothers and find none" (Elizabeth Barrett Browning). "Why isn't there a tradition of the mothers?" (Virginia Woolf). Women have "no past, no history" (Simone de Beauvoir). "I look for myself throughout the centuries and I don't see myself anywhere" (Hélène Cixous). As Woolf (1958) noted, "strange spaces of silence" separate the solitary female utterances throughout history.[2]

1 For a recent example, see Söderbäck, *Revolutionary Time*, 246.
2 Nikolchina, *Matricide*, 8.

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More recently, Fanny Söderbäck has voiced a similar idea: "At present, we have no words to speak about woman – she is a dark continent, a riddle, an enigma, and a stranger – and the event of speaking woman or recognizing her specificity is bound to lead to some confusion and a sense of being at a loss of words."[3]

Such a phenomenon of cultural homelessness need not be distinctly manifested in the specific feelings or intuitions of many women in their everyday lives, but neither is it a purely theoretical construct.[4] Feminist phenomenologists have been particularly attentive to tracing these conceptual lacunae, which are often difficult to pinpoint precisely because, by definition, they cannot quite be put into words. One of the areas that has been strongly affected by both a lack of cultural representation and analytical difficulties provoked by the unreliability of first-person accounts has traditionally been sexuality. This has resulted in a practice of "double book-keeping" where the phenomenologist's task is to: "[…] note what the participant says, but also uncover what she does not or cannot say but what structures her discourse."[5]

In empirical research on women's sexual response, a similar pattern of confusion or hesitancy as to one's sexual feelings has been observed in experiments measuring sexual concordance, i.e. the extent of agreement between a person's genital and subjective states of sexual arousal.[6] During the decades of systematic research on the subject, women's average sexual concordance has been found relatively low and persistently lower than men's, suggesting a difficulty in interpreting, admitting or reporting one's involuntary genital reaction.[7] Whereas men's genital and self-reported arousal predominantly align, women's genital reaction frequently indicates strong sexual excitement when the reported level of arousal is significantly lower. Many women respond genitally to a much broader range of sexual cues than their subjectively stated preferences would indicate. Taken together, these discrepancies are read as a sign of low sexual concordance. In some cases, concordance can also be negative, meaning that physical excitement is very strong but no conscious arousal is reported, or *vice versa*.[8]

As to the reasons for the considerable gender difference in sexual concordance, the jury is still out. Some have argued for a physiological explanation: men's sexual organs are on the outer surface of their bodies, so they have a more direct and constant awareness of them. The adaptationist perspective suggests that for men both psychological and genital arousal is necessary for sexual intercourse, whereas for women strictly speaking neither is needed, and in many cases not present, either. There are those who find that low concordance is instrumental for maintaining more conservative sexual practices when selecting possible partners, and there are others who venture that with regard to sexual experiences, women's minds seem to be disconnected from their bodies.[9]

However, although on average women show systematically low sexual concordance, there is considerable in-group variation and for some women the physical and mental components of arousal are in strong alignment.[10] This suggests that low concordance is not universal and that there are also social and cultural

3 Söderbäck, *Revolutionary Time*, 253.

4 It is important to note here that female thinkers and authors have existed throughout history, and a lot of valuable work has been done recently to uncover their presence in various fields and disciplines. What is meant here is that their contribution has been largely absent from the literary, scientific and philosophical canon that has shaped generations of female authors during their formative years.

5 Simms and Stawarska, "Introduction," 12.

6 In laboratory studies, the two aspects of arousal are measured simultaneously: the test subject is exposed to different sexual cues (videos, pictures, audio-recordings, etc.) and asked to manually indicate whether the stimulus is sexually arousing for them. They do this on a keypad, a Likert scale or other similar device. At the same time, arousal is measured electronically on their genitals using a technique called plethysmography (a plethysmograph is an instrument for measuring changes in the volume of an organ; for women, a technique called vaginal photoplethysmography is used to measure vasocongestion and lubrication). Subsequently, the two indicators are compared and if there is significant overlap between them, the concordance is deemed to be high, whereas if there is a considerable difference between subjective and genital arousal, the concordance is deemed to be low.

7 Chivers et al., "A Meta-analysis;" and Chivers and Brotto, "Controversies."

8 Chivers and Brotto, "Controversies," 10–3.

9 For a more comprehensive list of various hypotheses, see Chivers et al. "Meta-analysis," 50; and Suschinsky et al., "Bogus Pipeline," 1529.

10 For example, homosexual women and women who regularly masturbate, as well as those who more frequently experience orgasm have shown considerably higher concordance rates. Chivers and Brotto, "Controversies," 13.

moderators at play. *Ergo*, more research attention has recently been paid to possible social factors. In the words of the authors of the first empirical study to that effect, "lower sexual concordance appears unlikely to be an essential feature of women's sexual responding and is likely, at least partially, the result of socialization."[11] The study in question showed that under the bogus pipeline condition (whereby half of the test group is told that their self-reported responses can be checked for veracity) women (but not men) showed higher concordance rates, i.e. their self-report went counter to the social expectations of modesty and "normal" sexuality but was a lot closer to their simultaneous genital reaction. The fact that the bogus pipeline condition had an effect only on women's results and not on men's suggests that women are more susceptible to impression management prompted by gender-related social norms. The question remains, though, to what extent, and how, do social factors enter into the interplay between the psychological and physiological components of sexual response.

