

Research Article

Rita Niineste*

A Phenomenological Look at the Orgasm Gap

<https://doi.org/10.1515/oppil-2022-0204>

received November 15, 2021; accepted April 7, 2022

Abstract: The orgasm gap is the marked difference in the frequency of orgasm between cisgender men and women in heterosexual intercourse that has been documented in research for decades. However, orgasm as a state of intense sexual excitement and gratification is physiologically uncomplicated and readily available for most people regardless of gender. This article undertakes a philosophical study of the processes by which the individual experience of orgasm is invested with meaning and embedded in social and cultural practices that collectively both produce and sustain the orgasm gap. By looking at the experience of orgasm as horizontal, I draw a distinction between the social and the cultural horizons of sexual experiences. I argue that social standards of sexual modesty make sexuality a field where the process through which we make sense of our individual experiences is especially dependent on how these experiences are depicted in cultural representation. The current socially normalised male perspective in cultural representation continues to conflict with the ways orgasm is experienced in female bodies. This is probably one reason why the orgasm gap persists even in countries where sex education and gender equality are highly advanced.

Keywords: orgasm, orgasm gap, sexuality, phenomenology, embodiment, meaning, body, feminist philosophy, feminist theory

1 Introduction

The experience of orgasm rarely takes centre stage in philosophical discussions of sexuality.¹ It tends rather to be taken for granted as the logical and uncomplicated end goal of ordinary sexual activity that in itself warrants no particular attention, as it only lasts for a few happy moments and is discouragingly arduous to describe in any case. Feminist theorists have been more intent on the topic in parallel with the general rise in scientific interest in female sexuality. A heated debate on the specificity and meaning of the female orgasm dates back to at least the 1970s and features the so-called rediscovery of the clitoris and the spectacular undoing of the Freudian imperative of the vaginal orgasm: “With the full force of feminist analysis to support us, we declared with relief and then authority that vaginal orgasms were a myth, that our fears of being inadequate women were groundless. ... Masturbation became the symbol of autonomous feminist sexuality, a logical reconciliation of our bodies and our lives, and a necessary foundation for knowing what was erotically satisfying.”²

¹ This is a personal observation I made while doing research for this article. As a quick sample, orgasm is mentioned in several articles in Soble’s encyclopaedic work *Sex from Plato to Paglia*, but does not have a separate entry; none of the articles in *The Philosophy of Sex*, edited by Halwani, deals specifically with orgasm; and Susi Ferrarello’s, *The Phenomenology of Sex, Love, and Intimacy* contains no direct reference to orgasm. This is not meant as a criticism of any of these works, as their focus is simply elsewhere.

² Webster, “The Forbidden,” 385.

* Corresponding author: Rita Niineste, Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia,
e-mail: rita.niineste@gmail.com

However revolutionary this may have sounded fifty years ago, surprisingly little of it has filtered through to the present day. The orgasm gap, already documented for decades, is a robust finding in literature.³ Laurie Mintz, a leading researcher in the field, finds that 50% of women aged 18 to 35 say they have trouble reaching orgasm with a partner, 64% of women but a full 91% of men say they had an orgasm the last time they had sex, and 55% of men but only 4% of women say they usually have an orgasm the first time they have sex with a new partner.⁴ Mintz's research is mainly focused on the United States where the data vary from state to state, but general public awareness of both female sexual anatomy and pleasure remains low. Amazing proportions of students on American campuses think that the clitoris is to be found in the vagina, and even fewer are knowledgeable about its central role in the female orgasm.⁵

In Europe, public knowledge of the differences between male and female sexuality is also likely to differ from country to country. The Nordic countries are often seen as the global flag-bearers of sex education: "In the Scandinavian countries, men have regularly received public instruction on how to stimulate a woman and about any and every female erogenous zone. Today, most men know far more about women's bodies than they do about their own – at least if they have been reasonably attentive in class."⁶ Despite such laudable progress, women in Scandinavian countries also continue to have difficulties with orgasming when having sex with a partner: "... studies have provided consistent results that men experience orgasms in intercourse considerably more frequently than women. More than 90% of men usually experience orgasm in their intercourse; among women, this proportion is only around 50%."⁷ Survey results from other countries show a fairly similar gap between men's and women's likelihood of experiencing orgasm in partnered sex.⁸ In sum, although the orgasm gap has received extensive attention in sexual medicine, feminist theory, and women's magazines for many decades now, the share of women who engage in sexual intercourse without having an orgasm remains surprisingly high even in countries where sex education is highly advanced and the social acceptance of women's rights is undoubtedly solid.

The reasons for the orgasm gap seem at first sight to be quite straightforward and to relate mostly to the way that "sex is done" in contemporary Western societies.⁹ It has been shown that for a substantial proportion of women, direct clitoral stimulation is needed for orgasm to occur, but this rarely takes place in the culturally prevalent form of penile–vaginal intercourse. Vaginal penetrative sex can be considered the most reliable route for the male orgasm, but not for the female orgasm, and only a small percentage of women report that they always experience orgasm through intercourse.¹⁰ However, this applies to heterosexual women, whereas the orgasm rates from intercourse are higher for lesbian women.¹¹ This suggests that the orgasm gap is to a large extent a problem of mainstream sexuality, meaning it has to do with the most common and widespread ways that people typically have sex. It mainly concerns women who identify as heterosexual because they usually do not need to question their sexual identity and orientation.

