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## "Now Thinking About It, It's Freedom": Conceptualizing Sexual Pleasure for Fat, Queer Women

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“NOW THINKING ABOUT IT, IT’S FREEDOM”: CONCEPTUALIZING SEXUAL  
PLEASURE FOR FAT, QUEER WOMEN

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Education  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Carolyn Elizabeth Meiller

Lexington, Kentucky

Co- Directors: Dr. Candice Hargons, Associate Professor of Counseling Psychology

and Dr. Sharon Rostosky, Professor of Counseling Psychology

Lexington, Kentucky

2021

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### “NOW THINKING ABOUT IT, IT’S FREEDOM”: CONCEPTUALIZING SEXUAL PLEASURE FOR FAT, QUEER WOMEN

Research considering the positive aspects of sexuality, such as pleasure, within a cultural context is especially important for groups of people that are often seen as separate from the experience of sexuality, such as fat, queer women. Due to perceptions of their bodies and how their sexuality goes against traditional heteronormativity, fat, queer women's experiences with sex and pleasure are under represented. Using a critical sexuality framework, the present study sought to explore the definitions and experiences of sexual pleasure for fat, queer women.

In the present study, constructivist grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2014) were used to analyze the definitions and experiences of sexual pleasure provided by 15 emerging adult, fat, queer women during semi-structured interviews. A definition of sexual pleasure for fat, queer women was co-constructed that highlighted the incorporation of positive emotional, mental, and physical experiences in definitions of pleasure. Results indicated that certain elements of partnered and solo sexual experiences either generated or inhibited experiences of pleasure for participants. For the fat, queer women interviewed, critical socialization that included experiences of sexism, heterosexism, and sizeism led to decreased feelings of pleasure worthiness that impacted their expectations for pleasure, and ultimately their feelings of pleasure. However, the participants also encountered socialization that moved against gendered, heteronormative, and sizeist beliefs of sexuality ultimately increasing the beliefs in the worthiness of their pleasure and their experiences of pleasure. Implications for counseling, sex therapy, and sex education are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Sexual Pleasure, Critical Sexuality, Fat, Queer, LGBTQ, Qualitative Research

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*(Name of Student)*

04/30/2021  

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Date

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Much of sexuality research focuses on deficit, risk, and dysfunction, such as unplanned pregnancies (Kuroki et al., 2008), sexually transmitted infections (Kalichman et al., 2011), sexual assault (Sabina & Ho, 2014), and sexual dysfunctions (Lewis et al., 2010). Focusing exclusively on the negative aspects of sexuality is especially prevalent for people with marginalized identities, such as fat, queer women. Sex research on sexual minority women is dominated by exploration of sexually transmitted infections and risky sexual behaviors (e.g., Fethers et al., 2000), while sexuality research on fat women often focuses on how body size relates to body image and therefore sexuality issues (Blodgett Salafia & Benson, 2013). Yet, as sexual pleasure is an aspect of sexual health (World Health Organization, 2006), emphasizing and understanding sexual pleasure is important to promoting sexual health as a whole.

Furthermore, sexual health and pleasure are connected to systemic privilege and oppression, which necessitates an examination of systemic processes, historical oppression, and cultural context in connection with sexuality (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Sexual experiences inherently occur within a sociopolitical context that perpetuates systems of heterosexism, sexism, sizeism, racism, and other forms of oppression. These oppressive systems influence the way people learn about, understand, and engage in sex. For example, understandings of sex are often rooted in heteronormative discourses that emphasize penile-vaginal penetration as sex. Therefore, research needs to consider the impact of societal and systemic power on sexuality. Additionally, research should look at sexuality holistically, encapsulating often overlooked aspects of sexual health, such as pleasure. This is especially important for groups of people that are seen as separate from

the experience of sexuality due to perceptions of their physical bodies or the way they go against traditional heteronormative sexuality, such as fat, queer women (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Mosher, 2017).

### **Sexual Pleasure**

Sexual pleasure is commonly cited as a primary motivator for engaging in sexual behaviors (Boul et al., 2009; Pinkerton et al., 2003). Broadly, sexual pleasure has been defined as any positive feelings that occur as a response to sexual activity (Pinkerton et al., 2003; Rye & Meaney, 2007). However, sexual pleasure is often exclusively linked to orgasm within the literature (Blair & Pukall, 2014). Sexual pleasure is also measured through items conflating pleasure with satisfaction, such as “I am satisfied with my sex life,” or asking about orgasm frequency (McClelland, 2011). Although orgasm is still highly related to sexual pleasure, a qualitative survey of 119 sexually active adults showed that sexual experiences that did not lead to orgasm were still often seen as pleasurable (Opperman et al., 2014). Boul and colleagues (2009) distinguish between the hedonic and eudemonic pursuit of pleasure, arguing that aspects of both are often present in sexual motivation. In contrast to hedonic pleasure, or pleasure for pleasure’s sake, eudemonic pleasure considers the pursuit of other goals within the sexual domain, such as intimacy, relational connection, and happiness. Based on this conceptualization, sexual pleasure is more complicated than exclusively hedonic pleasure (i.e., climax or orgasm). In spite of the conflation of sexual pleasure with orgasm within the literature, researchers have begun exploring what sexual pleasure means and how it is experienced.

### ***Sexual Health and Sexual Pleasure***

The concept of sexual health has evolved since the World Health Organization (WHO) first worked to define the term in 1975 (Edwards & Coleman, 2004; Giami, 2002). Although historic, and sometimes popular, definitions of sexual health primarily focus on the physical aspect (i.e., free from disease and unintended pregnancy; Rubinsky & Cooke-Jackson, 2018), the WHO (2006) conceptualizes sexual health as well-being beyond the physical. Aspects such as mental, emotional, and social well-being, possibility of pleasure, safety, and attainment and maintenance of sexual rights (e.g., free from coercion and discrimination) are highlighted by the WHO definition. Therefore, when discussing sexual health, it is important to highlight the broader definition, including sexual pleasure.

Pascoal and colleagues (2014) found that in definitions of sexual satisfaction, people emphasized mutual pleasure among partners as a central element of sexual satisfaction. Pleasure, both their own and their partner's, was also present in Black Caribbean men's definitions of sexual health (Crowell et al., 2016), Black university student's most recent sexual encounter narratives (Hargons et al., 2018) and women's descriptions of good sex (Fahs & Plante, 2017). In a sample of 20 women, Fahs and Plante (2017) found that descriptions of good sex emphasized both physical pleasure in terms of orgasm and other elements of sex that made it good, including relationship dynamics, comfort, and control. When considering their own experiences related to sexuality, this research demonstrates that individuals may place pleasure as a centrally important component of the experience, but pleasure is not solely dependent on orgasm. McClelland (2011) argues that equating pleasure with orgasm does not capture many individual's understandings of pleasure and leads to construct validity issues when



measuring pleasure. As pleasure cannot accurately be captured by a one-item measure or frequency of orgasm, it is important to theorize and explain how people define pleasure beyond orgasm.

In addition to being important to people, and an aspect of sexual health, pleasure has also been found to facilitate other elements of health and well-being. For example, research has found that promoting pleasure and discussing the ways pleasure can be enhanced, such as through the use of condoms by increasing sensation and duration, are more effective at promoting condom use than traditional risk prevention models of education (Hirst, 2013; Philpott et al., 2006). Sexual pleasure and orgasms have been further linked to the relational components of sexual health and well-being. Pleasure and orgasm have been associated with greater marital satisfaction, and participants emphasize mutual pleasure or partners' pleasure within qualitative research (Crowell et al., 2016; Fahs & Plante, 2017; Hargons et al., 2018; Pascoal et al., 2014). Understanding definitions and conceptualizations of pleasure for different groups may help guide sexual health promotion efforts, contribute to a more complex and nuanced definition of pleasure, and work towards promoting justice in the domain of sexuality.

Although definitions of pleasure have been explored for some groups of people (i.e., Black university students, Hargons et al., 2018 and women, Fahs & Plante, 2017), definitions and experiences of pleasure have not been explored for fat, queer women. For the purposes of this study, queer refers to sexual minority identities within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer spectrum (LGBQ+; + refers to other identities within the LGBQ spectrum). I use fat in the current study to refer to individuals who are larger bodied, plus-size, curvy, or full-figured. Similar to the reclamation of the term queer, fat activists

and scholars have called for use of fat as an identifier and descriptor to help destigmatize fatness (Saguy & Ward, 2011). Therefore, my choice to use the term fat in this paper is an intentional choice as a means of reclaiming fat as a neutral or positive identity descriptor.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Critical Sexuality Studies***

Fahs and McClelland (2016) argue that the connection between power and sexuality necessitates research on sexuality from a critical standpoint, or critical sexuality studies. In their description of critical sexuality studies, Fahs and McClelland (2016) argue that research on sexuality needs to take a critical standpoint by: 1) re-analyzing and conceptualizing definitions falsely thought of as common sense and/or universal, 2) focusing on abject bodies, or bodies that are often seen as separate from or not included in discussions of sexuality, such as fat bodies, and 3) understanding and dismantling heteronormative and heterosexist conceptualizations of sexuality. Exploration of the experiences and definitions of sexual pleasure of fat, queer women works to accomplish these three dimensions. First, sexual pleasure is often narrowly defined based on orgasm or with a one-point statement of “I am satisfied with my sex life,” assuming a universal experience of pleasure (McClelland, 2011). Qualitative methodology gives space for fat, queer women to define sexual pleasure for themselves and provide a new perspective on its definition. Furthermore, emphasis on fatness and queerness and the intersections of these identities brings abject bodies into the forefront and provides a space to dismantle heterosexist and sizeist conceptualizations of sexual pleasure.

### ***Intimate Justice***

Sexual pleasure is not equally accessible for everyone (Harris, 1996; McClelland, 2010). McClelland (2010) argues that the way people report pleasure within their sex lives is based on their expectations, as well as the pleasure that they feel they are entitled to. Therefore, someone who feels they are not entitled to pleasure or has low expectations for pleasure may report higher satisfaction with less experienced pleasure than someone who believes they are entitled to and expecting pleasure. Intimate justice argues that exploration of pleasure must also include an exploration and understanding of sexual stigmas, stereotypes, and inequality that influences the experience of sexual well-being (McClelland, 2010). Through this exploration, intimate justice strives to bring justice to sexual experiences that are both free from harm, discrimination, and coercion, as well as pleasurable (McClelland, 2010), which are both elements of sexual health as defined by the WHO (2006).

### **Queer Women's Sexuality**

Sexuality of LGBTQ+ individuals has the possibility to be used to analyze and deconstruct the typical heteronormative sexual scripts present within society from critical sexuality and queer theory perspectives (Butler, 1993; Fahs & McClelland, 2016).

Although in recent years research has focused more on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, the focus on LGBTQ+ sexual experiences and sexuality is still limited.

Although sexual scripts predominately identify sexual intercourse as involving penetration (Opperman et al., 2014), researchers have found that lesbian women tend to identify more sexual behaviors as sex than heterosexual men or women (Horowitz & Spicer, 2013). The diverse ways that sexual minority women define sex may lead to different experiences of sexuality and sexual pleasure than heterosexual women.

A few researchers have compared the sexual experiences of sexual minority women to heterosexual women (e.g., Fahs & Plante, 2017; Goldey et al., 2016).