In this article, I propose a phenomenological reading of women's typically low sexual concordance. The arguments made here are based on the general idea that sexuality is a type of intentionality: it is not experienced in the body as in a closed circuit but as a relationship of the body to the outside world that provides the instinctual components with a meaning.[12] Therefore, instead of describing the situation in terms of a disconnection between the mind and the body, I concentrate on delineating the culturally conditioned perceptual discordance that makes it complicated for many women to make sense of their sexual experiences. I argue that women's low concordance rate reflects the discrepancy between the social, cultural and theoretical representations of women's sexuality on the one hand, and their lived experiences on the other.

A question may have arisen by now: why do I propose to read someone's sexual experiences through the lens of some bewildering empirical data that are rather complicated to understand and interpret? At least, wouldn't it make more sense to use women's first-person accounts as a basis for a phenomenological study of their sexual encounters? In other words, why not simply ask women what is going on in their bodies?[13] The answer is that I use these particular findings because they are intriguing for several reasons. First, it is easy to interpret low sexual concordance as "proof" that women's first-person accounts of their sexual feelings and preferences are not reliable, thereby discrediting not only their sexual agency but also the emphasis that phenomenology as a method has traditionally laid on first-person perspectives. As can already be expected, I do not share this view and I think it is much more likely that the opposite is the case: the share of women who are confused about their sexual feelings is so high exactly because women's first-person perspectives have been largely missing from historical, cultural and theoretical representations that are nevertheless exactly the ones that they necessarily use to make sense of their experiences.

Hence, there is a certain vicious circle here: women feel the confusion in their bodies but as bodily feelings can only be interpreted through the socio-cultural means available to us, no unmediated expression of this feeling is possible. The resulting silence is one of the forms of inability to speak, or a feeling that cannot quite be put into words, that is alluded to by many feminist authors and which I referred to above as a feeling of homelessness. I believe that the experimental setting in which sexual concordance is measured has inadvertently brought out or revealed one of the possible forms of this inability of direct expression. In my view, the hesitancy or confusion that seems statistically prevalent in the self-reports of women's sexual response is a manifestation of a certain disruption or disturbance in the process by which we make sense of our experiences through the means of shared social and cultural imagery. But as the person who feels the confusion is not able to find words for it, this disruption could only be revealed unintentionally, in the course of an experiment that records the bodily reaction that is not under the person's conscious control and is thus impervious to impression management. Therefore, it is likely that the uncertainty many women feel with regard to their sexual experiences is ultimately not about how their body reacts but about the discrepancy between their body's reaction and how they think it *should* react. Below, I will explain how I

11 Suschinsky et al., "Bogus Pipeline," 1530.

12 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 182.

13 A critique to that effect can be found for example in Ussher, "Unraveling," 1209.

think this discrepancy is created, why it most strongly affects heterosexual women, and why men seem largely untouched by it.

2 Methodological remarks and conceptual framework

The categories of women and men as well as female and male are used non-exclusively in this article, in awareness and full recognition of the gender fluidity present in individuals. To better acknowledge and accommodate the categorical complexity involved in the subject matter, the theoretical approach I will make use of can be characterised as critical phenomenology,[14] distinguished by heightened attention to the ways contingent historical and social structures shape our experiences and play a constitutive role in how we make sense of them.[15] Sense-making or meaning-making itself is understood in the way it is used in phenomenologically informed cultural analysis, i.e. as a semiotic process (culture-dependent meaning formation) by which the human world is experienced as a series of identifiable, familiar and customary objects, units and processes.[16] Thus, both "meaning" and "culture" are used very broadly here.

For historical reasons, a certain precautionary distrust of empirical enquiries into female bodies runs through feminist theory and philosophy. However, human sexuality seems to be one of those fields where interdisciplinarity is not just a trendy catchword for attracting more research money or promoting one's academic visibility, but a genuine necessity. The contemporary field of experimental research has abandoned the historically genderless perspective on sexuality and recognises the gender-specific character of sexual response and experience.[17] Nevertheless, the empirical data used in this article are not considered to be the ultimate truth about anybody's sexual feelings. Instead, they are used as material for philosophical reflection, keeping in mind that further research may compel modifications to be made to the current hypotheses, or even totally disqualify them. Therefore, the arguments made here are of a speculative nature: if the current data are correct, then they can be interpreted in the ways presented below and the following explanations can be suggested for them. If subsequent research provides new information that contradicts the interpretation given here, the latter will need to be modified accordingly.

From the point of view of feminist philosophy, bringing the empirical and constructivist understandings of human sexuality into a meaningful dialogue might help balance an inclination to "dissolve the body into language,"[18] which has been observed in cultural studies already at the end of the last century and is still strongly present today. Social scientists have also highlighted a disparity between "theories of the body and of the social construction of sexuality, which say little about embodied sexual practices," and the "statistical data on who does what with whom and how often, but which tell us nothing about the processes involved," whereas "amid ever more abstract theorizations of the body, embodied social actors disappear altogether."[19] Experimental psychologists, on their part, feel that more insight into social factors is necessary.[20] The case of sexual concordance seems a good example of how the body, its representations in society and culture, and the lived experiences of social actors interact in increasingly complex ways that call for the joint explanatory force of various areas of research.