My aim in this article is not to compete with the empirical sciences in suggesting novel or more plausible explanations for the orgasm gap. I agree with the broad consensus of sexual psychologists that there seem to be no biological or physiological reasons for the gap, as no differences based on gender or sexual orientation have been found between orgasm rates during masturbation. The reasons behind the gendered orgasm gap therefore seem to be wholly of a sociocultural nature.¹² While I accept this overall

³ Mahar et al., "Orgasm Equality," 24.

⁴ Mintz, *Becoming Cliterate*.

⁵ Wade et al., "The Incidental Orgasm."

⁶ Lorentzen, "Masculinities," 71.

⁷ Kontula and Miettinen, "Determinants."

⁸ Mahar et al., "Orgasm Equality."

⁹ I refer to Western societies throughout this article not because I think that the problem of orgasm gap only exists in these parts of the world, but because the data I use mainly come from these societies, and I do not want to make groundless universalisations by simply extrapolating from these limited data to the rest of the world.

¹⁰ Mahar et al., "Orgasm Equality," 27.

¹¹ Ibid., 25.

¹² Ibid., 27.

conclusion, I think that alongside the empirical and sociological research it is worth taking a philosophical look at the social and cultural factors that surround the orgasm gap to see whether it could help us shed light on and better understand how human sexual experiences in general are constituted and how they acquire their specific value and meaning. More precisely my questions here are: what does the existence and especially the persistence of a sizeable orgasm gap in contemporary Western societies tell us about the nature of sexual experiences in general and the experience of orgasm in particular? What does it let us conclude about the process through which we make sense of our sexual lives? Which parts of this process are easily recognisable and which tend to resist conscious examination? In sum, I am interested in examining the ways that a simple bodily phenomenon like orgasm transforms into socially and culturally complicated behaviour patterns that exercise an extensive influence on our personal lives.

For obvious reasons, it is not possible to present an exhaustive description of either the experience of orgasm or the problems relating to the orgasm gap within the scope of one article. Sexuality is by definition a field that is abundantly populated by anecdotal evidence and a quick “Yes, but...” can be found for most of the arguments and observations in this article. I am aware of this, but I think it is still worth trying to tackle these topics philosophically, keeping in mind that I aim to make a contribution to an on-going discussion, and not put an end to it.

2 Methodological framework

To answer the questions presented above, I put forward a phenomenological analysis of the specific tensions between orgasm as a very personal and intimate feeling and the social conventions that surround it. The phenomenological method takes the individual experience as a starting point, and I think it is especially important with the orgasm gap to take the first-person perspective seriously by asking oneself what it is like to have sex regularly without orgasm. If we delve deeper into this question, we see that people for whom orgasm is a self-evident part of sexual activities, and those for whom it occurs very seldom, live their sexual lives in very different worlds. This means in practice that the first group often struggle to understand what exactly the problem is in the first place, while the second group have difficulties describing or even admitting the problem.

To give a more specific account of this, I will make use of the phenomenological concepts of meaning-making, horizon, and intersubjectivity. Meaning-making or sense-formation refers to the process through which we are able to experience something that has a recognisable identity, value, and meaning in such a way that it provokes an embodied reaction. It is based on the Husserlian insight that we always experience something *as* something, so that whenever a phenomenon is identified, recognised, recalled, felt, or otherwise perceived, it is invested with a certain meaning. All objects, both material and immaterial, that we are conscious of consequently have some kind of meaning or sense, and the question about meaning-making or sense-formation concerns the process through which these meanings are formed and how they acquire their truth value and validity.¹³ In the present context, my analysis concentrates on the central, albeit sometimes implicit, role of orgasm in the ways that sexuality is imagined, practiced, and understood in Western societies.

I use the concept of horizon to analyse the specific sociocultural contexts of the experience of orgasm. Husserl argues that it is possible for any experience to distinguish between its core and a horizon that is not strictly speaking experienced but is necessarily also meant.¹⁴ This kind of figure/background structure of experiences is in turn itself embedded in multi-layered horizons of significance, such as temporal, spatial, social, historical, cultural, or political.¹⁵ What is important, especially in the context of sexual experiences, is the pre-reflective character of the role that the horizons play in the constitution of experiences. They are

¹³ Viik, “Understanding,” 151–8.

¹⁴ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 23.

¹⁵ Weiss et al., *50 Concepts*, xiv.

continuously synthesised into a more or less coherent totality that is hardly ever analysed as such by the subject. The subject only becomes aware of them if the synthesising process is somehow impaired or disrupted and the horizontally pre-delineated, experienceable object is no longer recognisable or identifiable. If we are walking down a familiar street for example, we hardly ever notice the horizons that constitute this experience. However, were we to suddenly notice that we were walking under a blue roof instead of an open sky, the whole experience would acquire a dream-like character of confusion and estrangement. Similarly, horizons are constitutive of all our sexual experiences, even though we are hardly ever conscious of them in our natural attitude towards the world.