Researchers have found that sexual minority women report greater frequency of orgasm than heterosexual women (Blair et al., 2017; Frederick et al., 2017; Garcia et al., 2014). Women were more likely to report orgasm at their last sexual encounter if it included a variety of different sexual activities, such as manual stimulation and oral sex (Frederick et al., 2017). Differences between sexual minority and heterosexual women in orgasm frequency may be related to narrow definitions of sex among heterosexual couples, for example focusing on vaginal-penile penetration, despite research suggesting women are less likely to orgasm through penetration alone (Frederick et al., 2017; Richters et al., 2006). On the contrary, sexual minority women may be more likely to include various sexual activities within their sexual encounters leading to greater orgasm frequency.

Some of the differences in sexual activity between sexual minority and heterosexual women may be related to how sexual minority women go against traditional heteronormative sexuality (Blair et al., 2017). For example, sexual minority women reported less shame about the use of sex toys than heterosexual women (Fahs & Swank, 2013). Furthermore, sexual minority women described feeling more entitled to sexual pleasure than heterosexual women (Goldey et al., 2016). As queer sexuality is inherently not included within heteronormative scripts, some sexual minority women may use this as a way to move against these traditional scripts, and therefore, place greater emphasis on their own pleasure.

Goldey and colleagues (2016) investigated sexual pleasure for sexual minority women. Across 13 focus groups with a total of 73 participants (about half of whom identified as heterosexual and half within the LGBTQ+ spectrum), researchers examined how experiences of sexual pleasure differed by sexual identity, age, and across partnered

and masturbatory experiences (Goldey et al., 2016). Researchers found that for women across sexual orientations, sexual pleasure is a complex and nuanced experience that involves many different elements, such as autonomy, exploration, trust, closeness, partner's pleasure, and orgasm. Although many of the themes present in the descriptions of sexual pleasure were the same across sexual orientations, social identities still contributed to the experience of pleasure, such as sexual minority women expressing greater expectation of sexual pleasure than heterosexual women.

Furthermore, although Goldey and colleagues (2016) focused on age and sexual orientation in their analyses, they did not discuss other social identities such as size and race. Additionally, the authors used a focus group format with lesbian focus groups and heterosexual focus groups, further divided by age (older and younger). However, the authors acknowledged the limitation that they gave bisexual and queer participants the option of which group to participate in, which ultimately lessened the ability to understand the experience of bisexual and queer women in the study. Therefore, the focus group format may have limited the applicability of the results to bisexual and queer women within the sample.

### **Fat Women's Sexuality**

As a field, fat studies is much newer than other identity-based fields, such as African American studies or LGBTQ studies (Rothblum, 2012). Fat studies seeks to understand how society views and oppresses those who are fat. Furthermore, a goal of fat studies is to work against the negative connotation fatness has within society, and work towards acceptance of all sizes. Sizeism, or discrimination based on being perceived as too fat, has led to systemic discrimination, such as within healthcare (Chrisler & Barney,

2017) and employment (DeBeaumont, 2009), as well as rampant fatphobia within society (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011; Pausé, 2017).

In relation to sexuality, stereotypes that fat people are lazy, unattractive, and unmotivated influence the prejudicial attitudes that people hold towards fat people, and may become internalized (McHugh & Kasardo, 2012). In the limited research on fat women's sexuality, the majority of it investigates how body size relates to negative body image or sexual dysfunction (Blodgett Salafia & Benson, 2013; Erbil, 2012; Yaylali et al., 2010). For example, one study looked at the influences of women's body image on sexuality and found that women with higher body mass indexes (BMI) reported lower sexual satisfaction and higher self-consciousness than women with lower BMI (Blodgett Salafia & Benson, 2013). Through this quantitative survey, the link between fatness and sexual satisfaction was explored, but the data does not provide insight into what societal factors may have led to this link for participants. Moreover, the predominant focus on the link between fatness and negative sexual experiences in research may reinforce stereotypes that exclude people who are fat from discussions of positive sexuality. Due to the medicalization of fatness as "obesity" that relates fatness to physical and psychological health concerns, as well as a personal failing and problem (Lupton, 2014; Prohaska & Gailey, 2019), fatness is not seen as sexual, except when it is explicitly fetishized (White, 2016).

Although not many studies have looked at the sexual experiences of fat women, Gailey (2012) interviewed 36 fat women about their sexual histories as related to their body image and involvement in fat acceptance movements. The women reported unsatisfying sexual experiences and high amounts of shame related to their body image.

Upon becoming involved in fat or size acceptance movements, the women reported decreased shame towards their body, and instead developed acceptance and appreciation of their bodies which translated to positive changes to their sexual experiences. This study provides one example about how differing views of one's size may play into the experiences of sexuality and sexual pleasure.

### **Queerness and Fatness Intersectionality**

Research has shown correlations between fatness and queerness for women (Mereish, 2014; Rizer et al., 2015). Specifically, lesbian women have been found to have higher rates of “obesity” than heterosexual women (Conron et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2003). Less research has looked at weight among bisexual women, but a few studies have found higher rates of “obesity” for bisexual women than for heterosexual women (e.g., Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013; Struble et al., 2010). However, Conron and colleagues (2010) did not find significant differences in weight between bisexual and heterosexual women.

Historically, fatness has been seen as a reaction or consequence of experiencing stress related to discrimination for LGBTQ+ individuals (McHugh & Kasardo, 2012). For example, lesbian women who reported higher rates of heterosexist discrimination were more likely to be larger than lesbian women who had experienced lower rates of discrimination (Mereish, 2014). However, recent writings within fat studies have argued that fatness leads to discrimination due to fatphobia and sizeism (Rothblum, 2012). Therefore, higher weight and larger body size is not simply a consequence of discrimination or oppression, but also leads to discrimination and oppression. Nonetheless, relationships between queerness and fatness remain.

Neither queerness nor fatness are included or seen within traditional Western heteronormative sexual scripts. Therefore, both queerness and fatness provide a unique lens for how cultural beliefs about sexuality influence those who are not traditionally included or represented in these narratives. Rye and Meaney (2007) argue that experiences of sexual pleasure are mediated by what is seen as acceptable sexuality within social norms. Furthermore, lack of sexual pleasure may stem from anxieties and difficulties of living up to societal norms (Boul et al., 2009) or the influence of limited representation of expectations for pleasure (McClelland, 2010). Therefore, the limited representation of sexuality as White, heterosexual, with a western bias around slim bodies, may be harmful and detrimental to marginalized groups that do not fit within these norms (Boul et al., 2009; McClelland, 2010). However, individuals who do not fall within these limited representations, such as fat, queer women, may not be bound to constricting definitions and understandings of sex, and therefore, may be able to combat the limitations imposed by societal norms and experience greater sexual pleasure. Understanding sexual pleasure for fat, queer women may help to further explicate and dismantle these processes.

### **Research Questions**

The current study used constructivist grounded theory methods to investigate and understand the experiences of sexual pleasure for emerging adult, fat, queer women. Guided by critical sexuality studies and intimate justice the current study sought to answer the following questions: How do fat, queer women experience sexual pleasure? and How do fat, queer women define sexual pleasure?



## CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY

Grounded theory allows researchers to build theories from qualitative data (Charmaz & Henwood, 2017). Constructivist grounded theory (CGT), as discussed by Charmaz (2014), incorporates a constructivist paradigm that posits that there is not one true objective reality. Instead, reality is constructed through the interpretation of the individual. Opposed to positivist paradigms which believe the researcher has no impact on the research process, constructivist paradigms encourage reflexivity and understanding about how researchers co-construct reality along with their participants (Ponterotto, 2005). The process of accounting for researcher influence moves CGT away from assuming an objective reality exists and strives to centralize the voices of participants in analysis and results (Mills et al., 2007). Because I used a critical sexuality studies framework (Fahs & McClelland, 2016), I also integrated a critical paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). Therefore, the analysis and discussion pulled in focus on power, queerness, and fatness to dismantle heteronormative androcentric sexuality discourse and bring bodies typically erased from sexuality discussion into the forefront.

### **Subjectivities**

Constructivist grounded theory methods focus on the power that the researcher has in the construction of theory from data. Charmaz (2014) discusses the importance of memo-writing throughout the research process, which entails documenting reflections on how researchers are conducting research. This process can help the researcher focus on what they are bringing into the research and how they are coding and categorizing the data (Charmaz, 2014). Memo-writing was utilized throughout all stages of this study to help the researchers engage in reflexivity and understand their biases, which is especially

important when working with people with multiple marginalized identities (McGhee et al., 2007).

Prior to starting and throughout the research, I engaged in reflection and memoing to understand my perspective on the subject, including answering the protocol questions for myself prior to data collection. As I identify within the population being studied, it was important for me to understand my own definitions and experiences with sexual pleasure so that my own experiences did not unknowingly limit how I interacted with the data or the interviews.

I am a 28-year-old, White, bisexual, fat, cisgender woman. As I have experienced the limiting effects of negative messages about sex, I designed this study with the hopes of emphasizing the pleasurable and enjoyable aspects of sexuality. A goal for this study was to highlight and normalize the varied experiences of sexual pleasure for fat, queer women. My understanding and identification around my sexual orientation and size have changed throughout my life and throughout this research process. Beginning this research project, I felt more hesitant in naming body size and fatness as one of my social identities. As I progressed through this research, I found myself becoming more comfortable claiming and using fat to describe myself. My experience of sexual pleasure has varied throughout my life, and as I have learned about myself and my identities, I have seen my experience of sexual pleasure change, often for the better. I find myself tiring of seeing predominately young, White, thin, heterosexual couples engaged in sex, and wanted to provide a space to depict sexuality for people not included within this typical representation. My hope is that research highlighting the sexual experiences of fat, queer women will help to increase fat, queer women's comfort and acceptance towards

themselves and their sexuality, and ultimately improve their experiences of sexual pleasure.

## Participants

Participants for this study self-identified as fat, curvy, plus-size, or of a larger body size. Furthermore, participants self-identified with a minority sexual orientation along the queer spectrum (i.e., lesbian, bisexual, queer, asexual etc.), and self-identified as a woman. Finally, participants were between the ages of 18-29. A total of 15 participants completed interviews for the study. Participants were asked to name their various social identities at the start of the interview. Prompts were provided by the interviewer for undisclosed social identities. Table 1 shows the identities that were disclosed by participants.