In all of the fields mentioned above, the amazing cultural and individual variety of people's sexual experiences is held to be common knowledge. There is also a shared recognition of some extent of bias arising from the researcher's personal and cultural background. While these limitations are extremely important to bear in mind for the author, they also presume the reader to acknowledge that any research

14 Weiss et al., *50 Concepts*.
15 Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," 12.
16 Viik, "Understanding."
17 The leading role in research on women's sexuality has also passed on to women.
18 Bynum, "Why All the Fuss," 1.
19 Jackson and Scott, *Theorizing Sexuality*, 139.
20 Suschinsky et al., "Bogus Pipeline," 1530.

effort requires some measure of generalisation that will have to overlook a whole range of individual differences.[21] The arguments made in this article ultimately bear the temporal, geographical and cultural restraints arising from the theoretical framework and the empirical material used. Women's sexuality has been characterised by various appearances and disappearances of knowledge throughout history, but this is a different topic that is not within the scope of this article. The bulk of the data available on the topic come from research conducted on women in Western societies in the last 20–30 years. Thus, my focus here is compelled to be Western and exclusively contemporary. This means that I refer to historical data about women's sexuality only insofar as they also have a bearing on the contemporary world. Similarly, it is well known that certain religious practices and communities pay special attention to women's sexual pleasure and make use of elaborate techniques to that effect, but as their influence on broad social and cultural representations of sexuality in Western societies is marginal, they are not included in the present study.

Nevertheless, the most general aim of this article is to contribute to a better understanding of human sexuality as a culture-dependent meaning-making process which, I believe, has a relatively stable and generalisable character both in terms of time and place, even though the context and content of sexual experiences endlessly varies. Thus, it remains my sincere hope that my main findings can also be extrapolated into other cultural and geographical contexts at least for comparative purposes. Finally, as a phenomenologist, I do not find some amount of research bias resulting from the personal situation and circumstances of the researcher a source of major concern. After all, as humans we are all temporally and culturally situated, and a failure to recognise this inevitable bias in oneself constitutes a much greater risk of erring. I believe that a plurality and heterogeneity of perspectives is more likely to result in a comprehensive picture of any subject matter than a pretendedly unbiased analysis conducted by a chosen few.

To facilitate the dialogue between the empirical input and the underlying philosophical perspective of this article, sexuality is understood here in accordance with the approach taken in those branches of feminist social theory that conceptualise sexuality as an ordinary, everyday social phenomenon embedded in other, more general patterns of sociality.[22] On this view, sexuality is seen neither as a pre-social inherent property of the human organism driven by biological imperatives, nor as a supra-social phenomenon capable of raising the subject into higher realms above their ordinary mundane existence.[23] This view of sexuality is in line with the phenomenological understanding that sexual experiences are never simply given, but always mediated through culturally shared meanings, which is why there are strictly speaking no purely sexual reflexes or pure states of pleasure.[24] Why the relationship between bodies and meanings is so important here will become clearer in the next sections.

3 Phenomenological view on culture-dependent meaning-formation

In various passages of his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty articulates the special relationship between the person's body and their ability to understand the surrounding world so as to feel at home in it:

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21 Aristotle observed that it belongs to an educated person to be aware that equal clarity is to be neither found nor sought in all discussions and for some subject matters the truth can only be indicated roughly and in outline (NE.I.3.1094b12–259). Today, of course, we have learned to be cautious about truth claims, especially so regarding sexuality, although the natural as well as human sciences still endeavour to gain ever greater knowledge of the world, albeit in increasing awareness that full objectivity cannot be achieved. This is particularly relevant in the case of a topic as multiply coded and elusive as human sexuality.

22 I rely predominantly on Jackson and Scott's understanding of sexuality as put forward in their joint work *Theorizing Sexuality*.

23 "In everyday terms these two frequently overlap, so that sex can paradoxically be seen both as an expression of humanity's animal nature and a means by which individuals can discover transcendental 'truths' about themselves." (Ibid., 149–50)

24 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 180.

> "My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'"[25]; "To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in a world"[26]; "... the body... is that strange object... through which we can consequently 'be at home in' that world, 'understand' it and find significance in it."[27]

Here, the body is seen as our primary home and it is only through the body as our anchorage and "home base" that the surrounding world becomes known and familiar to us. Two things are important here: first, we experience the world always and unconditionally from the perspective of our own body – all our experiences have the body as their necessary starting point. Second, the body is the instrument through which we not only perceive the world but also understand it and make sense of it in the first place. This basic bodily understanding is not limited to rational cognitive abilities but forms the foundation for orienting ourselves in the world. It relates to how we make sense of our physical and mental surroundings in general and how our consciousness constantly organises its environment into meaningful units.

Normally we do not notice the intermittent processes through which our body interacts with its more or less immediate surroundings. We pass through a doorway without any conscious effort of assessing its size because our body knows, i.e. it has learned, through habit, that the door is big enough. Similarly, we hardly ever notice that in order to go through a doorway we must first identify the door somehow, i.e. we have to be able to register the opening in the wall as a door. In other words, in order to pass through a door, we first attribute a meaning to the opening in the wall although we do not consciously register this as a meaning-making act. In order to perform this meaning-making act, two conditions have to be met: first, it must be possible to identify the door as a door, it must come to the fore against the surrounding wall. Second, our body must in principle be such that it is able to go through the door both in terms of the body's size and its ability to move. Some openings in walls will not be perceived by humans as doors, even as they have that precise function for other beings, such as mice. Similarly, an elephant would not perceive a human-size opening in a wall as a possibility to pass through.