Finally, I use the concept of intersubjectivity to elaborate the hypothesis that sexual experiences, more than other types of experience, are vulnerable to the way sexual encounters are depicted in cultural representation. Phenomenologically speaking, our experiences are intersubjectively constituted. This means that even what is purely perceptual cannot be experienced separately from the meanings that are associated with those perceptions as a result of our previous experiences. We learn to associate certain perceptions with certain meanings in constant interaction with the world as we communicate with other people, and also as we observe the customs, traditions, and cultural representations relating to various phenomena. Husserl calls this process intersubjective validation.¹⁶ Further on in this article, I will delineate the special role of cultural representation in the intersubjective validation of sexual experiences.

3 Orgasm as a horizontal experience

The feeling of orgasm among all sexual experiences is probably the most difficult to describe. For the purposes of this article, I assume that even in their infinite variety, individual experiences are comparable enough to talk about them as instances of a coherent, recognisable phenomenon. A typical encyclopaedia definition of orgasm runs as follows:

“Orgasm, also called climax – climactic physiological state of heightened sexual excitement and gratification that is followed by relaxation of sexual tensions and the body’s muscles. Orgasm is marked by a feeling of sudden and intense pleasure, an abrupt increase in pulse rate and blood pressure, and spasms of the pelvic muscles that cause contractions of the lower vagina in the female and contractions of the urethra and ejaculation by the male. Males and females are physiologically capable of experiencing orgasm from infancy, and children who engage in masturbation or sex play may achieve this sensation. Orgasm can occur while a person is asleep and dreaming, as well as from sexual intercourse or masturbation.”¹⁷

In contrast with the quasi-medical straightforwardness of this definition, the most interesting feature philosophically of the experience of orgasm is its ambivalent, paradoxical character. The trouble it takes to put this experience into words is one aspect of this ambivalence and an indication of the messy and confused origin of all meanings. Among the words used most frequently to characterise an orgasm are ecstasy, transcendence, going beyond, and flying over the edge. It is often described as merging with the universe, of exploding or dissolving into the cosmic order of things, being at the same time together and alone, open and closed. During the most intense moments of orgasm, rational thinking stops and the subject is simultaneously faced with the horror of the unknown and the bliss of being momentarily freed of the burden of conscious thinking.

The joy of orgasm is a form of affectivity that indicates our primordial involvement with the world. “We are not just receptive beings, capable of registering what appears to us, we are also responsive beings capable of caring about what appears. Affectivity means that we are constituted in such a way that things and situations matter to us.”¹⁸ So, although orgasm is in one sense a solitary experience, urging our

¹⁶ Husserl, *Crisis*, 163.

¹⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/science/orgasm>.

¹⁸ Welton, “Bodily Intentionality,” 181.

consciousness to focus totally on ourselves, our bodies, and our personal time, it is also an impetus that ecstatically forces us outward, towards the world and other human beings. But like any other perceptual event, it is always a situated experience that takes place within something that is wider and larger than the purely physical sensations it involves. It is this wider contextual network that actually renders the bodily experience identifiable as an orgasm. Consequently, not all orgasms are experienced as pleasant or exhilarating, especially if they occur in humiliating or violent circumstances.¹⁹ Similarly, orgasmic sensations experienced by children before the age of puberty are not strictly speaking sexual.²⁰ I will now proceed to delineate the multiple webs of signification that make the orgasm as an intentional object stand out as a separate phenomenon in our consciousness and enable us to experience it as a meaningful perceptual event.

4 Temporal horizons

As it is in any case a temporally very limited experience, the orgasmic feeling is by its nature at its most intense at the very moment when it is already ceasing to be, such that the precondition for the most powerful pleasure lies in the inevitability of giving it up and letting go. Portrayals of the contradictory character of this experience reflect a Hegelian dialectic of becoming, a unification of opposites in sublation.²¹ The being of orgasm literally consists in going over into its own non-being, and it is the tension between the two that makes it possible in the first place, but also renders it uniquely pleasurable. Orgasm commits the body of the person totally as it is one of the rare occasions when we are entirely present not only in the moment, but also in the place, where the place is our body. The sheer force of the orgasm, the becoming, takes hold of our whole being and compels us to face the possibility of non-being. The overwhelming character of the orgasmic feeling owes itself to this brief loss of control.

The temporal structure of orgasm as an affective state is similar to the general temporality of perception: “Perception is related only to the present. But this present is always meant as having an endless past behind it and an open future before it.”²² Although the orgasmic feeling in many ways exists only in the present, we nevertheless come to this experience with a personally subjective past that strongly shapes our expectations as to what the feeling should be like. These expectations can both enhance and restrict the pleasure of the actual experience, and they also shape our feelings as to the timing of the orgasm. In popular discourse, men are expected to “last long” and premature ejaculation is seen as problematic, whereas women are constructed as needing a considerable time and special care from their partner in order to reach an orgasm. Studies show however that people of all genders actually need very little of either time or stimulation in order to climax through masturbation and are generally able to do so quickly and easily.²³ Perhaps the most damaging of all the myths about the timing of orgasm is the idea of simultaneous orgasm, which in most cases results not in the purported transcendent experience of ecstasy but rather in performance anxiety and a vicious cycle of sexual frustration.

5 Spatial horizons

It goes without saying that the spatial setting of sexual acts impacts heavily on our lived experiences. Given the intimate character of those acts, some elementary measure of security is likely to be preferred by all.