Table 1: Pseudonyms and Disclosed Demographics

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Disclosed Demographics</b>
Andrea	27, Woman, queer (pansexual or bisexual depending on day), Black, fat, PhD Candidate, Quaker
Bree	25, Cisgender Woman, Bisexual, Arab/Egyptian, curvy/bigger/fat, PhD student, raised Christian not currently practicing religion, able-bodied, upper/middle class, immigrant born in Egypt raised in Kuwait
Clara	26, Woman, Queer/Gray asexual, White, Israeli, curvy/overweight/fat, bachelor's degree, Jewish, abuse survivor, PTSD, immigrant from Israel
Daisy	27, Female, bisexual, White, larger/curvy, currently pursuing Master's degree, Unitarian agnostic, upper/middle class, feminist
Eliza	28, cisgender woman, Queer/bisexual, White, curvy/plus size, master's degree, Agnostic, chronic pain, upper/middle class, non-monogamous, kink community
Felicity	22 "almost adult", Woman, queer/lesbian, Black American, fat, current Master's student, Witchcraft, middle/working class
Gloria	25, "still distilling" gender: high femme, woman adjacent, Queer, White, plus size, master's student, solo religious practitioner, mental and physical illness, middle class
Hayley	23, "female-ish," Lesbian/Demi a-spec, White, curvy, trade school certificate, agnostic, ADHD/Asperger's, from Australia
Iris	20, cisfemale, bisexual, Irish and Arab mixed race, fat, high school degree, pursued apprentice degree but dropped out, born Muslim, in therapy, "really really poor," lived in a woman's shelter until last year
Josie	26, woman, bisexual/questioning asexuality, mixed race half Indian half European, plus size, bachelor's degree, started master's program but dropped out, middle class

Kat	28, gender fluid female pronouns, pansexual, mixed race European and Native American, “bottom heavy,” associates degree, atheist, able bodied
Lilly	22, Woman, Stone Butch Lesbian, Secular Jewish, fat, senior in college, Jewish, neurodivergent
Margo	25, Woman, Pansexual but doesn’t use label, Afro-Latina, Haitian/Puerto Rican, plus size, Bachelor’s degree, first-generation student, Spiritual
Nadia	29, Woman, Bisexual, mixed race White and Native American, curvy, Bachelor’s degree, lower – middle class
Olivia	25, Woman, Bisexual, Afro-Latina, curvy/thick/big, Bachelor’s degree, Spiritual, able-bodied, middle-upper class

Following guidance of theoretical saturation, interviews were stopped when later interviews did not provide new information or ideas to the developing theoretical framework (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012). However, the use of theoretical saturation as a guiding principle for number of participants has been criticized in the literature due to limited transparency (Morse, 2015; O’Reilly & Parker, 2013). Therefore, informational power was utilized as an additional guideline to determine when I gathered enough data (Malterud et al., 2016).

Informational power proposes that sample size should be determined based on the amount of information participants within a qualitative study have to contribute to the overall data (Malterud et al., 2016). The greater informational power participants have, the smaller sample size needed. Informational power is determined by five characteristics: 1) aim, 2) specificity, 3) theory, 4) dialogue, and 5) analysis. Due to the depth of dialogue in the interviews, the specific focus on emerging adult, fat, queer women’s experiences, and the diversity in participant’s identities, it was determined that 15 participants reached informational power.

### **Recruitment**

Recruitment emails and flyers (see Appendix) were sent to organizations and online groups or blogs geared towards LGBTQ+ and fat individuals (e.g., LGBTQ

Weight Watchers member forum, Fat Girls Doing Things, Bi Positive Tumblr) through email and direct messaging. Potential participants were directed to an eligibility screening survey that asked for demographics as well as a few brief questions about their body image and satisfaction with their sexual pleasure. The researcher purposefully chose participants (Morrow, 2005) to contact to set up interviews in order to interview individuals with a diverse range of experiences and identities.

### **Data Collection**

Intensive semi-structured interviews were conducted (Charmaz, 2014) averaging a length of 71 minutes. Interviews were conducted over Zoom, a video-conferencing software. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed using Amazon Transcribe software, an online encrypted transcription software service that utilizes automatic speech recognition. Five participants were selected to provide feedback on the initial codes and theoretical formulation, also known as member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Krefting, 1991). Member checking helps to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Krefting, 1991). These participants provided feedback that they felt the data reflected their experiences. Two participants provided additional feedback about different wording to use in the definition of pleasure and in describing different themes.

Interview questions focused on eliciting how participants give meaning to and define sexual pleasure, as well as explore their specific experiences with sexual pleasure and messages about sexual pleasure. Two pilot interviews with emerging adult, fat, queer women helped to further finalize the protocol. Data collection and analysis took place in an iterative process, moving between analysis and collection (Charmaz, 2014). The iterative process allowed the researchers to remain engaged and active with the data

throughout the research process, therefore staying close to the initial data and refining the protocol to elicit deeper understanding and fill in gaps in the current data (Charmaz, 2014; Fassinger, 2005). For example, a questions asking specifically about the sexual pleasure messages participants received and how those messages changed.

### **Data Analysis**

A team of researchers was assembled to help with the analysis. Initial line-by-line coding was conducted. Line-by-line coding helped researchers remain close to the data while coding (Charmaz, 2014). Lines of interview transcripts were coded for action with the use of gerunds (Charmaz, 2014). Initial codes focused on summarizing, categorizing, understanding stories, and making observations. In-vivo codes, or codes using participant's language, were also used to capture the language and experiences as told by participants in their words (Charmaz, 2014; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The research team, consisting of three doctoral students in counseling psychology and the lead researcher, engaged in initial coding as a group at first, and then moved to conducting initial coding independently. Each research team member was asked for a brief reflection on their subjectivities and salient identities. The first member of the research team is a cisgender heterosexual Black woman from the South who maintains a personal commitment to liberation principles such as critical reflexivity, intersectional justice, and centering and amplifying individuals at the margins. The second research team member is a Black, cisgender, heterosexual, male of Caribbean descent, who is a first-generation student. The final research team member is a queer-adjacent, White, fat, woman who is guided in her work by inclusive sex-positivity and anti-racist feminist theory. Regular research team meetings were conducted to discuss developing understanding of the data, investigate

potential theoretical categories, process reactions and biases about the data, and receive additional input on initial codes as needed.

Initial codes that were repetitive and/or appeared to have theoretical reach were identified for focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). A comparative process was utilized throughout the coding stages that compared the emerging codes to the overall data set to determine the codes with the greatest reach (Charmaz, 2014). Focused coding concentrated on understanding and drawing connections between codes to understand how different concepts relate to one another and identify gaps in the current codes. Categorizing of codes helped to further illuminate relationships between different codes and categories. Continued memo-writing, revisiting previous memos, and continued discussion on the research team assisted with the focus coding process. Initial and focus coding occurred within the research team for the first eight interviews, the remaining seven interviews were coded by the lead researcher due to conflicts and delays in scheduling interviews during the start of the COVID-19 outbreak and quarantine.

Tentative categories of codes with theoretical plausibility were identified, along with a theoretical direction, such as codes of defining pleasure, increasing pleasure, decreasing pleasure, and partner dynamics (Charmaz, 2014). In line with the iterative process of CGT methods, continued interviews engaged theoretical sampling to check and elaborate on current categories and relationships (Charmaz, 2014). Upon completion of data collection and analysis, the lead researcher engaged in theoretical sorting (Charmaz, 2014). Refining the relationships between categories helped to highlight the links between different concepts. For example, highlighting the link between partner

dynamics and increasing and decreasing pleasure helped to highlight how partner characteristics and qualities could generate or inhibit pleasure.



## CHAPTER 3. RESULTS

### **Defining Pleasure**

Participants were asked to provide their definitions for sexual pleasure and what sexual pleasure meant to them at the beginning and conclusion of the interview. At the beginning of the interviews, some participants expressed uncertainty and struggled to find the language to describe sexual pleasure. For example, Bree responded, “Um... Do you have a follow up?” and Daisy began her response saying, “So yeah.. I don’t know, that’s a big question.” Hayley further explained the difficulty as she shared, “Mmmm... I’m honestly not entirely sure how to put it into words.” Other participants noted how their thoughts automatically turned to physiological experiences of pleasure, mainly orgasm. Gloria explained, “I think mentally we always... like I and many of the people I know always go straight to orgasm.” Although some participants related pleasure to orgasm, all participants emphasized pleasure as extending beyond orgasm and the belief that orgasm is not necessary for pleasure. As Nadia summarized, “It doesn't necessarily mean orgasm. It's just what feels good.”

In terms of definitions for pleasure, the women interviewed noted the subjective and individualized experience that all people have of sexual pleasure. Due to this, many of the women noted the need to keep the definition of sexual pleasure simple to intentionally allow room for individual differences. Andrea shared her definition of sexual pleasure as “holistic expressions of joy and satisfaction that contribute to my well-being.” She elaborated that this definition feels both as “simply” and “expansively” as she can summarize it to allow for variation. In keeping definitions broad, many

participants emphasized that pleasure is related to positive physical, emotional, and mental experiences. Josie emphasized the physical aspect of sexual pleasure felt like “an adrenaline rush.” She elaborated, “I’m a kind of person who really likes to explore the outdoors and sort of get that adrenaline when you are like climbing something really high. And that’s what it feels like in my brain, only 10 times better.” Participants named numerous positive emotions that encompass sexual pleasure. Lilly noted “feelings of elation during, before, or immediately following a sexual act.” Feelings of “enjoyment,” “fun,” and “good” were commonly named. For example, Hayley shared, “I do think that one of the fundamental things for me is that all of the parties involved have to be getting enjoyment out of it.” When asked to elaborate on the “good feelings” she was describing, Eliza shared “I think like happiness is kind of the basic one, right?” Kat defined sexual pleasure as “a positive sensation, I guess, sought out and enjoyed, but also something that’s mentally rewarding. Something that you’re gonna lay back and feel good about later. Or think about fondly.” Expanding on the mental experience of sexual pleasure, Daisy shared a feeling of “sexy mental stimulation” that was related to teasing and feeling connected with her partner. Kat also described a sense of “mental stimulation” in defining pleasure. She elaborated by describing intimacy as a two-player game, like Battleship:

if you’re playing Battleship, and you sink a battleship, the other player has to tell you... With arousal that’s pretty easy, nipples get hard, they rub up against you... for me its mental stimulation, because I know what I’m doing is having an effect.

Participants noted that sexual pleasure can occur on their own and with partners. Clara described, “being able to enjoy my own body by myself or with other people.”

Participants that focused on masturbatory sexual pleasure in the interviews often highlighted pleasure as self-care and connection with their own bodies. Iris explained, “I feel like it's such an overused word, but self-care. I mean I'm taking care of myself. I am focusing on myself and being happy and comfortable with myself.” Emphasizing the mutual fulfillment of sexual pleasure with partners, Felicity defined pleasure as, “sexual pleasure means both parties have reached whatever they want from the sexual encounter.”

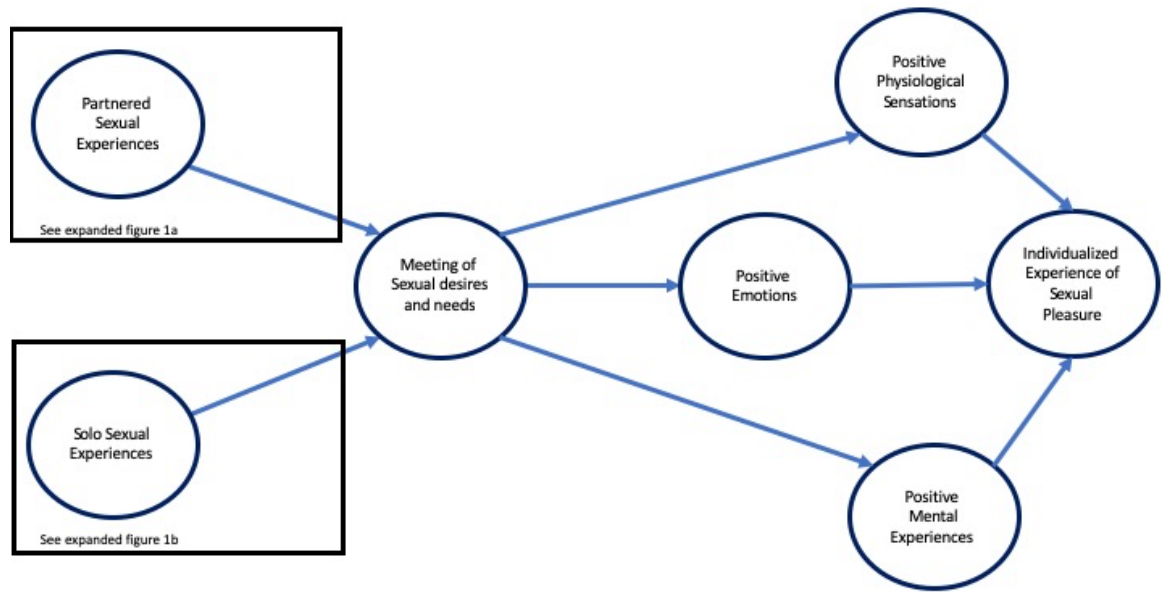
Participants also described the ways they gained new and expanded definitions of pleasure throughout their lives. Participants noted adding different elements to their definitions of pleasure beyond orgasm as they grew and their understanding of pleasure changed. Felicity shared, “sexual pleasure is no longer just about an orgasm.” Josie shared the sentiment of her definition of pleasure continuing to grow and evolve, “my definition of pleasure is just constantly growing and expanding as I learn more about my body and other things like that.” For Bree, her changing understanding of pleasure has led to feeling like, “I just have more agency or responsibility for how I feel” during sex. Margo shared her growth led her to a definition of pleasure as freedom, “I think sexual pleasure and now thinking about it, it's freedom.” Expanded definitions of pleasure made space for participants to figure out what positive sexual experiences really meant for them. Andrea shared a checklist she goes through when thinking about if a sexual encounter is good for her overall well-being:

Is this sexual interaction, thought, activity contributing to my mental health? Contributing to my physical health? Contributing to my sense of self? Is it uplifting? Do I feel empowered during and after? Do I feel like I'm respected by my partner? Do I feel like I'm seen and heard and have space to be heard in this interaction?