Thus, although we normally do not notice all those meaning-making processes taking place in our consciousness, there is constant mutual interaction between our body and the surrounding world. This interaction is also the basis for how the world acquires meaning for us and how we can make sense of ourselves and our experiences in the world. Although we do not usually pay attention to the way our body interacts with its environment, we become aware of it when something goes wrong in the process. For example, if the doorway turns out to be lower than expected or if it is made of glass that is almost invisible, we suddenly become aware of our body and its interaction with the surroundings and have to pay conscious attention to this process in order not to be hurt. In sum, we only perceive those things in our environment that have a meaning for us, and there is a mutual relationship between these meanings and our body's perceptual abilities.[28] As we are normally a lot more focussed on the activities of our minds than those of our bodies, the fact that our bodies function as they do seems perfectly self-evident and natural.

As could be seen from the examples given above, this kind of bodily understanding of one's surroundings is not a capacity limited to humans but is shared with other life forms. However, although our perceived world is thus divided into meaningful units and their backgrounds, our entire human reality is not limited to physical surroundings. In addition to the meaning-making mechanisms that we have in common with other species, we also use cultural symbol systems that provide our physical world with another layer of meanings that are created in the symbolic world of linguistic and cultural differentiations. These collectively assigned symbolic meanings mediate the realities of the physical world for any given community. The specific meaning given to a specific thing in a cultural community is contingent upon the beliefs and attitudes that prevail in that community. The process of assigning meaning to various mental

25 Ibid., 273.
26 Ibid., 167.
27 Ibid., 275.
28 Viik et al., "Culture-dependent Meaning," 72–3.

and physical objects in the world is always historically, socially and culturally conditioned, although within the community these meanings are customarily considered self-evident and self-explanatory. In general, "all situations in which someone experiences things, circumstances, people, groups of people, places or times as meaningful phenomena, and reacts and acts according to the meaning ascribed to them" can be called acts of meaning-making.[29]

4 Communalisation of meanings and intersubjective validation

In order to better understand the specific character of the culture-dependent meaning-making that is relevant from the point of view of sexual experiences, it is important to recognise the role of intersubjectivity in meaning formation processes. This will explain how these processes operate in individual consciousness, how personal experiences are communalised between the members of a society, and how the meanings attached to individual experiences are socially validated.[30] Intersubjectivity is a structure of meaning formation that participates in establishing "the world common to us all," i.e. a world where, for a given community, things, practices and customs have relatively stable meanings. This happens through a communalisation of experiences and concerns not only social practices and customs but also what is purely perceptual. Thus, our individual experiences of real and ideal objects are constantly conditioned by how we consider them to be perceived by others. The very objectivity of our individual experiences is in this sense intersubjectively constituted.[31] However, the intersubjective objectivity and the meanings attached to particular experiences are not set in stone but are susceptible to possible alterations of validity that take place through reciprocal correction. By means of such mutual correction and validation, possible intersubjective discrepancies are revised and brought into harmony so that the members of the society can experience things, circumstances, people and phenomena in a more or less similar way and mutual understanding is possible.[32]

For our present purposes, the structure of intersubjectivity helps us to understand the simultaneous existence of remarkable variety in sexual customs across various cultural communities on the one hand, and their fairly strict normativity for the members of any given community on the other. Like language, sexual norms and customs enable us to engage in meaningful social practices with other members of society, and although we can, in principle, also opt to speak another language, we then risk losing the ability to communicate within our own community. And like language, sexual practices change over time – we do not speak in the manner our ancestors did 500 years ago, nor do we express ourselves sexually the way they did. There is certainly some continuity in these practices but their susceptibility to change is undeniable. It is well known from sexual anthropology that societies vary widely as to what is considered feminine or masculine sexual behaviour or altogether outside the binary; in different cultures both men and women can be predominantly active or passive in sexual encounters, etc.

5 Sexuality as a meaning-making process

To situate this general phenomenological model of meaning-making more clearly in the context of sexual concordance, I would now like to bring it into dialogue with the constructivist approaches applied in feminist social theories. This is not difficult since the phenomenological understanding of meaning-making

29 Ibid., 76–7.
30 Husserl, *Crisis*, 163–4.
31 Viik et al., "Culture-dependent Meaning," 84–8.
32 Husserl, *Crisis*, 163–4.

largely overlaps with the constructionist model, differing only in its particularly close attention to the interaction between the body and the surrounding world. As shown above, the way our body relates to the world is conditioned by our perceptual abilities and this interrelationship prescribes the ways in which it is possible for us to understand the world and feel at home in it. It is the most basic level of meaning-making but it can never be fully overwritten by symbolic meaning simply because in order to engage in symbolic processes we have to keep engaging in bodily existence, and having a body by definition involves this kind of vital interaction with the material world. Thus, although we live in a culturally conditioned environment of symbolic meanings, we remain connected to the physical world through our bodies. And even though these connections themselves are also interwoven with meaning, the perceptual experiences have bodily confirmation as their constitutive element.