¹⁹ Frith, *Orgasmic Bodies*, 161–2.

²⁰ Jackson and Scott, *Theorizing Sexuality*, 156.

²¹ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 81.

²² Husserl, *The Crisis*, 160.

²³ Frith, *Orgasmic Bodies*, 68.

Even so, there are people who need to feel safe and protected in order to orgasm, and there are others whose orgasms are greatly enhanced by non-familiar surroundings. The family home as the spatial horizon of a substantial part of all sexual encounters is likely to be much less favourable for women's orgasms when there are children in the house. Women have also been found to be more vulnerable to various other types of cognitive distractions²⁴ that can be associated with the spatial surrounding of sexual activity, such as absence or presence of light and the acoustic properties of the room.

6 Subjective horizons

The difficulties of comparing the orgasms of different people are obvious, but not all the orgasms of any one individual person are similar or of the same intensity. While some are exhilarating, others may be uninteresting or even boring. Although the importance and value that we attach to orgasm necessarily originate in social norms and practices, the experience in itself does not require any partnered activity. In present-day Western societies, both men and women are exhorted to work on the quality of their orgasms and are given guidance for how to do so. Women's magazines and thematic websites²⁵ encourage women to masturbate in order to have better awareness of their own sexual preferences and dislikes, so that they could take advantage of this knowledge when they have sex with a partner. In earlier times, when masturbation was still strongly stigmatised in children and adolescents, the feelings of shame and guilt associated with it could haunt the sexual experiences of a person for their entire life.²⁶

In general, it seems for both men and women that solitary orgasms tend to be more intense than those with a partner, probably because many people find it easier to let their imagination run free when they are alone. This can have both positive and negative consequences for the same person's experience of having sex with a partner. A growing problem for young men accustomed to using internet pornography for masturbation is that they can have serious difficulties with feeling aroused by a real-life person.²⁷ There is no reason why a similar scenario should not apply for women, if not yet now then in near future. It remains to be seen whether and how these developments will affect the currently prevalent romantic idea of orgasm through intercourse as the ultimate ideal of sexual pleasure.

7 Intersubjective horizons

I will now describe intersubjective horizons first as they manifest in interpersonal sexual relations, and then as larger social and cultural horizons. Merleau-Ponty has observed that by trying "to see how a thing or being begins to exist for us through desire or love," we can "come to understand better how things and beings can exist in general."²⁸ Although there is an intersubjective aspect to all our experiences, we are especially vulnerable in intimate encounters to the presence, behaviour, and attitudes of other people. In romantic relationships, we care not only about our own pleasure but also about that of our partner. This means that in erotic situations our consciousness operates on at least three levels, as we are conscious of our own desire and arousal, of the arousal of our partner, and of our own arousal as experienced by our partner. If one of those levels is missing, the experience loses its character of mutuality and one of the participants is treated either as an object only or as a subject only. Thomas Nagel, following the Gricean

²⁴ Mahar et al., "Orgasm Equality," 28.

²⁵ E.g. omgyes.com.

²⁶ Russell, *Marriage and Morals*, 275.

²⁷ Park et al., "Internet Pornography."

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 178.

model of meaning,²⁹ has described this interplay as a necessary framework for psychologically natural sexuality, as opposed to coupling sex naturally with procreation or heterosexuality, for example.³⁰

As far as orgasm is concerned, however, the dialectic that this affective structure generates in contemporary relationships tends to confirm the psychoanalytic insight that sexual relations are by definition incongruent and destined to go amiss. Given the high social value attached to orgasm in modern Western societies, it is no wonder that both men and women care especially about whether they are able to “offer” one to their partner. As we now know, this does not necessarily translate into higher orgasm rates, at least not for women. For decades, feminist authors have shown how contemporary sexual practices have become geared to male pleasure and especially the man’s orgasm.³¹ At the same time, the burden of that pleasure has come to be borne by women, often at the expense of their own enjoyment, since they feel that they have to take care of both the man’s orgasm and also his perception of himself as a competent lover who is capable of making her climax as well. Women systematically consider their partner’s orgasm at least rather important and often very important, and this proportion is much higher than the proportion of women considering their own orgasm to be very important. Many women still consider their own orgasm to be more of a happy extra than a goal to be striven for in sexual encounters.³²

However, the situation is beginning to change somewhat in societies with progressive views on sex education, and surveys show that young men now also prioritise women’s orgasms over their own: “It is more important for a younger man today that his partner has an orgasm than that he himself does. Possibly men think this way because they feel that they will always attain orgasms anyway and that their problem is that they orgasm too easily.”³³ This tendency reflects the awareness-raising work that has been done about women’s sexuality in recent decades and shows that although the orgasm gap can be framed as a situation from which men emerge as winners, at least comparatively, they can hardly really be called as such since they are just as likely to suffer from the long-term consequences of the gap. Furthermore, there is no reasonable ground to suspect that an average man would prefer his partner not to have an orgasm, but rather the opposite. As shown above however, the statistics stubbornly show that throughout the Western world, women are still far less likely than men to experience orgasm in partnered sex, especially in heterosexual encounters.