Andrea provides one example for how participants learned to focus on their varying needs, wants, and desires through their expanded understanding of pleasure and sex.

From the interviews, the following definition of sexual pleasure was co-constructed (see Figure 1):

Sexual pleasure is a subjective, individualized experience of positive feelings (physical, emotional, and mental) that occurs through the meeting of sexual desires and needs during sexual activities, either partnered or solo. Pleasure can be experienced physiologically such as through orgasm, feelings of “tingling,” or a “rush of endorphins” due to physical stimulation of nerve endings. Emotional pleasure often entails positive feelings such as enjoyment, fun, joy, connection, “warmth” and happiness. Experiences of mental pleasure were frequently connected to mental stimulation, engagement, anticipation, and exploration. Pleasure can be experienced alone, through masturbation, and is the enjoyment of one’s own body. When sex occurs among partners, pleasure is a mutual experience, even if the focus is on providing others with pleasure. Different elements within partnered and solo sexual experiences can either generate or inhibit pleasure.



*Figure 1: Conceptualizing Sexual Pleasure. An image depicting the definition for sexual pleasure co-constructed from this study. Figures 1a and 1b below show further details for the elements that generate and inhibit sexual pleasure in partnered and solo sexual experiences.*

### **Partnered Pleasure**

Participants described different elements that helped to either generate or inhibit experiences of pleasure in their sexual activities with partners (See Figure 1a).

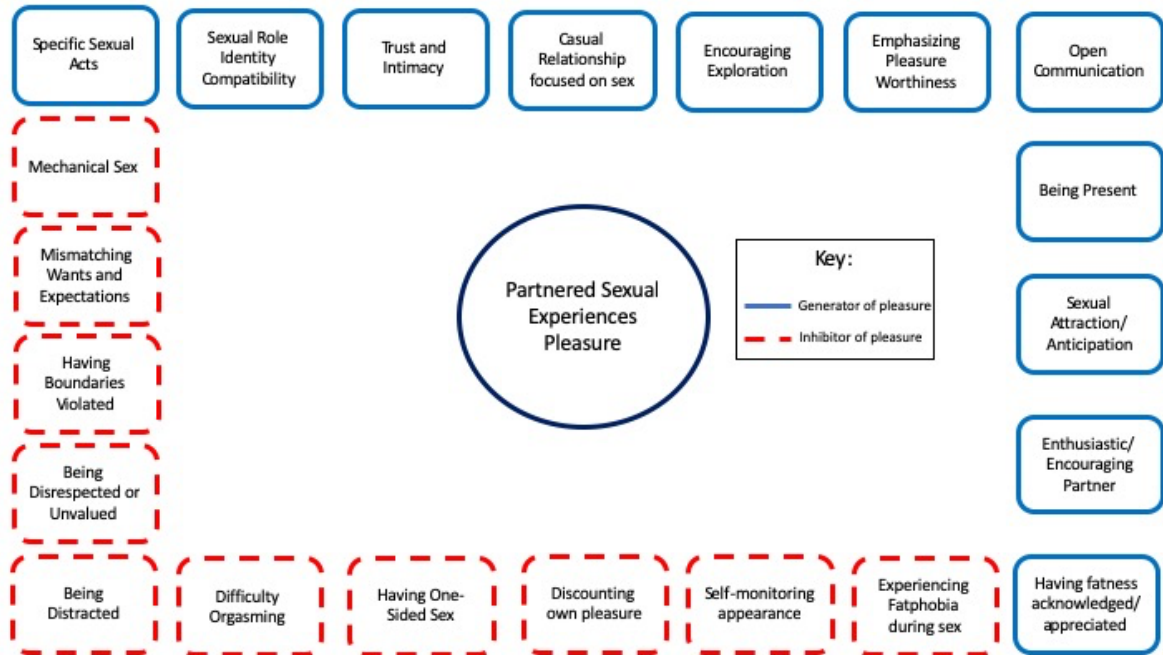


Figure 1a: Generators and Inhibitors of Partnered Sexual Pleasure. This image reflects the various elements that participants described as either generators or inhibitors of partnered sexual pleasure. Generators are shown in the solid boxes and inhibitors are shown in the dashed boxes.

### **Generating Partnered Pleasure**

Participants named and described different ways that they experienced greater amounts of pleasure with their partners. These elements included the influence of specific sexual acts, sexual role identity compatibility, trust and intimacy with partner, casual relationships focused on sex, encouraging exploration, open communication, being present, experiencing sexual attraction and anticipation, having enthusiastic and encouraging partners, emphasizing pleasure worthiness, and having fatness acknowledged and appreciated.

**Specific Sexual Acts.** As participants described their experiences of pleasure, they noted specific sexual acts that led to increased pleasure for them with their partners. Specific sexual acts named by the women included BDSM, exhibitionism, sexual and sensual touching, and specific sexual positions. For example, Eliza, who engages in the

kink community described how BDSM is connected to her experience of pleasure, “...there's like a power and control, like, psychological aspect of [BDSM] that is really appealing to me and that to me is very pleasure related.” Bree described how sexual experiences she had that were in more public spaces brought an element of excitement to the sexual encounter, “the thrill of being outside, of maybe potentially we-I've been, like caught, I suppose, a few times in my life. But there is the thrill of, like someone watching.”

**Sexual Role Identity Compatibility.** When describing their sexual experiences, some participants noted strong sexual role identities, such as identifying as a “top” or “bottom.” Heteronormative sexual scripts often pre-assign gendered sexual roles. However, these same sexual roles are often not prescribed within queer relationships. Therefore, there may be more space for queer women to determine their preferred role in sexual encounters, as was the case for some of the women interviewed. For example, Lilly described herself as a “stone butch top.” In describing what stone butch top meant for her, she shared, “For me, it's not necessarily about being touched in what people would traditionally consider a sexual way. I've got no interest whatsoever in receiving sexual attention. I find a lot more pleasure in giving sexual attention to my partner.” Lilly, and other participants with strong sexual role identities, noted more enjoyable and pleasurable sex when they were able to be in their preferred role. For some, including Lilly, this pleasure was gained through providing pleasure to their partners. Gloria shared her experience being with sexually compatible and not compatible partners. She explained:

I tend to be more of a bottom. But I also have dated a lot of other bottoms, then had to kind of fill that top void, and that was fine at the time. It's not fine anymore. I need to- I've gotten to a point where I'm like I need to be having the sex that I want to be having.

Whereas in the past Gloria has filled in a role she has less preferred, she has now began focusing on having sex in her desired role, which has increased her pleasure.

**Trust and Intimacy with Partner.** Participants noted the ways that relationships with their partners influenced their experience of pleasure. For some participants, long-term relationships with partners they trusted and loved enhanced their experience of sexual pleasure. Daisy described the impact of her current relationship on her experience of pleasure, “We've been together for like, three years at this point. And so, it was this relationship where we both had a lot invested in it and care deeply about each other and so there was that added element.” Feelings of caring for and knowing each other were commonly discussed reasons long-term relationships added to pleasure for participants. Eliza explained, “I mean definitely being with somebody who knows me is always enjoyable for me because there's a level of already knowing what I like and knowing what I'm into...the comfort and the knowledge of each other's already established.” The feeling of comfort in long-term relationships shared by Eliza was noted by other participants, such as Nadia. She explained, “Having a long-term relationship just lets you feel more comfortable with your partner. And I think our sex has only gotten better the longer that we've been together.”

**Casual Relationships Focused on Sex.** While some participants noted experiencing greater pleasure in long-term relationships, others experienced more



pleasure in casual relationships focused on sex. Participants who noted a preference for more casual relationships felt the decreased pressure on the relationship added to their experience of pleasure. As Olivia described, “It was just a lot of fun. It felt like there was no pressure.” In discussing the decreased pressure in casual relationships, participants noted the importance of agreeing to keep a relationship casual between partners. Gloria shared:

Yeah, I told her that I wasn't really looking for a relationship. I was really more interested in something casual and she said, ‘...That's great. I'm actually really happy about that.’ And so we kind of right off the bat established that we were both looking for the same thing... and I think that really helped me feel secure enough to enjoy it.

For Gloria, agreeing to keep the relationship casual allowed her to feel more comfortable during sex with her partner and therefore increased her experience of pleasure.

**Encouraging Exploration.** Regardless of the length or commitment of the relationship, participants noted that partners who helped foster environments that allowed for exploration led them to experience greater amounts of pleasure. As Bree explained the impact her partner had on her most pleasurable sexual experience, she described, “So they were someone who in many ways were also willing to let me explore.” Being allowed to explore let participants try new things and discover new sexual fantasies and likes. Nadia explained how her husband helped her to feel comfortable asking to try new things. She explained, “But to ask for things that I'm like, I've been thinking about this. Can we try out, you know, using a toy or like, let's create a scenario together?” An

environment that fostered exploration allowed participants to try new things and advocate for things they were wanting to try.

**Open Communication.** When discussing the impact of partners on most pleasurable sexual experiences, participants more commonly noted the importance of communication. Whether in long-term or more casual relationships, open and continual communication before, during, and after sex led to increased pleasure for participants. Olivia shared how her partner during her most pleasurable sexual experience was more communicative than past partners, “Then I thought that it was different too, because he definitely was into talking the entire time. He was very communicative. So, like, he would tell me what he wanted. He would ask what I wanted. Which was great.” Bree also shared how communication with her partner was different and more intentional than other past sexual partners, “Like, we’d listen and had very honest conversations and talked a lot, even back then, about like, being intentional with each other.” Gloria described how her and her partner negotiated throughout sex and her partner’s honesty is what helped the sexual experience be her most pleasurable:

...We explicitly negotiated. ‘Hey, maybe don't do that, but this is fine.’ And just the honesty and the forthrightness...Like don't get me wrong, the physical stuff, 10 out of 10 would recommend to a friend. Just the way that she was as a person I think was what helped it be so good.

Communication helped participants experience greater pleasure by having space to ask for what they wanted, be intentional about what they were doing with each other, and showed respect through listening and respecting boundaries.