Quite similarly to the phenomenological approach, constructivist theories maintain that sexual experiences are "*simultaneously* corporeal and meaningful, physical and symbolic" [my emphasis]. Our physical bodies are not meaningful in themselves and in order to interpret someone's body, including our own, as sexual, various socially and culturally acquired competencies are necessary.[33] That sexual behaviour is socially constructed has been an important tenet for feminist theories in order to counter various evolutionary or biologistic viewpoints that use men's "naturally" uncontrollable desire as an ultimate excuse for sexual violence and aggression. On the constructionist view, the current prevailing masculine understanding of sexuality does not derive from male sexual anatomy and physiology but from the culturally ordered meanings and social practices.[34]

However, although it does not derive from it, there must be some concordance between the male body and the prevailing masculine view of sexuality since otherwise the latter would not enjoy the (still almost unrivalled) social endorsement it currently does. If we say that sexual practices have no ground in the physiology of the human body, then we are faced with a further question of why the practices are such as they are, and what forces them to either persist or change. Again, the parallel with linguistic meanings is instructive here: to say that sexual meanings and practices are contingent and ever-changing is not the same as to say that they are arbitrary within the specific context in which they are used. In addition, to say that meanings are changeable does not mean that the change could be achieved quickly and easily. But what is it then that determines them? Moreover, what makes an activity not only sexual but widespread enough to acquire the status of a sexual custom or practice? Complementing the constructionist approach with a phenomenological view enables us to zoom in on the interrelationship between the bodily aspects of sexuality and the meanings attached to them in society. Like any type of experience, sexual experiences gain and retain their meaning through a constant process of intersubjective validation.

6 Intersubjective validation of sexual experiences

There seem to be at least two preconditions for a sexual practice to become widespread in a society and gain the status of a sexual custom. First, the practice in question has to be capable of eliciting sexual pleasure. Second, it has to be represented in social and cultural imagery as "normal" sexuality, i.e. it has to enter popular imagination as one of the ways sex is done, however vague the idea of it. If either of those components is missing, the practice in question will not develop into a socially validated sexual custom at this particular point in time (which does not mean that it cannot do so at some other time when society has changed, nor that it was not possible in earlier times). Although the first aspect, pleasure, can seem obvious, this is exactly where things get complicated since, clearly, not all sex is always pleasurable. Nevertheless, it is first and foremost sexual pleasure that gives meaning to sexual activity and without which the discourses, customs and practices related to sexuality in a society would cease to make sense. In

33 Jackson and Scott, *Theorizing Sexuality*, 149.
34 Ibid., 153.

cases where pleasure is not present in a sexual act, its very absence is acutely felt and structures the entire experience. In situations where sex is not enjoyable the act of meaning-making fails because, for the person concerned, the experience as a whole does not make sense and quickly becomes disconcerting and meaningless.

At the same time it is important to remember, as referred to above, that there are no pure states of sexual pleasure. What we experience as pleasurable is always a negotiation between our bodily sensations and the socially acquired standards of sexual expression. We learn to behave in sexual situations the same way we learn to eat with a knife and fork. Obviously, the negotiation between our sexual preferences and the sexual standards we find before us in society is not always successful. The ways people are able to experience sexual pleasure are infinitely more varied than what the social norm happens to prescribe at any given moment in time. This is also one of the reasons why our sexual experiences are so heavily affected by what we perceive as "normal" sexual practice. The standards of normal sexuality, on their part, are created and recreated through social and cultural representations of sexual activities.

In Western societies, as in many others, sexual imagery has for a long time been created predominantly from the heterosexual male perspective. Clearly, this does not mean that all men endorse or are aroused by the ways sex is depicted in literature, art, media, film, on the Internet, etc. The seemingly neat correspondence between the male body's functioning (its ability to experience sexual pleasure in certain ways) and its symbolic and cultural expression has acquired its supposed naturalness exactly because heterosexual males have for a long time been almost the only ones who have had the opportunity to create these symbolic and cultural representations. The fact that they are actually not universal remains almost invisible for those whom they suit because for the actors concerned these representations make sense – they are understandable and meaningful, which is why, importantly, there seems to be no need to change them. The experiences that fall within the prevailing paradigm are subject to continuous intersubjective (re)validation, and the corresponding representations, having achieved the status of dominant discourse, are reproduced without any pressing need for reciprocal correction. The picture has acquired a seeming naturality as if sexual experiences as such naturally match the ways sexuality is socio-culturally represented. For its perpetuation, it is not necessary that it meet the interests and preferences of all of the actors concerned, it is enough if a majority are able to experience sexual pleasure and satisfaction in the ways described in the dominant discourse.

The structure of intersubjective validation explains why certain ways of achieving sexual pleasure dominate the sexual discourse and enjoy consistent reproduction and others remain on the fringes, even though remarkable diversity exists even within the Western scenery. This also explains why society's understanding of "normal" sexuality is so heavily dependent on the popular imagery. As shown above, in deciding upon the objectivity of even our most personal experiences, we rely heavily on a comparison of those experiences with those of others. As our personal sexual encounters are not a topic that is easily discussed or openly debated even among close friends, we are all the more dependent on how sexuality is depicted through means of cultural expression. It is quite difficult to even doubt the socially prevalent view exactly because it is not easy to bring it into discussion in the first place. We try to make sense of our sexual experiences relying on how we see others behaving and expressing themselves, mostly indirectly, in metaphors and allegory. This tends to create a fair amount of confusion in the minds of adolescents, especially if they happen to be, for example, homosexual or non-binary. But once the person has established for themselves that their sexual preferences do not align with the dominant discourse, they no longer base the objectivity of their experiences on whether these correspond to the socially prevalent view, and from there on take the experiences of persons with similar preferences as the point of departure. However, as will become clearer in the next section, heterosexual women are in a peculiar situation in the current Western sexual scene, since their sexual orientation matches the socially accepted standard of sexuality, but the ways heterosexual intercourse and love-making are socially and culturally represented are still largely dominated by the male view. This creates a different type of tension between the female body's experience of sexual pleasure and the representation of this pleasure in the popular imagery.