From translating the dry numbers of the orgasm gap into the interpersonal lived experiences that I am considering here, it becomes clear that sex without orgasm in partnered interactions is not just sex minus orgasm. The happy scenario of mutual recognition of arousal and desire described by Nagel above can turn into a gloomy pattern of unhappy appearances, as women who have difficulties orgasming in partnered sex feel that they have to deal with the personal trauma this creates, but at the same time that they must hide this experience from their partner who they think is entitled to their pleasure, and on top of that they must fake an orgasm in order not to make the partner feel bad about the woman not getting one.³⁴

I will now proceed to the analysis of the social and cultural horizons of the experience of orgasm. These two types of horizon largely overlap for most kinds of experience, but I believe that in the case of sexuality, and especially orgasm, there is good reason to differentiate between the two.

8 Social horizons

Social horizons comprise the customs, conventions, and values that shape our attitudes and views about sexual experiences. Taken together, they reflect the general sexual ethics that prevail in a society in a given

²⁹ Grice, “Meaning,” 377–88.

³⁰ Nagel, “Sexual Perversion,” 46.

³¹ Jackson and Scott, *Theorizing Sexuality*, 148.

³² Kontula and Miettinen, “Determinants,” 7.

³³ Lorentzen, “Masculinities,” 71.

³⁴ Mahar et al., “Orgasm Equality,” 28.

period of time. This loose body of conventions need not be strictly normative but is nevertheless fairly stringent and routinely adhered to. For our present purposes, it is worth noting that there are not really any specific ethical conventions concerning orgasm in Western cultures. This means that it is not that easy to analyse the orgasm gap from an ethical point of view since it does not readily fit under any of the received ethical categories: orgasm is neither a duty nor an obligation, neither a right nor a virtue, even though it is clearly not a vice either. It is neither a privilege nor a luxury, although it could be called a good.³⁵ However, this apparent absence of orgasm from the ethical discourse is deceptive:

It is instructive to notice what happens if we ask: "Should women have orgasms?" or more precisely, "Should women have orgasms when we have sex?" In several ways this question is odd. Consider, for instance, its parallel, "Should men have orgasms?" or "Should men have orgasms when they have sex?" In almost all cases (before advanced age or specific dysfunctions such as retarded ejaculation), if a man is having sex, he is having an orgasm. Most men cannot imagine having sex regularly, let alone for years, without orgasms.³⁶

Moreover, there is a wealth of pejorative street language in English to scorn a woman who fails or refuses to satisfy a man after having aroused him, whereas there is nothing of the kind for the opposite case.³⁷ The situation is likely to be similar in many other languages.

Pellauer's critique above indicates that there is no specific ethical discourse on orgasm because the male sexual climax has historically come to be seen as something that naturally belongs to an act of intercourse and that in itself warrants no particular attention. In the male sexual organ, the procreative and orgasmic functions largely coincide and this enabled the Christian natural law discourse to concentrate on the reproductive side of sexuality, without any specific mention that for the male body, the procreative act inevitably involves an orgasm.³⁸ For women, however, the Thomist paradigm of procreative sex resulted in sexual ethics developing very differently. Somewhere between the thirteenth century and the Enlightenment, the advancement of medical sciences refuted the popular belief that the female orgasm was necessary for conception.³⁹ In parallel, public knowledge of the clitoris as the site of female pleasure waned, until it no longer figured even in medical textbooks by the middle of the last century.⁴⁰ Thus, the gradual shift in sexual ethics towards reproductive concerns that took place over the centuries under the Christian paradigm of natural law in no way disturbed the male right to sexual pleasure, whereas female pleasure became to be seen as less and less important.

By the beginning of the age of commercialisation of sexuality in Western societies in the last century, the common understanding of female pleasure relied entirely on an inherently blurred, and male, guess at what women might like in bed. This still holds to a large extent, as the male orgasm continues to be invisible in discussions of sexual ethics, while the female one is hotly disputed: "Orgasm, and female orgasm in particular, has been dogged by scientific and social controversy – from disagreements about whether orgasm originates in the vagina or the clitoris (or any other part of the body), whether or how it serves any evolutionary function, whether it is a necessary part of women's sexual satisfaction, and whether it is a site of women's oppression, liberation or both."⁴¹

Another ethical framework that is widely used in discussions of sexual relations but is difficult to apply to the problematics of the orgasm gap centres around the notion of consent. The paradigm of consent is

³⁵ Pellauer, "The Moral Significance," 177.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Consider, however, the following important qualification: "The fact that a man reaches ejaculation does not necessarily mean that he has an orgasm. It is important to stress that orgasm should not be confused with the sensations of overspilling or bursting, terms often used to describe ejaculation and how that feels. An orgasm occurs when this ejaculation is linked to a more comprehensive and deeper emotional reaction or bodily explosion. An ejaculation has an emotional circumference, which includes the genitals and at most, the groin, whereas an orgasm includes the whole body and not least the brain." (Lorentzen, "Masculinities," 72.)

³⁹ Laqueur, "Orgasm," 1; Tuana, "Coming," 210.

⁴⁰ Tuana, "Coming," 200.