**Being Present.** Participants noted the importance of staying present and in the moment during sex as generating pleasure. Andrea explained her experience of being present, “And so I was really just able to enjoy moment by moment what was happening because it only mattered moment by moment. We weren't working toward anything in particular.” Being present let Andrea focus on the in the moment enjoyment of what she was experiencing. Andrea noted her ability to stay present was helped by not having a goal-directed focus, such as orgasm, during sex. For Daisy, being present and not distracted allowed her to be more fully in the moment with her partner and ultimately helped her experience a more powerful orgasm. She explained, “I don't think orgasms are like completely mental, but if you're in the right mind state, it makes them better...I allowed it to be more powerful because I wasn't distracted or anything, we were both just in it.” Daisy noted that while being present was not necessary for her experience of an orgasm, it did help it be more pleasurable.

**Experiencing Sexual Attraction and Anticipation.** Participants described the connection between attraction and anticipation. For participants strong feelings of sexual attraction led to increased anticipation between partners. Bree described how the mutual sexual attraction between her and her partner led to her most pleasurable sexual experiences due to the intensity of the attraction, “I have never experienced that kind of like intense sexual attraction to this day.” Strong sexual attraction between partners often created anticipation. Eliza shared her experience of being strongly attracted to her sexual partner and feeling aroused throughout a dinner and evening before being able to have sex that night. She explained, “There was a lot of anticipation going on there and you know, I think I was probably pretty turned on for the course of dinner and the evening.”

She continued to explain how this anticipation led to increased pleasure for her and her partner that night.

**Enthusiastic and Encouraging Partners.** When partners were active participants in sex who were also enthusiastic about the way sex and sexual pleasure were unfolding, participants experienced their own increased pleasure. The impact of enthusiastic partners was especially important for increasing the pleasure felt by participants who were more focused on providing their partners pleasure. For example, Kat shared:

She was very encouraging. I didn't feel any hesitation when we continued to kiss or when she pulled herself closer. She had no reservations about getting what she wanted. I was being sought out which was very pleasurable. I was wanted, and I was doing a good job.

Through her partners enthusiasm and excitement, Kat was able to feel wanted and accomplished by providing her partner with pleasure, both of which helped her overall experience of pleasure. For Lilly, her partner's enthusiasm for having sex in the way that aligned with Lilly's identity as a "stone butch top," not only increased her experience of pleasure, but was also affirming. She explained, "It was very affirming to know that the ways in which I was going to experience pleasure...were not just things she was willing to agree to, but things that she was enthusiastically in favor of." Lilly shared that she did not have an interest in being sexually touched by her partner, and her partner's enthusiasm about this type of sex helped her to feel affirmed in the type of pleasure and sexual experience she was wanting.

**Emphasizing Pleasure Worthiness.** Participants described experiences of learning to focus on and emphasize the importance of their own pleasure. Increased focus

on pleasure was joined by an acceptance and understanding of some participants that they were worthy of experiencing pleasure. As Daisy shared:

And I think a big element of it is what I'm worth and what I deserve, because it took...me coming to terms with the fact that it's about my pleasure and not just their pleasure, or like women can orgasm and partners should care about that has come from me also discovering my self worth.

For Daisy and others, a belief in their pleasure worthiness, allowed participants to have higher standards and expectations for their experiences of pleasure. As Daisy elaborated, "If it's harder to, you know, make me orgasm like actually working to make that happen instead of, Oh okay, well, then we're not going to try." As Daisy reflected on her experiences of difficulty orgasming, she learned to still emphasize the importance of her pleasure with partners and not accept the fact that she might not orgasm as a reason for not focusing on her pleasure.

By focusing on their pleasure and emphasizing the importance of their pleasure, participants also felt able to not fake pleasure, admit when sex was bad, and not blame themselves or their fatness for bad sex. As Olivia shared, "I feel like my pleasure matters more, and that it wasn't just about giving a guy a good experience...I guess it makes you feel a little more confident in saying that you've had bad sex." Clara further emphasized her change in not blaming her body for bad sex, "...there's nothing wrong with your body. This person is just bad at sex. They just don't care." As participants gained more understanding of bad and pleasurable sex, they further internalized the belief that they were worthy of having good sex that focuses on their pleasure and were able to further advocate for and subsequently experience greater amounts of pleasure.

**Having Fatness Acknowledged and Appreciated.** Many participants discussed the nuanced and important ways that partners interacted with their larger bodies to increase their experiences of comfort and therefore pleasure. The appreciation of one's body size, shape, and appearance was especially important for many of the interviewed women. Gloria shared that the explicit complimenting of her body was not a common experience for her. When describing her most pleasurable sexual experience, she emphasized how her partner, "was just so openly, explicitly positive about the way that I look and the way that my body is, which is not something that I've had with a ton of partners." A strong distinction was made by multiple participants in the need for their partner's to not just accept their bodies but appreciate them. Olivia described how her partner's overt complimenting of her body influenced her pleasure.

I'm not 100% confident in my body. So, it was just nice to know that, like this person not only didn't mind the way that I looked but really liked it and thought it was sexy, you know...it takes an extra load off... and I felt like I could be more free with what I was doing, because I didn't have to worry about, you know, how do I look from this angle or anything like that.

For Olivia, and other participants, hearing their partners' verbal praise of their bodies enabled them to remain present, feel relaxed, and ultimately increased their experience of pleasure due to no longer feeling a need to monitor their appearance throughout sex.

Building on the importance of having her body size acknowledged during sex, Felicity explained her ideal approach of future partners to her body:

How do I have a healthy sexual experience where my fatness isn't ignored? Because I don't want somebody to ignore my fatness during sex, but instead, it's valued, without going that fetish like route. So, I think at one point I wanted someone to just like, you know, hold my love handles and tell me that they're beautiful.

She connected how "timidness" and ignoring of fatness felt similar to "colorblindness theory" stating, "I feel like people do that with like fatness. Like if I just ignore the fatness or focus on other things, then it won't be issue." For some participants, having their bodies acknowledged and appreciated allowed them to be their full complete self in sexual interactions which positively influenced their experience of pleasure.

### ***Inhibiting Partnered Pleasure***

When discussing partnered pleasure, participants noted characteristics of partnered sex that led to diminished or absent experiences of sexual pleasure. These characteristics included having mechanical sex, mismatching wants and expectations, having boundaries violated, being disrespected and unvalued, being distracted, not meeting own or partner's expectations, having one-sided sex, discounting own pleasure, self-monitoring appearance, and experiencing fatphobia during sex.

**Having Mechanical Sex.** Participants described bad sex with partners as "mechanical." Sex became mechanical when it was performed out of a duty as opposed to an inherent desire, became repetitive, and lacked additional elements that contributed to pleasure. As Daisy summarized, "I think there have been times that I have done it more out of duty than out of wanting." Kat also explained her experience of mechanical sex:

If it felt like a chore...if I feel an obligation to bring someone to orgasm. That's the period at the end of the sentence for me...if it becomes repetitive...without that

mental stimulation, without a conversation or body language to build off of it's not a good time.

For Kat and Daisy, having sex out of an obligation, duty, and feeling like a chore led to sex that did not have other elements such as connections with partners, excitement, and mental stimulation that otherwise would have increased their experience of pleasure.

**Mismatching Desires and Expectations.** Participants described how a mismatch between their own and their partners desires and expectations from a sexual encounter led to limited experiences of pleasure. Nadia shared at times feeling like her and her husband were in different mental states when it came to sex and how this led to confusion for her husband:

That definitely is a struggle for him, cause he's like, "I'm ready to go, you're sexy, I'm sexy, like, let's just do this!" You know? And I'm like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Can we slow down? Can we just, you know, take a minute?" And I think he gets confused.

For Nadia, moments when her husband is ready for sex and she is not led to mismatched expectations and desires. She described this mismatch is what led her to having sex more out of obligation as opposed to her own inherent desires.

Bree explained how mismatches with partners also stemmed from incompatibility in specific desires. She explained, "If I know that this is something that turns them on and I'm not into it, then it becomes about feeling like you're not meeting, or you're not able, or you don't want to fulfill someone else's desires." She went on to explain that this mismatch took away from her and her partner's experience of pleasure.



**Having Boundaries Violated.** Boundary violations and lack of consent were commonly noted factors of unpleasurable and bad sex among participants. Six of the 15 participants disclosed experiences of trauma and/or sexual assault in the past. Discussions of boundary violations and consent were especially common amongst these participants. When asked what makes sex bad or unpleasurable, some participants thoughts immediately went to consent. For example, Clara responded, “Consent. Lack of consent is my first thought.” Felicity also noted the impact of lack of consent on pleasure, “Obviously if things are not consensual. Like if I asked for something to not be done and it's done anyway.”

**Being Disrespected or Unvalued.** Participants noted the importance of feeling respected during their experiences of partnered pleasure. Partners who were disrespectful, unkind, and did not value participants as people led to decreased experiences of pleasure. Gloria explained, “A bad sexual experience is about somebody who doesn't value me as a person. Somebody who isn't nice to me, which seems like such a baseline thing, but I've had so many experiences that just did not hit that bar.” At times, feeling unvalued by partners was connected to the ways partners interacted with their fatness. However, being unvalued or disrespected by partners was not always connected to specific identities for participants. For example, Felicity noted the importance of partners being polite, “So, people not being polite either. People not knowing how to give directive in a polite way.” When participants did not feel respected as people their experience of pleasure was inhibited.

**Being Distracted.** Participants described ways that they felt unable to be present in the moment during sex and felt disconnected from their bodies. Stress, responsibilities,

and other distractions overshadowed their experiences of pleasure with partners. Nadia described her process of trying to be able to focus on sex and pleasure, “I need to get past the layers of work, stress, family, anxiety, lack of confidence. I have to get through all those layers and burrow down to where I could just be focused on sex and sexuality and pleasure.” For participants, moments when they were unable to push past different stressors and distractions, kept them from being present during sex which impacted their experience of pleasure.

**Difficulty Orgasming.** A few participants, notably Daisy and Olivia, shared experiences of not always orgasming during sex. Difficulty reaching orgasm during partnered sex was often connected to feeling unable to reach an internalized belief that orgasm was expected and necessary for enjoyable sex. The inability to meet a perceived standard of orgasm led some participants to experience frustration and uncertainty about their self-worth. Daisy shared, “And so, it felt like, I don't know sometimes early on when I was first having sex, I felt kind of broken because I didn't orgasm during sex.” Daisy’s own expectations of having an orgasm during sex and her experience of not orgasming led her to feeling broken, a feeling which inhibited her pleasure. Olivia shared her initial approach to sex of focusing on orgasm:

So, I felt like, it was all about orgasm. Which for me, it kind of ended up not being because I don't orgasm super easily or all the time, but I still really enjoy sex. Then like for a while, those messages made it feel like that wasn't enough.

For Olivia, messages that centered orgasm in sexual encounters made her feel like sex without orgasm was not enough even though she was still enjoying it. For the women who described difficulty orgasming, the physical absence of orgasm was not the reason it

detracted from pleasure. The feelings of frustration and brokenness that occurred were the inhibitors of pleasure.