7 The case of female pleasure

A bit less than 100 years ago, Bertrand Russell observed that "the total amount of undesired sex endured by women is probably greater in marriage than in prostitution."[35] Since then, a lot seems to have changed. Compared to many other societies, the sexual autonomy and agency of Western women is incontestably high. Women's sexual pleasure is increasingly widely addressed both in academic research and in various media sources. Concurrently, highly sexualised images of women enjoying themselves pervade all forms of popular culture, but especially the film industry and, inevitably, pornographic works, the accessibility of which has surged to unseen heights in the age of the Internet. All this seems to leave no doubt that women are very much involved in the process of intersubjective validation of their sexual experiences. However, the low rates of sexual concordance recorded among all age groups of women indicate that something is not quite right in this picture.

In order to explain this more clearly, it is informative to read women's low sexual concordance rate against the background of other data that have been collected on human sexuality over the years. The most relevant for the matter at hand is the increasing amount of statistical evidence that contrary to the way women's sexual pleasure is depicted in popular imagery, the "classic" vaginal penetrative intercourse seems to offer little pleasure to most women. Surely, this must sound like old news. For decades, feminist philosophers, theorists and activists have described penetrative sex as oriented to male pleasure.[36] Actually, it was old news already more than 50 years ago when Anne Koedt wrote:[37]

> There is only one area for [female] sexual climax, although there are many areas for sexual arousal; that area is the clitoris. All orgasms are extensions of sensation from this area. Since the clitoris is not necessarily stimulated sufficiently in the conventional sexual positions, we [women] are left "frigid." [...] Men have orgasms essentially by friction with the vagina, not the clitoral area, which is external and not able to cause friction the way penetration does. Women have thus been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men; our own biology has not been properly analyzed.[38]

By now, a fair amount of proper analysis has been conducted on women's sexual anatomy and Koedt's observations have been backed up with a robust body of scientific evidence. Although the debate on "types of orgasm" is still being held, most women's bodies seem to be built in ways that make clitoral stimulation the prevalent, and by far the easiest, route to sexual satisfaction: about 70–80% of women require some form of clitoral stimulation to reach an orgasm.[39] Considering that penetrative sex usually does not offer this kind of stimulation, but continues to be the default mode of sexual intercourse in Western cultures, it is not surprising that on average men orgasm during roughly 90% of their sexual encounters, whereas the figure for women is around 50%.[40] The remarkable difference between men's and women's frequency of orgasm especially in heterosexual partnered sex has been termed the orgasm gap in popular as well scientific literature. Whereas through masturbation women regularly orgasm easily and within minutes, only a very

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35 Russell, *Marriage and Morals*, 153.

36 Jackson and Scott, *Theorizing Sexuality*, 153.

37 Koedt wrote "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" in 1968; it was first published in 1970. In the text, Koedt refers to Kinsey's "Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female" published in 1953. In this work, Kinsey writes:

> We have perpetuated the age-old traditions concerning the slower respons[e]... of the female ... the idea that there are basic differences in the nature of orgasm among females and males, the greater emotional content of the female's sexual response and still other areas which are not based on scientifically accumulated data – and all of which now appear to be incorrect. ... It now appears that the very techniques which have been suggested in marriage manuals, both ancient and modern, have given rise to some of the differences that we have thought were inherent in females and males. (Kinsey et al. 1953, quoted in Jackson and Scott, 7)

38 Koedt, "The Myth," 111–2.

39 The data presented here should not be read as an imperative to orgasm (more). What is highlighted here is the social meaning of orgasm, not its specific significance for individual women.

40 Mahar et al., "Orgasm Equality," 24; and Kontula and Miettinen, "Determinants," 1–2.

small percentage actually do so through penetration alone.[41] This does not mean that vaginal sex cannot be pleasurable for women, just that on its own it is usually not enough for sexual climax.

A question naturally arises: if it is anatomically so improbable for women to orgasm from vaginal intercourse alone, why did they not say so loudly and in large numbers long ago? In feminist social theory, the popular imagination, i.e. the very broad general understandings of "how sex is done" have been analysed as "scripts."[42] We see now that in those scripts, which have a profound influence on our sexual behaviour, women's sexual pleasure is regularly depicted as deriving from vaginal intercourse, whereas the source of sexual climax, the clitoris and its stimulation, is almost totally missing from the picture.[43] In a wide majority of media images and films women are persistently shown as orgasming from intercourse alone, if at all. The same goes for Internet pornography, from where an increasing number of young people get their sex education. There, too, women's orgasms are depicted marginally compared to men's, and of those in turn most are shown to be achieved through vaginal or anal intercourse, not clitoral stimulation.[44] As a result, although in purely technical terms women's orgasms are not more or less complicated to accomplish than men's, there is only a vague idea of it in the collective imagination. However, it is this collective imagination that works as a mediator of meaning in the intersubjective validation of experience.