⁴¹ Frith, *Orgasmic Bodies*, 1.

closely related to the Kantian categorical imperative according to which we should always treat others as ends in themselves and not as mere means for achieving our own ends. However, as already noted above, most of the sexual acts where women fail to orgasm are actually consensual, or at least they are not violent or coerced. The question is whether consent is enough to guarantee that in our sexual encounters we treat others fully as persons, so that we are not simply using them. Onora O'Neill has argued that even apparently informed consent may still not be enough to satisfy this requirement: "If we want to give an account of genuine, morally significant, consent, we need to explain which aspects of actions must be consented to if nobody is to be used or treated as less than a person."⁴² She concludes that morally significant consent must take into account the deeper and more fundamental aspects of the proposal for which consent is sought.⁴³

So, is orgasm a deeper and more fundamental aspect of sexual intercourse? As we have already seen, the answer is yes even under the principles of Thomist Christian ethics, as it is necessary for the male procreative function. As such, it is a constitutive element of all sexual meanings and without it the current sexual conventions and practices would make no sense. Phenomenologically speaking, this is actually the heart of the problem of the orgasm gap, because when the cultural meanings of sexual intercourse take orgasm for granted, having sex regularly without it leads to an experience that does not make any sense. Therefore, even if the activity is supposedly consensual, the person cannot help feeling used even though they have not been compelled or forced. Engaging in sex regularly without real satisfaction puts the person emotionally in a situation where they cannot really regard themselves with respect and fully as a person.

Thus, the point is not that others treat the person wrongly, though feelings of being victimised can easily arise. Absence of joy in sex makes one feel exploited, not fully present in the act, and degraded. These feelings are aggravated because the act has not been directly forced on the person. The male partner involved need not be actively ignorant or malevolent, indeed he may on the contrary just as well be very much interested in making the experience enjoyable for both. But this only exacerbates the confusion and misunderstanding, fuelled by an inability to talk about it freely due to social taboos that still surround sexuality even in present-day societies. What usually happens in these cases is that the person either puts the blame on herself and thinks that she is in some way inadequate, or she blames the partner for not being good enough, whereas actually it is a case of deception without an individual deceiver.⁴⁴ The person is deceived by the discourse, by the ways sexual intercourse, including orgasm, is depicted and represented, and also not represented, in social interaction and in cultural works of art. It is these cultural horizons that I will concentrate on in the next section.

9 Cultural horizons

I have so far sketched a picture of how the human experience of orgasm is a product of an embodied consciousness. Our bodies play an active role in how we experience the world, but they also shape and limit our ability to make sense of our experiences. The meanings of intentional objects, including sexual experiences, are constituted intersubjectively and it is from these intersubjectively constituted, communalised meanings that our experiences gain their validity.⁴⁵ In judging their objectivity, we rely heavily on how we perceive others who experience these same intentional contents. In this kind of passive synthesis, we are usually not aware of how we associate our subjective experiences with those of the "we-communities" to which we belong. This level of secondary passivity involves history and tradition, including linguistic and cultural traditions.⁴⁶

⁴² O'Neill, "Between Consenting Adults," 257.

⁴³ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 274.

⁴⁵ Husserl, *Crisis*, 163–4.

⁴⁶ Drummond, *Historical Dictionary*, 154.

We learn what to expect from different experiences through such intersubjectively passed-on forms of apperception that together establish what we perceive as normal. Therefore, normality in the form of conventionality transcends the individual. We receive our understanding of normality from others, firstly from our closest family members and later from larger we-communities around us.⁴⁷ However, I believe that sexual experiences are a special category in our judgements of normality. Sexuality is usually not a topic that we approach readily in daily discussions or in public debate, even though the availability of sex education generally continues to rise. We do not talk about or compare our orgasms or sexual preferences at dinner tables or in newspaper pages. In consequence, the intersubjective harmony of validity that ultimately establishes what we perceive as normal for sexual practices is much more heavily influenced than it is in other domains by images and descriptions of sexuality in cultural and literary interpretations and in works of art. In this section, I will treat different forms of cultural representation together under the name of cultural horizons, by which I mean the ways in which sexual intercourse and orgasm are depicted in various kinds of artistic representation, such as literature, film, theatre, and art, and also different forms of popular culture, like videos, blogs, or social media posts.

In general, the cultural representation of orgasm in Western societies reflects its high social value. Having many and spectacular ones is coded as good and desirable, whereas having few or weak ones is coded as bad and unfortunate. Orgasm is a sign of successful sexuality.⁴⁸ Among various art forms nowadays, the audiovisual imagery of sex that we see in the cinema and on television has the most powerful hold on our attitudes and beliefs, and through these also on our actual sexual experiences. These images do not have a direct influence on our lived experience: “their effects are mediated through the interactional contexts in which we ‘do’ sex and the reflexive processes whereby we interpret our own bodily responses and ‘read’ those of a lover. It is only then that cultural meanings of sex become part of our lived embodiment.”⁴⁹ For sexual experiences, intersubjective validation occurs through more or less conscious comparison of one’s own experiences with those we encounter in films and other audiovisual art forms.