**Having One-Sided Sex.** Participants noted the importance of mutuality in experiences of pleasure. Sexual encounters that were not mutually participated in and enjoyed limited experiences of pleasure. One-sided sex occurred in a few different ways. Bree described one example of one-sided sex, “Yeah, if it's one sided. If it's predominantly, if it all relies on me to, like, do the work for example. So, I think that would take away from it.” For Bree, one sided sex meant she was doing all the work. This experience was distinctly different from participants who described sexual role identity compatibility between partners that generated pleasure. When participants preferred to provide their partner with pleasure and that was discussed beforehand, that was seen as generating pleasure. However, for Bree, one-sided sex where she was doing all the work was not a dynamic that she wanted in her sexual encounters. Olivia described another experience of one-sided sex, “I think someone who doesn't listen to what I want or is just trying to only focus on what they're getting out of an experience, can definitely make it less pleasurable.” For Olivia, one-sided sex occurred when her partners were not focused on her experience of pleasure, but only themselves. In these ways, one-sided sex detracted from experiences of pleasure for participants.

**Discounting Own Pleasure.** Participants described past beliefs and experiences where they discounted the importance of their own experience of pleasure. Participants described internalizing beliefs that sexual pleasure was primarily for men, and not for women. Clara shared learning and believing “...for a very long time that women aren't meant to have sexual pleasure.” Daisy elaborated by sharing that she believed the

messages that women did not often orgasm, or needed additional effort in order to, “...when I was younger, I was more accepting of those ideas because I guess I'd been convinced that it wasn't-- my pleasure wasn't worth it.” Many of the participant’s interviews resonated with this belief that their pleasure “wasn’t worth” the time, effort, or emphasis required to experience pleasure. Participants shared times of not experiencing pleasure, dismissing their own pleasure, and faking pleasure for their partner’s benefit. For example, Andrea shared, “...I would do a lot of performing for my partner, and a piece of that was like, why am I doing that? Where did I get the idea that this was more important than what I'm actually feeling?” For Andrea, the discounting of her own pleasure and experience led her to focusing on performing for her partner at the expense of her own pleasure.

**Self-Monitoring Appearance.** Concerns about body appearance and worries about being unattractive or undesired commonly undermined pleasure for the women interviewed. Participants described how their worries about their appearance often led them to self-monitor their appearance, predominantly in relation to their body size, as if viewing their sexual activity from an outside camera within their minds. Gloria described her experience of self-monitoring as, “Where you feel like you're both having the sex and watching yourself have the sex. Like, ‘Oh, God. How do I look while I'm doing this?’ as opposed to ‘I'm doing this.’” This pattern of thinking led participants to feel not present during sex due to their concerns about their body size. Gloria explained these worries “definitely detracted” from her experiences of pleasure.

**Experiencing Fatphobia During Sex.** Participants also noted the ways their partners’ interactions with their body size negatively influenced their experience of

pleasure with partners. Participants shared experiences of feeling fetishized due to their size by their partners, or having their body size completely ignored. Felicity compared a positive sexual experience to past negative sexual experiences in how her partners approached her body:

She didn't go out of her way to specifically tell me your body is beautiful... But she didn't go out her way to say anything rude or fetishizing. Which shouldn't be the best thing in the world, but it was really nice to experience that because I realized at that point I had never experienced being treated like a person during sex really.

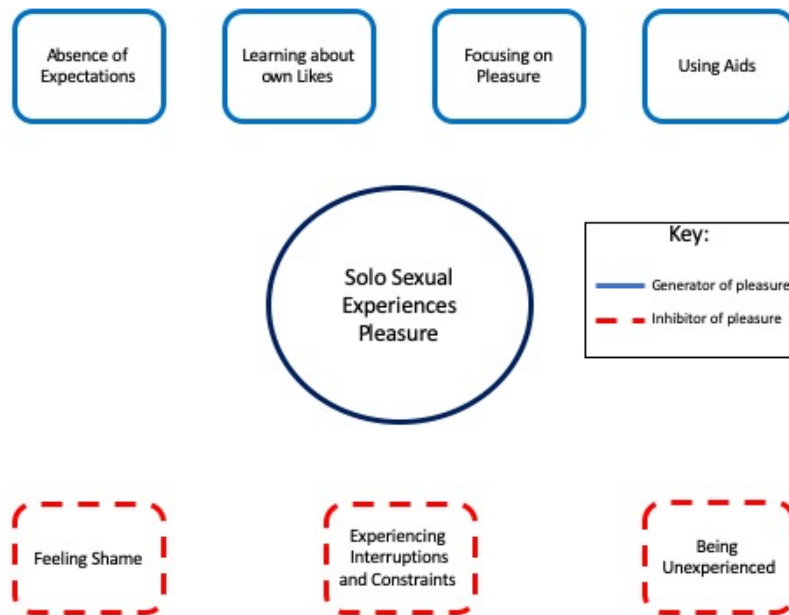
For Felicity, this experience of a neutral approach to her body felt positive because she had only experienced negative and fetishizing reactions to her body from partners previously. Gloria shared a similar reaction in realizing she often braced herself for a negative reaction from partners. She explained, "I shouldn't be bracing myself when I'm having sex with somebody... waiting for them to either think of my body as an obstacle they have to get past or totally wishing that it weren't the way that it is."

A common negative reaction to fat bodies that participants experienced from partners was of partners blaming negative sexual experiences on their fatness. Gloria explained, "I think having sex and being plus sized there's the unique experience of a partner blaming your body for a sexual experience that didn't go the way they wanted it to go." Some participants noted how they had internalized the belief that bad sex was caused by their fatness and also blamed themselves. Daisy shared, "because orgasming has not always been easy for me, there were times that I thought that if I lost weight, it would be easier." Kat explained that blaming her body and focusing on what was wrong with her body has been, "...an obstacle for sexual pleasure...just to get over that it's my

body and it's working properly, and I'm receiving pleasure from it. So there's nothing wrong with anything, any part of it.” Fatphobic beliefs were both internalized by participants and expressed by partners and inhibited the experience of pleasure.

### **Solo Pleasure**

Similar to the discussion of partnered pleasure, participants that focused on solo or masturbatory pleasure also noted varying elements that either generated or inhibited their experience of pleasure (See Figure 1b).



*Figure 1b: Generators and Inhibitors of Solo Sexual Pleasure.. This image reflects the various elements that participants described as either generators or inhibitors of solo sexual pleasure. Generators are shown in the solid boxes and inhibitors are shown in the dashed boxes.*

### **Generating Solo Pleasure**

The majority of participants focused on experiences of partnered pleasure. However, some participants noted their experiences of pleasure while masturbating either in addition to their experiences with partners or, in the case of Iris and Josie, because they had not had sexual experiences with partners. Elements that helped generate solo pleasure

for participants included the absence of expectations, learning about their own likes, focusing on their own pleasure, and using aids.

**Absence of Expectations.** Participants shared that while they were masturbating, when they were able to put aside their own expectations, the freedom of having no one else to impress or focus on allowed them to explicitly focus on increasing their own experience of pleasure. Clara explained:

There was no one to impress. If I didn't put anything on my expectations of how I was supposed to look or sound or anything to another person, and I didn't know what the hell I was doing, so I just kind of kept going until I found something that I liked.

For Clara, the experience of having no expectations from herself or others allowed her to explore and focus on increasing her experience of pleasure during masturbation.

**Learning About Own Likes.** While exploring masturbation for themselves, participants also found space to explore and understand what they enjoyed. Learning about their own likes and what brought them pleasure held a sense of discovery and exploration for participants. Iris explained gaining freedom to explore masturbation and her likes once she lived alone for the first time. She explained, “I had the space to myself and it was sort of the first time I really got to try different things and figure out what worked for me.” Having space to understand what she liked while masturbating allowed Iris to experience further pleasure.

**Focusing on Pleasure.** Compared with descriptions of partnered pleasure, solo pleasure often had more of a goal-directed focus on experiencing pleasure and orgasm for participants. Josie shared while masturbating she was “just focusing on, you know,

getting off.” Focusing on her experience of getting off allowed Josie to prioritize her pleasure and make sure her needs were met while masturbating. Clara explained how focusing on her pleasure allowed her to masturbate until she had enough. When describing her most pleasurable experience of masturbation she explained, “And so the reason it ended up the way it ended up was because I literally just kept going until I was like, okay, that's enough. So that was, like, five orgasms later.” By focusing on their own pleasure during masturbation, participants were able to take steps to make sure they experienced the pleasure they wanted.

**Using Aids.** When discussing their greatest experiences of pleasure with masturbation, participants noted the importance of using toys and media, such as erotica and porn. The use of these aids during masturbation helped to increase their experiences of pleasure. Josie noted she frequently used erotica while masturbating. She described the experience of using erotica as “It's like a sugar rush when I'm reading something when I get in the mood.” When asked about her most pleasurable experience of masturbation, Iris described the first time she used a sex toy. She explained, “It was just the first time I'd used anything other than my hands. And it was just a regular vibrator.” The use of aids such as toys and media helped to heighten participants experiences of pleasure during masturbation.

### ***Inhibiting Solo Pleasure***

Participants also discussed certain elements and experiences that inhibited the pleasure they may otherwise experience from masturbation. These elements included feeling shame, experiencing interruptions and constraints, and being unexperienced.



**Feeling Shame.** Participants described receiving messages and learning that masturbation was wrong and taboo growing up. The women interviewed described how these messages led to feelings of fear and shame that interrupted their experience of pleasure during masturbation. For Eliza, these messages were often connected to religion, she shared feeling, “Fear and shame. And there would be different points at which I would try to stop masturbating and make deals with myself or with God.” Iris also explained her experience of shame connected to masturbation. She described, “It felt sort of like this thing that I enjoyed doing, and it felt pretty great. But emotionally, it was like you shouldn't want to do this so often, I shouldn't be doing this thing...It was very shameful.” Iris's feelings of shame that stemmed from beliefs of masturbation as wrong inhibited her experience of pleasure.

**Experiencing Interruptions and Constraints.** When reflecting on experiences of masturbation, participants noted how different constraints in their lives negatively impacted their experience of pleasure. The commonly discussed constraints included living arrangements, financial, and time constraints. Participants described past experiences of living with others and worrying about or actually being caught or interrupted. Most commonly, participants described feeling constrained while living at home with parents. Josie explained:

I still live with my parents at home, and the thought of them finding out what I'm doing is a real killer. I feel like I'm not as free to satisfy my horniness as I would be if I lived alone.

For Josie, living at home and worrying about her parents finding out about or interrupting her masturbation kept her from fully experiencing the pleasure she would like to

experience. Iris also shared about the constraints of living at home with parents and shared this made her keep her experiences of masturbation short and timed in the past. She explained, “Before it was pretty much have it down pat, get it done in, like, 20 minutes. It was very sort of in and out.”

The women interviewed also noted ways that their consumption of media to aid in their experience of pleasure was interrupted. Josie explained she commonly uses written erotica while masturbating, and shared when, “I’m reading some erotica and a kink that I really don’t like comes up that totally ruins it.” The appearance of kinks participants did not enjoy interrupted their use of porn and erotica and therefore their experience of pleasure.

Financial constraints kept participants from purchasing sex toys that they later found helpful in increasing their pleasure. Clara also explained how time constraints inhibited her experience of pleasure. She shared, “Having a time constraint, like, oh, I have to be doing this by this point.” For Clara, other responsibilities and commitments keep her masturbation timed and force her to move her masturbation along so she is able to be “done” in time. For participants, different constraints on the experience of masturbation limited their ability to fully explore and experience pleasure on their own.