As shown above, we regard even our purely perceptual experiences as objective if we can consider them to be perceived more or less the same way by others. And it is here that the meaning-making process goes wrong for many women, because the "others" who have created the collective imagination are almost exclusively men, whose bodies are predominantly able to climax in the ways sex is scripted in literature, film, art and the media. Women, on the other hand, are only just starting to have any real influence on how sex is depicted in popular imagination. As women's perspectives have been historically so weakly represented in the creation of shared cultural meanings relating to sexuality, almost everything in this domain has been worded, depicted and analysed from the perspective of the male body, even though it looks as though women have always been at the centre and the whole point of the enterprise.

8 Low sexual concordance as intersubjective discrepancy

The problem is therefore not the male perspective as such but the near absence of any other point of view. It is the intimate connection between the bodily understanding of an experience and its mediation through culturally shared meanings that ultimately enables us to make sense of our experiences in the context of our lives as meaningful wholes. Therefore, from the male perspective, the discrepancy between the cultural code and women's bodily sexual experiences can perhaps be observed or deduced, but not really directly felt. The actual discrepancy can only be corrected by women themselves, but as shown above, due to a lack of both adequate information and cultural imagery created by women themselves, they have had no choice but to look for validation in the ways sex is depicted in cultural representations and in the media, i.e. through the male perspective. Thus we are in the vicious circle again: as women's first-person perspectives have been so marginal in the creation of cultural and media images of sexual practices, the scene is heavily dominated by the male perspective which is in (sufficient) harmony with the sexual functioning of the male body, but not the female. *Ergo*, the images women see of their own sexuality do not correspond to and therefore cannot validate their lived experiences and, *vice versa*, in the sexual encounters they have especially in heterosexual relationships, the reaction of their body does not confirm the image of sexual pleasure they have been led to seek by the way sex is represented in cultural works and the media.

41 Mahar et al., "Orgasm Equality," 25.

42 Jackson and Scott, *Theorizing Sexuality*, 148.

43 This does not mean that the whole body couldn't be a source of sexual pleasure, it surely can, but even if the climax is achieved through imagination only, it is still the clitoris that is the centre of the orgasm.

44 Mahar et al., "Orgasm Equality," 27.

It is this clash between the bodily, lived experience and the representation of sexual pleasure in the general social and cultural "shared" understandings of sexuality that creates the confusion manifested in women's low rates of sexual concordance. It is a discrepancy in the meaning-making process that leads women to report sexual feelings that do not confirm their genital reaction, and *vice versa*. This happens because the sexual experience itself is discordant, it does not make sense. And, it is the same disruption that has left them unable to alter the intersubjective validity of their sexual experiences through reciprocal correction. The cultural means of expression relating to sexuality have been created from a male point of view, but as these have until recently been the only means, the intersubjective validation of women's sexual experience is mediated through an understanding of sexuality that is based on the male body. This creates a conflict between the bodily, lived experience and the collective imagination to which women turn for the validation of their experience.

Thus, there seems to be a clear parallel between the orgasm gap and sexual concordance, with men generally showing remarkably higher rates of agreement between their self-reported and genital arousal, but also considerably higher orgasm frequency. As the collective imagery of sexual intercourse is in alignment with how men's bodies are actually able to attain sexual satisfaction, their subjective and genital reactions in the experimental settings also align. Similarly, the sexual experiences of homosexual women are less affected by the stereotyped heterosexual images as, once they have established their sexual identity as not conforming to the heterosexual paradigm, the validity of their experiences is no longer dependent on the prevalent view. Accordingly, their average concordance rate, and also frequency of orgasm in partnered sex, is higher.[45]

Hence, the orgasm gap broadly matches the gap between men's and women's sexual concordance rate because both gaps are actually the result of the same process whereby women have successively dropped out of participating in the intersubjective validation of their own sexual experiences. It is not possible to go deep into historical details within the scope of this article, but in broad terms this seems to have happened little by little in the course of a gradual shift of focus away from women's sexual pleasure to their reproductive role. If until the thirteenth century, female pleasure was believed to be necessary for conception and was therefore accorded due attention both in popular and medical view, by the mid-twentieth century the clitoris – the only organ on the human body the sole function of which is sexual pleasure – seems to have been altogether omitted even from medical textbooks, while images of penises were becoming all the more detailed.[46]

Feminist-oriented medical books started to depict anatomically correct renditions of the clitoris already in the 1980s, but the first complete 3D sonography was published as late as 2008.[47] To date, public awareness of its proportions and functioning remains by and large nugatory, which means that the role of this knowledge in the intersubjective validation process is also bound to be still marginal. Thus, the "epistemology of ignorance"[48] surrounding the clitoris has facilitated the exclusion of women from the intersubjective validation of their experiences since it has made it harder to doubt the validity of the way sexuality is depicted in social and cultural imagery, especially in media and film. Instead, these doubts have been turned inward, towards one's individual body and frame of mind. The resulting silence, self-doubt and low self-esteem has rather macabre real-life consequences. Many women give up looking for satisfaction in their sexual encounters and deem their sex life to be satisfactory if they are not hurt or degraded. The idea that the ultimate goal to be achieved in heterosexual intercourse is the man's orgasm is so ingrained in popular imagery that women often value their partner's satisfaction more than their own and feel less entitled to sexual pleasure. However, the cultural scripting of penetrative intercourse as the

45 Mahar et al., "Orgasm Equality," 25; and Chivers and Brotto, "Controversies," 13.

46 Tuana, "Coming," 200–10.

47 Foldès and Buisson, "The Clitoral Complex." Various education and art programmes have been launched to raise awareness of the size and shape of the clitoris which, instead of being a pea-sized nub (which is the external part of the clitoris) actually extends around the vulva so that the average total size of its erogenous internal parts is comparable to that of the penis.