When we look at how the experience of orgasm is depicted in cultural works, we see that images on film and television continue to portray women climaxing intensely and easily from penetrative heterosex, although as shown above, surveys and studies dating back to at least the 1950s have shown this to be the least likely route to female orgasm. For most women, the vaginal friction occurring in stereotypical heterosexual intercourse is not nearly enough for climaxing. Whereas an ordinary act of penetrative sex leads a man to orgasm relatively easily, it rarely does the same for a woman. It is understandable to a degree that a feature film or a television series is not a sex education class and that depictions of intercourse in film cannot be expected to convey the exact details that lead to orgasmic pleasure, and besides, it is a characteristic feature of cultural representation of any phenomenon that not everything is shown or explained. However, the understanding of both men and women of their sexual needs currently relies heavily on depictions of vaginal penetrative sex that pervade both film productions and the porn industry.⁵⁰

All in all, the outcome is a skewed appearance of especial and frenzied popular interest in and attention to female pleasure, while the way this pleasure is shown to be achieved in films and other audiovisual works remains one of the greatest impediments to women’s ability to actually experience the joy of orgasm in their everyday lives. Because of the private nature of sexual activities, it is easier to doubt one’s own experiences than the image that is conveyed in cultural representation and that takes on the authority of normality. “In most cases, it requires an effort to deconstruct the meanings that are already formed by means of cultural forms, or to juxtapose them with different, perhaps conflicting, meanings. And the more a cultural form is socially normalised by the repeated intersubjective usage of it, the more difficult and out of place it feels to contradict it.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Zahavi, *Husserl’s Phenomenology*, 133–4.

⁴⁸ Kalman, “Faking Orgasm,” 99.

⁴⁹ Jackson and Scott, *Theorizing Sexuality*, 156.

⁵⁰ Mahar et al., “Orgasm Equality,” 27.

⁵¹ Viik, “Understanding,” 162.

It must be admitted though, that it seems easier to change the tide in literary works and that realistic depictions of women's orgasms are easier to find there. An instructive example of differences between how female pleasure is portrayed in literature and in film in terms of audience numbers and the potential impact on the public is the cinema version⁵² of the best-selling novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*.⁵³ Whereas the male protagonist in the book takes special and minute care of making his lover orgasm in each of their sexual encounters, none of this heedfulness is conveyed in the film version, where the sexual scenes are more explicit than usual but in their peak moments invariably conform to the stereotypical image of simultaneous orgasm from penetrative sex.

In general, the discrepancy between women's actual experiences of orgasm and how it is depicted in cinema and film has resulted in a somewhat strange situation where women, and also men, in the more sexually open-minded countries are rationally very aware of the relevant details of the female body and pleasure, but the visual imagery they encounter in cinema and TV still endorses the idea upheld by the double standards of large-scale film productions that feature a sexually assertive man sporting a strong libido, and a passive woman surrendering to his will, plus the two of them climaxing together. It is no wonder then that the orgasm gap so tenaciously sticks in place despite the general advancement of sex education and the slow but steady rise in public awareness of female sexuality.

10 Closing the gap

It is likely that anyone who has tried to think philosophically from a feminist, or any other non-mainstream, perspective has at some point felt that for any one thing to change, everything needs to change. And if it is the system that needs to change, then what is the use of wrapping one's head onerously around specific problems. If we take the problem of the orgasm gap seriously, it is difficult not to see the amount of unnecessary suffering and trauma it creates, compelling one to think what would need to happen for the gap to start showing signs of diminishing. As with most questions relating to sexuality, this is also problematic in many ways. It implicitly takes the number of male orgasms as the reference point and presumes that women should catch up. In various media outlets, women are encouraged to take active responsibility for their sexual pleasure, to educate themselves and their partners, work for their orgasms, and so forth. This may sound a reasonable thing to do considering the circumstances, but many feminist authors have challenged these assumptions, pointing out that these recommendations actually add to women's burden of pleasure rather than reducing it.

We can of course approach the question of reducing the gap differently and say that it is not really about numbers and not even about genders. It is rather about reducing unnecessary harm to many people's well-being and their chance to flourish. While no one has the right to demand sexual satisfaction from others, there is simply no reason to perpetuate suffering that could be avoided. A frequent counterargument to this line of reasoning seems to be that there is no way to guarantee anyone's sexual happiness anyway. I agree, but I also agree with Bertrand Russell's contention that "so long as there is sorrow it can be no part of the duty of human beings to increase its amount, in spite of the fact that a few rare spirits know how to transmute it."⁵⁴

11 Conclusion

The orgasm gap is a specific problem that has its origin in centuries of development of the Western sexual culture. That sex in contemporary societies is habitually done in ways that facilitate the male orgasm but

⁵² *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson. Universal Pictures, 2015.

⁵³ James, *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

⁵⁴ Russell, *Marriage and Morals*, 302.

impede the female one is a historical contingency that is kept alive by simple, though lamentable, ignorance and natural, albeit regrettable, modesty. It is one thing to learn the location and functioning of the clitoris in school, it is another thing actually to apply this knowledge when having sex with a partner, bearing in mind that a large part of the pleasurable quality of sexual experiences arises out of their spontaneity. It is surely possible to advance and elaborate greatly one's sexual techniques, but first and foremost comes the vague general idea, a certain stereotypical image of sexual intercourse that is currently so hopelessly out of tune with most women's bodily make-up as far as orgasm is concerned. Once internalised, cultural forms of these kinds take on an existence of their own and are generally difficult to change because they supposedly represent the intersubjectively validated communalised experience of the whole society.⁵⁵

This is because the intersubjective validation of sexual experiences is influenced by the private nature of these experiences, as well as by social standards of sexual behaviour. In accordance with Western social conventions, an overwhelming majority of sexual activities take place privately, hidden from possible onlookers. Even though the social rules of sexual ethics have long been trending towards relaxation, it is still rare that a typical person finds themselves directly witnessing other people having sex. In childhood, we already learn to accept the private character of sexuality as natural, but it is instructive to notice that most of our other experiences actually do get validated in continuous physical co-presence with other people. This is how we learn to eat, talk, walk, and sleep, in short, how to behave in socially acceptable ways. Unless we suddenly land in a society with totally different norms and customs, we hardly ever notice the constant process of intersubjective validation taking place as we continuously acquire and maintain various social conventions.

