

ABSTRACT

Persistent Pleasures:

Agency, Social Power, and Embodiment in Women's Solitary Masturbation Experiences

by

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Though sexuality has historically been a useful site for examinations of social power, looking at power through the lens of sexuality often involves interpersonal analyses. But social power can also inform solitary experiences through the internalization of social norms and discourses. In this dissertation, I move beyond explorations of how people interact sexually with one another, and instead investigate women's solitary masturbation experiences throughout their lives as a means to better understand the intricate ways in which sexist, racist, and heterosexist ideologies weave themselves into women's bodies and lives. Specifically, I ask the following research question in this dissertation: How (in what ways and by what means) do social power and embodied knowledge interact to inform women's solitary masturbation experiences?

I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty adult women (Mean age = 30) in which I asked women to tell me stories about their solitary masturbation experiences throughout their lives. Because solitary masturbation is an activity that women may engage in without ever needing to put language to their experiences, participants first completed a card-sorting task, in which they sorted a stack of cards, each with one statement about women's masturbation on it,

into a distribution that ranged from “most disagree” to “most agree.” This procedure had the dual purpose of providing participants with examples of language used to discuss masturbation to aid in their articulation of their experiences, and also of giving participants “permission” to think about the topic in whatever way felt right to them. After completing the sorting task, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants. Following transcription of the audio-recorded interviews, I used a combination of thematic and narrative analyses to examine my research question.

Women talked about their solitary masturbation experiences in ways that illuminate the complicated braiding of oppressive social discourses, embodied sensations, and willful subjectivities. Though many women talked about experiences of confusion, shame, and silencing, they also often explicitly rejected negative messages about masturbation, and endeavored to learn more about their bodies and their pleasures. Some women described solitary masturbation experiences in childhood that appeared to have taken place before the participant knew that her activity had a name and a social meaning. These experiences sound very different from those participants talked about happening later in life, in that these childhood experiences seem not to be informed by social discourses – they appear to be extra-discursive experiences. Those who narrated these experiences also described various ways in which they entered into language and discourse, including sudden realizations (e.g., “Oh, that’s what I’ve been doing!”) and more gradual ones, but in both cases, participants came to recognize their behavior as sexual and laden with social meanings. I found that alongside the traditional feminist project of including women’s experiences within language as a means to political liberation, language can play a different role; as seemed to be the case in women’s childhood extra-discursive masturbation experiences, sometimes a lack of language can provide people with the cognitive

space to explore an experience without the constraints of discourse. I also found that even though women may masturbate in physical isolation, relational others are never far beneath the surface of their psyches, and women may be socially expected to concern themselves with relational others even regarding their solitary eroticism (and this pattern holds true both for queer and heterosexual women). Perhaps most importantly, my findings suggest that women are often agentic and determined explorers of their own bodies and experiences; even in the midst of social stigma, women consistently maintain their curiosity, and listen to the embodied wisdom within.