**Being Unexperienced.** When asked about unpleasurable experiences of masturbation, participants commonly described earlier experiences of masturbation. These early masturbation experiences were characterized by inexperience, uncertainty, and confusion. Iris explained, “At 14, when I had no idea what the parts are even called, I was really confused and stumbling around in the dark.” For Iris, inexperience inhibited her pleasure during masturbation. Eliza shared when she was first masturbating around

age 11, she focused on internal stimulation through fingering. She explained she had “the idea that I wasn’t fingering myself right. There was no internal sensation there.” Eliza’s inexperience with masturbation and lack of understanding of what masturbation could include, such as external stimulation of the clitoris, limited her pleasure in her early masturbation experiences.

## CHAPTER 4. DISCUSSION

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of and definitions for sexual pleasure among emerging adult, fat, queer women. The results sought to highlight a definition of sexual pleasure co-constructed from the definitions of the 15 interviewees and the researchers. The definition of sexual pleasure explained above notes the important individualized experience of sexual pleasure along with the elements of pleasure that move beyond a physiological climax and orgasm. Moreover, the research highlights how certain elements of sexual experiences can either inhibit or generate pleasure during masturbation and partnered sexual encounters.

The definition of pleasure put forth in this study has important similarities to past conceptualizations of pleasure in the literature. McClelland (2011) argues that defining pleasure as orgasm does not accurately reflect the way many people think about the various elements of pleasure. As shown in the results of this study, pleasure was made up of many different components. Although orgasm was one of these, participants highlighted the fact that pleasure could happen with or without an orgasm. Some participants found the orgasm to be an important bonus in sexual pleasure, but it was predominantly not necessary for pleasure across participants. This finding is similar to past research that showed young adults experienced pleasure in the absence of orgasm (Opperman et al., 2014). In the current study, participants emphasized the connection between positive physiological, emotional, and mental experiences and pleasure. Additionally, participants noted the individualized experience of pleasure that differs for everyone. Goldey and colleagues (2016) similarly noted the various aspects that formed sexual pleasure for the heterosexual and sexual minority women they interviewed.

However, the current study makes the distinction between elements that generate and inhibit sexual pleasure in addition to providing a definition of sexual pleasure.

Similar to past research, in describing and defining their experiences of pleasure, participants commonly drew on elements that generated or inhibited their experiences of pleasure (Pinkerton et al., 2003). Participants noted various ways that their pleasure was increased while engaging in masturbation or with partners. Some of these elements, such as intimacy and trust with partners, being present in the moment, and open communication align with past research on generators of pleasure for women (Fahs & Plante, 2017; Goldey et al., 2016).

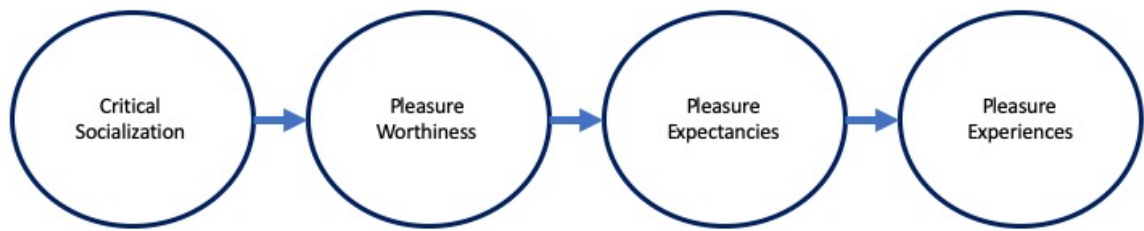
However, participants also discussed how they and their partners interacted with and felt about their body size influenced their experience of pleasure. Past research has shown the dichotomy of fat women either being treated as sexual objects and fetishized (White, 2016) or being seen as “gross” and not viewed as sexual (McHugh & Kasardo, 2012). The women in this study discussed encounters with partners, messages, and internalized beliefs that mirrored these two dichotomies. The women interviewed had experiences of feeling the need to “brace” themselves for the disrespectful, fetishistic, and rude comments from partners, similar to research conducted by Hall (2018) and Gailey (2012). Hall interviewed four fat women about their sexual experiences and the participants described partners making negative comments about their bodies during sex. Additionally, Gailey (2012) found that fat women sometimes felt that they needed to endure negative treatment from others around their size because of beliefs that they would not be able to find someone who would accept and appreciate their bodies. Similar to Gailey’s (2012) results, participants in the current study discussed past beliefs of

feeling like they could not expect to be treated with respect or expect pleasurable and fulfilling sexual experiences. For many of the women interviewed, past beliefs that discounted the importance of their own pleasure along with internalized sizeism inhibited their experiences of pleasure. Past research has shown that women who have negative views of their bodies have lower levels of sexual pleasure and satisfaction (Pujols et al., 2010; Weaver & Byers 2006).

The relationship between negative body image and lower levels of sexual pleasure can be explained from critical sexuality and intimate justice frameworks as well as the current study. Fat bodies are abject bodies often excluded from discussions and representations of sexuality in society (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). From a critical sexuality framework (Fahs & McClelland, 2016), this exclusion and systemic fat oppression has led many individuals to internalize fatphobic beliefs, and, for the women in the current study, to discount the worthiness of themselves and their pleasure. Through this critical socialization, the women interviewed internalized the belief that their pleasure was not important, they were not entitled to the experience of sexual pleasure, and therefore did not expect to experience sexual pleasure. Intimate justice (McClelland, 2010) purports that lowered expectations of pleasure make pleasure not equally accessible for everyone. For fat individuals, fatphobic beliefs and systemic fat oppression lead to internalized beliefs that their pleasure is not “worth it,” which was also reinforced by gendered and heteronormative messages of sex for the fat, queer women in this study. These beliefs, coupled with internalized gendered messages of male-centric pleasure (Camoletto & Bertone, 2010; Opperman et al., 2014), led participants to have low expectations for pleasure, and subsequent low experiences of pleasure. Therefore, when

participants experienced socialization that discounted the importance of their pleasure, they held low beliefs in the worthiness of the pleasure and low expectations for their experience of pleasure, which ultimately limited their own pleasure.

However, the fat, queer women interviewed in this study also were able to move against previously internalized beliefs that limited their pleasure. As their fat and queer identities are not encapsulated in typical heteronormative, androcentric scripts and depictions of sexuality, the fat, queer women interviewed found alternative sources of socialization that allowed them the freedom and ability to dismantle these scripts and internalized beliefs. For example, participants were able to expect to experience sexual pleasure in alignment with their own sexual role identity preferences instead of being pre-assigned into gendered sex roles after gaining more experience and knowledge about queer sexuality, such as through connecting with queer communities, seeking out information about queer sex, and talking with partners. In Gailey's (2012) study, as fat women embraced body acceptance movements and felt pride towards their fatness, they experienced increased positive sexual encounters. In the current study, participants developed increased belief in the worth of their pleasure and experience of sex. The increase in these new beliefs were assisted through new critical socialization that emphasized the importance and worth of their pleasure. One way this increased worthiness was enacted for some participants, such as Felicity and Gloria, was through no longer accepting sexual partners who were not respectful and appreciative of their fatness. When participants were exposed to messages that emphasized the importance of their pleasure, they gained a belief that their pleasure was worthy of energy, time, effort, and focus, they had greater expectations for their pleasure, and therefore more and better experiences of pleasure (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2: Critical Socialization Impact on Sexual Pleasure. This image shows the pathway from critical socialization experiences to experiences of pleasure. Critical socialization influences the beliefs people have in the worthiness of their pleasure which can generate or inhibit their expectations of pleasure, which in turn influences the actual experiences of pleasure.*

### **Limitations**

This study sought to understand the experiences of and definitions for pleasure among emerging adult, fat, queer women. Historically research, especially on emerging adults, has overrepresented people with more advanced education degrees (Arnett, 2016). Attempts were made to have a range of education statuses amongst participants. One participant had an associate’s degree, one a trade school certificate, and one had a high school degree. However, six of the 15 participants had completed or were currently pursuing graduate degrees. Aspects of attending university, moving for college, and gaining knowledge through classes were commonly discussed by participants as ways that their perspectives on pleasure and sex changed. Future research should focus on the experiences of people without higher education degrees.

Additionally, all participants noted significant changes to their perspectives on pleasure and sex that occurred throughout their lives. Although some participants showed more hesitancy and nervousness around talking about sex openly, such as Iris, many participants were still motivated to participate due to viewing the topic of the research as important or finding personal fulfillment talking about sex and pleasure. Due to this, as in



much sexuality research, participants in this study tended to lean towards having more positive views of sex and pleasure.

In the process of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic began which impacted the process of this study in two ways. First, the last four interviews were collected after the start of quarantines in the United States in March, 2020. A question was added to the protocol about the impact of COVID-19 on their experiences of pleasure and interview answers, but participants did not elaborate on significant changes due to COVID-19. However, COVID-19 likely had an impact on the depth and quality of these last interviews. For example, two of these interviews were markedly shorter than earlier interviews possibly due to increased stress on the part of participants and researcher that led to less in-depth questions. Additionally, the occurrence of COVID-19 led to delays in the coding process, which meant the second half of interviews were coded independently by the lead researcher without a team. The lack of a team coding the second half of interviews may have led to missing additional important elements in the interviews.

### **Implications**

The recognition of the impact of social identities on the lived experiences of people is well established. However, body size is commonly absent from discussions of social identities. Within the field of Counseling Psychology, the commonly used ADDRESSING framework does not include body size (Hays, 1996). By not including body size in discussions of social identities, discussion of the influence of body size on individual's experiences of privilege and oppression as well as the systemic oppression of fat individuals is also limited. Moreover, therapists may hold anti-fat bias that leads to

microaggressions, promotion of diet culture, and viewing fatness as a disease that may harm many fat clients (Kinavey & Cool, 2019).

Inclusion of body size as a social identity would allow for further understanding of the social aspects of fatness and the oppressive implications of diet culture and medicalization of obesity, as well as help professionals examine and understand their own biases towards fatness. Additionally, as explored in the above data, participants had various stories and accounts for how their body size influenced their sexual experiences in addition to other aspects of their lives. As demonstrated by this research, experiences of sizeism and internalized fatphobia impacted the pleasure worthiness beliefs of participants which ultimately inhibited their experiences of pleasure. Discussion of sizeism and representation of various body sizes within sex therapy and sex education can help reinforce the importance of pleasure for people of all sizes, and therefore increase expectations for and experiences of pleasure for fat individuals.

Participants described how they internalized messages that their pleasure was not important. Gendered, heteronormative, and fatphobic messages about who experiences pleasure, as well as experiences of sizeism from sexual partners, led participants to discount the importance of their own pleasure. As participants learned to appreciate the worth of their pleasure, they had increased expectations for their pleasure and ultimately greater experiences of pleasure. Exploring sex from a sex-positive, LGBTQ+ and fat inclusive perspective in sex therapy, sex education, and general representations of sex in society may help fat, queer women to further value the importance of their own pleasure. In order to not reinforce stigmas and stereotypes, sexual education should incorporate information about LGBTQ+ identities and sexual pleasure, as well as show representation

of various body types (Abbott et al., 2015; Fine, 1988; Preston, 2013). At the completion of the interview, many of the women shared having the space during the interview to talk about their sexuality in connection to their identities and changes throughout their lives was a valuable experience. Therefore, creating space to allow people to talk more openly about their sexual experiences and beliefs may also allow people to further understand themselves and gain more appreciation for the importance of their pleasure. Additionally, this may ultimately help to further dismantle oppressive power structures, such as heteronormativity, sexism, and sizeism, that limit people with varying intersecting identities experience of sex and pleasure.