Similarly, although discussions of the intimate details of sexual experiences do take place between close friends, as well as in specialised literature like research publications, sex magazines, and women's journals, the scope of these exchanges remains limited compared to the ways most other kinds of experience are tackled in everyday conversation. Thus, the usual modes of intersubjective validation through physical co-presence and verbal interaction are greatly hampered when it comes to sexual experiences. In consequence, the cultural representation of these experiences takes on an especially prominent role that is much more limited for most other types of experience.

However, in the same way that experiences are intersubjectively validated, their validity can also be altered through mutual correction. This can happen when it becomes possible to represent the failed act of meaning-formation either socially or culturally. For the moment, the ways sex is depicted in culture and art are still heavily dominated by the male perspective, originating in the experience of the male body. It is therefore crucial that female authors, directors, artists, theorists, and others engage in cultural creative and theoretical work on all possible levels. Without necessarily following any feminist agenda, their creative representation of the bodily experience is bound to start reflecting their actual embodied relationship with the world, since our body always remains the basis and necessary starting point of all our experiences, and all the more so for the sexual ones.

Acknowledgments: The author wishes to thank the editors Nicole des Bouvrie and Laura Hellsten and the Feminist Philosophy Circle of the Nordic Summer University.

Funding information: The editing and publishing of this article is funded by the European Regional Development Fund through an ASTRA measure project “TLU TEE or Tallinn University as the promoter of intelligent lifestyle” (no. 2014–2020.4.01.16-0033).

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

⁵⁵ Husserl, *Crisis*, 163–4.

References

Drummond, John J. *Historical Dictionary of Husserl's Philosophy*. Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2008.

Ferrarello, Susi. *The Phenomenology of Sex, Love, and Intimacy*. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Fifty Shades of Grey. Directed by Sam Taylor-Johnson. Universal Pictures, 2015.

Frith, Hannah. *Orgasmic Bodies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015.

Grice, H. P. "Meaning". *The Philosophical Review* 66:3 (1957), 377–88.

Halwani, Raja, ed. *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 7th edition, 2017.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Science of Logic*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: an Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: an Introduction to Phenomenology*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013.

Jackson, Stevi and Sue Scott. *Theorizing Sexuality*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2010.

James, E. L. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. London: Cornerstone Digital, 2012.

Kalman, Hildur. "Faking Orgasms and the Idea of Successful Sexuality." *Janus Head* 13:1 (2013), 97–118.

Kontula, Osmo and Anneli Miettinen. "Determinants of Female Sexual Orgasms." *Socioaffective Neuroscience & Psychology* 6:1 (2016), 31624.

Laqueur, Thomas. "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology." *Representations* 14 (1986), 1–41.

Lorentzen, Jørgen. "Masculinities and the Phenomenology of Men's Orgasms." *Men and Masculinities* 10:1 (2007), 71–84.

Mahar, Elizabeth A., Laurie B. Mintz, and Brianna M. Akers. "Orgasm Equality: Scientific Findings and Societal Implications." *Current Sexual Health Reports* 12:1 (2020), 24–32.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Mintz, Laurie B. *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters – And How to Get It*. New York: HarperOne, 2017.

Nagel, Thomas. "Sexual Perversion." In *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, edited by Halwani, Raja. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 7th Edition, 2017.

O'Neill, Onora. "Between Consenting Adults." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14:3 (1985), 252–77.

Park, Brian, et al. "Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions? A Review with Clinical Reports." *Behavioral Sciences* 6:3 (2016), 17.

Pellauer, Mary D. "The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women's Sexuality." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9:1/2 (1993), 161–82.

Russell, Bertrand. *Marriage and Morals*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1929.

Soble, Alan, ed. *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006.

Tuana, Nancy. "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance." *Hypatia* 1 (2004), 194–232.

Viik, Tõnu. "Understanding Meaning-Formation Processes in Everyday Life: An Approach to Cultural Phenomenology." *Humana.Mente: Journal of Philosophical Studies* 9:31 (2016), 151–67.

Wade, Lisa D., Emily C. Kremer, and Jessica Brown. "The Incidental Orgasm: The Presence of Clitoral Knowledge and the Absence of Orgasm for Women." *Women & Health* 42:1 (2005), 117–38.

Webster, Paula. "The Forbidden: Eroticism and Taboo." In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Vance, Carole S. Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984.

Weiss, Gail, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salomon, eds. *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020.

Welton, Donn. "Bodily Intentionality, Affectivity, and Basic Affects." In *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Zahavi, Dan. *Husserl's Phenomenology. Cultural Memory in the Present*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008.