48 "Ignorance is not a simple lack. It is often constructed, maintained, and disseminated and is linked to issues of cognitive authority, doubt, trust, silencing, and uncertainty." Tuana, "Coming," 194.

epitome of pleasure is damaging also for men since many feel frustrated when not able to lead their partner to orgasm in this way.[49]

9 Body as home in sexual experiences

What has happened in the sexual concordance experiments is that the anonymity and impersonality of the testing equipment has restored the body as an important actor and a constitutive element in the intersubjective validation process. Although validation takes place between the members of a community, ultimately what it validates is the situated bodily experience that always remains connected to the body's physical constitution and perceptual capabilities. The impression management whereby the test subject (mainly unconsciously) tries to formulate their self-report in the way socially expected from them is an unintentional attempt to "overwrite" the body, and to some extent this is always possible precisely because the objectivity of perceptual experiences is also intersubjectively constituted. Especially in sexual experiences, the extent to which social customs are able to modify what is experienced as pleasurable by the body is remarkable. What women's low average sexual concordance rate shows is that their bodies have not been completely overwritten as yet, although as things stand, they have become largely cut off from the pleasure. Why the sexual concordance experiment is important is because it has helped to highlight the intersubjective discrepancy, to show it, as it were, as not the problem of a few individuals but as a prevailing experience of many, even the majority of women.

It is true that it was already figured out by feminist theorists before, but as with many other similar issues, our voices are feeble when they sound alone. Although the intersubjective discrepancy has been felt and experienced directly on so many women's bodies, it has for a long time remained unspoken and unnoticed, with women themselves unwillingly and unknowingly participating in its perpetuation. With the social importance that is attached to "successful sexuality" in our societies, it is no wonder that so many women have silently suffered, thinking that there was something wrong with their bodies or attitudes if they were not able to orgasm the way everybody else seemed to so easily. It seems though that public awareness of this disruption in the meaning-making process is slowly reaching the level necessary for the alteration of validity in the communalisation of sexual meanings. Paradoxically, this can result in a seeming drop in the statistics concerning women's orgasm frequency since more women actually admit to not being able to reach sexual satisfaction in the socially scripted ways. The more women become actually involved in the intersubjective validation of their sexual experiences, the more quickly it will be possible to achieve the reciprocal correction of the intersubjective discrepancies, i.e. to change the way women's sexuality is depicted in cultural and social imagery so that it would be in concordance with the way sexual pleasure is actually experienced in women's bodies.

There can hardly be any quick changes in this process. Better sex education is extremely important but not enough. For example in Finland, where sex education has been available for a long time and women enjoy the highest social acceptance of sexual freedom in the world, the orgasm gap is comparable to North American countries with generally much stricter social norms and double standards relating to sexuality. In addition, the percentage of women who associate heterosexual intercourse predominantly with their partner's orgasm and value it more than their own is similarly high.[50] Therefore, it is the change in cultural imagery that seems to be the most important vehicle for change, but in democratic societies this cannot be achieved through any centrally organised campaigns, although education improvements are bound to have an effect in the long run. This can only come about through the increasing social and cultural presence of women's first-person perspectives on their lived bodily experiences, intersubjectively validated and mediated through literature, film, audio-visual culture and media, but also theoretical and philosophical

49 Mahar et al., "Orgasm Equality," 28.
50 Kontula and Miettinen, "Determinants," 1–2.

study. Only this change of perspective can ultimately change the sexual scripts in our collective consciousness and this is also why different first-person perspectives are so crucial. It is a slow process but at least it now seems to be well under way.

10 Conclusion

In both popular and theoretical works, women's sexuality has for a long time been framed as mysterious, unrepresentable, beyond linguistic expression. I agree with those who, in hindsight, find this a rather damaging practice.[51] Yet, as I have tried to outline in this article, it is not easy to start speaking about something that has been covered over in dubious silence and disorientation, lacking proper means of historical, theoretical and cultural representation. Therefore, my task in this article has been twofold. I have delineated some of the developments that have led to a rather blurred picture of women's sexuality, but at the same time I have tried to show that there is nothing inherently mysterious or unrepresentable about it – the confusion springs from the social and cultural representation that has evolved in separation from women's actual lived experiences because their perspective is only now starting to have any real influence on the social and cultural imagery of sexuality, even in Western societies. Using the phenomenological view of the body as the home and basis through which we make sense of all our experiences, I have tried to spell out some of the delicate connections between embodied existence and cultural meaning-making. I have done so, analysing the empirically observed low agreement between women's self-reported, subjective assessment of their sexual arousal and the simultaneous bodily response measured directly on the genitals. I hope to have shown that the average low rate of concordance between these two indicators mirrors the low rate of agreement between the cultural, literary and theoretical representations of women's sexuality on the one hand, and their lived experiences on the other. I analysed the low concordance rate as a disruption in the meaning-making process, i.e. in the way sexual meanings are created, communalised and validated in social interaction. This helped me to explain why women have not been able to participate in the intersubjective validation of their sexual experiences and how this, in turn, has created a situation in which it has become increasingly difficult to find words for this loss of expression. I located this inability to speak as one of the forms of confusion and silence that characterises the feeling of homelessness shared by various feminist authors.

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51 Jackson and Scott, *Theorizing Sexuality*, 151.

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