One space that is important to facilitate these conversations is within therapy. Researchers have noted the lack of emphasis on sexuality across mental health fields, such as social work (McCave et al., 2014), marriage and family therapy (Dermer & Bachenberg, 2015), and counseling psychology (Cruz et al., 2017). However, research indicates that without specific sexuality education, therapists are often not prepared to discuss sexuality with clients (Anderson, 1986; Hanzlik & Gaubatz, 2012; Reissing & Di Giulio, 2010). Therapists who had inadequate sexuality training were more likely to report reacting to discussions about sexuality with clients with embarrassment, anxiety, shock, and arousal (Anderson, 1986). Furthermore, without training, therapists' discomfort with discussing sexuality may ultimately impede client disclosure of sexual concerns (Hanzlik & Gaubatz, 2012) and lead therapists to avoid discussing sexual concerns (Reissing & Di Giulio, 2010). However, having space in therapy to understand and reflect on internalized messages about sex and sexual problems may be healing for many clients. Cruz and colleagues (2017) provide five recommendations for how

therapists can incorporate sex positivity into their work including engaging in their own self-reflection, understanding multiculturalism in relation to sexuality, developing their own comfort talking about sex, proactively bringing up topics related to sex, and using a client-centered approach to understand when to bring up sex or not. As therapy can often be a space for clients to gain awareness into their beliefs, the origins of their beliefs, and generate new beliefs, sex-positive, inclusive approaches to therapy would help clients to address their pleasure inhibiting beliefs and understand their own experiences of pleasure. By gaining insight into their pleasure worthiness beliefs and expectations for pleasure, clients may be more empowered to advocate for their own pleasure and ultimately experience more pleasurable sex.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the definition of pleasure for emerging adult, fat, queer women is nuanced, individualized, and incorporates physical, emotional, and mental aspects of pleasure. The ways that fat, queer women may approach their sexuality is informed by socialization processes that are often gendered, fatphobic, and heteronormative and may inhibit sexual pleasure in various ways. However, the women in this study also named ways of generating further pleasure, sometimes through combatting these previously held beliefs. Ultimately, the women interviewed gained new appreciations of the worth of their pleasure throughout their lives which allowed them to more fully experience, advocate for, and approach sexual pleasure. Intentionally incorporating discussions of pleasure and not reinforcing heteronormative, sizeist, and gendered approaches to sex and pleasure may allow people to more fully understand and experience pleasure for themselves.



## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1. RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hello! My name is Carolyn Meiller, and I am working on my dissertation project towards my doctorate in Counseling Psychology. I am looking to interview curvy queer women about sexual pleasure. Research on curvy queer women is limited, and when focused on sexuality, mostly focuses on the negative aspects of sex. I am hoping to raise the varied experiences curvy queer women have with sex and gain an understanding for how curvy queer women experience and understand sexual pleasure. I hope this data will be used to create a theory for how identity, societal messages, and other external forces influence the experiences of pleasure for curvy queer women. Furthermore, this research will be used to further promote sexual health, justice, and fair treatment for curvy queer women in medical and mental health settings.

To be eligible for this study you must:

- Be between the ages of 18-29
- Identify as a woman
- Identify as curvy, fat, or of a larger body size
- Identify within the LGBTQ+ spectrum
- Be willing to talk about your experiences over a video call related to your identity, sex, and sexual pleasure in a 1-2 hour interview that will be audio-recorded.

If you are interested in participating please fill out the eligibility screener at

[https://uky.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_4MVGs8C5gZ3J6oR](https://uky.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4MVGs8C5gZ3J6oR)

If you have questions or would like further information, please contact me at [cme236@g.uky.edu](mailto:cme236@g.uky.edu) and I'd be happy to talk about the study further! If you are not eligible or interested, but know others who might be, I'd appreciate you sharing this email with them. Participants who participate in the interviews will receive \$20 to compensate them for their time. Thank you again for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you!

Thank you!

Carolyn Meiller, M.S.

*Pronouns: she, her, hers*

Doctoral Candidate

Counseling Psychology

University of Kentucky

## APPENDIX 2. RECRUITMENT FLYER

**UK** University of  
**Kentucky**

LOOKING FOR

# CURVY QUEER WOMEN FOR A STUDY ON SEXUAL PLEASURE

You are eligible if you:  
Identify as a woman  
Identify as curvy, fat, or plus-size  
Identify within the LGBTQ+ spectrum  
Are between the ages of 18-29

**I AM CURRENTLY RECRUITING  
PARTICIPANTS FOR A STUDY ABOUT  
SEXUAL PLEASURE AND IDENTITY**

If you are interested and eligible contact me, Carolyn Meiller, at  
[cme236@g.uky.edu](mailto:cme236@g.uky.edu)





### **APPENDIX 3. FINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

- 1) This study is focused on the experiences of curvy queer women age 18-29. How do you identify with these different identities? What do these different identities mean to you?
  - a) How do you identify in other ways? Things such as race, religion, ability, education
- 2) What does sexual pleasure mean to you?
- 3) Tell me about the most pleasurable sexual experience you had.
  - a) What made it stand out? What made it pleasurable? If others were involved, how did those other people influence the experience?
    - i) How did your partner's identities influence the experience?
  - b) In terms of pleasure, how did this experience differ from other experiences of sexual pleasure?
- 4) What would make a sexual experience bad or unpleasurable?
- 5) What messages did you receive about sexual pleasure growing up?
  - a) Where did these messages come from?
  - b) What have these messages meant to you? How have they informed your experience or understanding of sex, sexuality, or pleasure?
  - c) How did these messages evolve throughout your life?
  - d) How has your understanding and experience of sexual pleasure changed throughout your life?
- 6) What did you learn about being curvy in relation to sex and sexual pleasure? Queer? A woman? Other salient identities?

- 7) What have you learned, heard, or seen about sex as experienced by curvy queer women?
  - a) How has this influenced your experience?
- 8) If you had to summarize, how would you define sexual pleasure?
- 9) What else should I know?
- 10) How has COVID-19 and quarantining impacted your experience or definition of sexual pleasure?
  - a) Do you feel COVID-19 and quarantining influenced the way you approached this interview?
- 11) What was it like talking to me about this?

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doi: 10.1038/ijir.2010.7

VITA

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**EDUCATION**

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- 2014-2016     **Master of Science in Counseling Psychology**  
*University of Kentucky; Lexington, KY*
- 2010-2014     **Bachelor of Arts in Psychology**  
*Transylvania University; Lexington, KY*
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**CLINICAL EXPERIENCE**

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- August 2020-  
Present     **University of Oregon University Counseling Services; Eugene, OR**  
*Predoctoral Intern*
- August 2019-  
March 2020     **Eastern Kentucky University-Counseling Center; Richmond, KY**  
*Psychology Advanced Practicum Student (Supervised Doctoral Training)*
- February 2019-  
June 2019     **Federal Medical Center-RESOLVE Trauma Program at Women's Camp (Prison); Lexington, KY**  
*Psychology Practicum Student (Supervised Doctoral Training)*
- September 2018-  
February 2019     **Federal Medical Center-Dual Diagnosis Residential Drug Abuse Program (Prison); Lexington KY**  
*Psychology Practicum Student (Supervised Doctoral Training)*
- August 2017-  
May 2018     **Eastern Kentucky University-Counseling Center; Richmond, KY**  
*Psychology Practicum Student (Supervised Doctoral Training)*
- August 2016-  
May 2017     **University of Kentucky-Counseling Center; Lexington, KY**  
*Psychology Practicum Student (Supervised Doctoral Training)*
- August 2015-  
May 2016     **Bluegrass.org-Bourbon County Comprehensive Care (Community Mental Health); Paris, KY**  
*Practicum Student Counselor (Supervised Masters Training)*
- June 2013-  
May 2014     **Bluegrass.org-Crisis Stabilization Unit (Inpatient), Lexington, KY**  
*Mental Health Associate (Pre-Master's Work Experience)*

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## PUBLICATIONS

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- Hargons, C., Malone, N., Montique, C., Dogan, J., Stuck, J., **Meiller, C.**, ... & Stevens-Watkins, D. (In Press, 2021). Race-based stress reactions and recovery: Pilot testing a racially specific meditation. *Journal of Black Psychology*.
- Hargons, C.N., Malone, N., Montique, C., Dogan, J., Stuck, J., **Meiller, C.**,... & Oluokun, J. (In press). White people stress me out all the time: Black students define racial trauma. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*.
- Hargons, C., Mosley, D., **Meiller, C.**, Dogan, J., Stuck, J., Montique, C., Malone, N., Bohmer, C., Sullivan, Q., Sanchez, A., Oluokun, J., & Stevens-Watkins, D. (2021). "No one can make that choice for you": Exploring power in the sexual narratives of Black collegians. *Journal of Counseling Sexology & Sexual Wellness: Research, Practice, and Education*, 2(2), 80-92. <https://doi.org/10.34296/02021040>
- Mosley, D. V., Hargons, C. N., **Meiller, C.**, Angyal, B., Wheeler, P., Davis, C., & Stevens-Watkins, D. (2020). Critical consciousness of anti-Black racism: A practical model to prevent and resist racial trauma. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000430>
- Meiller, C.**, & Hargons, C. (2019). "It's happiness and relief and release": Exploring masturbation among bisexual and queer women. *Journal of Counseling Sexology and Sexual Wellness: Research, Practice, and Education*, 1(1), 3-13. doi: 10.34296/01011009
- Clements-Hickman, A., Dschaak, Z., Hargons, C., Kwok, C., **Meiller, C.**, Ryser-Oatman, T., & Spiker, D. (2019). Humanity in homelessness: A social justice consultation course for counseling psychology students. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology*, 10(2), 34-48. Retrieved from <https://openjournals.bsu.edu/jsacp/article/view/1061>  
[Authors listed in alphabetical order to reflect equal contribution]
- Dogan, J., Hargons, C., **Meiller, C.**, Oluokun, J., Montinque, C. & Malone, N. (2018). Catchin' feelings: Experiences of intimacy during Black college students' sexual encounters. *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships*, 5(2), 81-107. doi: 10.1353/bsr.2018.0021
- Hargons, C., Mosley, D. V., **Meiller, C.**, Stuck, J., Kirkpatrick, B., Adams, C., & Angyal, B. (2018). "It feels so good": Pleasure in last sexual encounter narratives of Black university students. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 44(2), 103-127 doi: 10.1177/0095798417749400
- Reese, R. J., Duncan, B. L., Kodet, J. D., Brown, H. M., **Meiller, C. E.**, Farook, M. W., Lengerich, A. J., Vasilj, I., Hong, S., & Bohanske, R. T. (2017). Patient feedback as a quality improvement strategy in an acute care, inpatient unit: An investigation of outcome and readmission rates. *Psychological Sciences*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/ser0000163

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## AWARDS

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- Summer, 2019    **Conference Funding Award**  
*University of Kentucky-College of Education*
- Fall, 2018      **Professional Development Grant**



*University of Kentucky-Center for Graduate and Professional Diversity  
Initiatives*

Summer, 2018	<b>Conference Funding Award</b> <i>University of Kentucky-College of Education</i>
Fall, 2017	<b>Conference Funding Award</b> <i>University of Kentucky-College of Education</i>
Summer, 2016	<b>Conference Funding Award</b> <i>University of Kentucky-College of Education</i>
2011-2014	<b>Psi Chi National Honor Society for Psychology</b>
2011-2014	<b>Alpha Lambda Delta Honorary</b>
Fall 2010- Spring 2014	<b>Pioneer Award Scholarship</b> <i>Transylvania University</i>