



Sexuality, Stigma, and Science

Why Women Aren't Studied Like Men

EMILY RAND

In this interdisciplinary review essay, Emily Rand connects Mary Roach's work on women and sexual stigma to literature, science, history, academic study, and contemporary popular culture. Rand ends on the hopeful note that this final front—exemplified by sex-positive hip-hop music—might help destigmatize female sexuality. This essay was written for Foundations of Life Science with Drs. Jeannette Loutsch and Jason Shaw.

IN *BONK: THE CURIOUS COUPLING of Science and Sex*, Mary Roach explores the history of sexual research, which reveals that (1) men's sexual health has generally received more funding than women's, (2) studies on men's sexual health have typically been received with less disdain than those on women's sexual health by both public and private groups, and (3), due to men's primary sex organ being an external device, research on the penis has been more accessible at all stages of technological advancement. Roach's work also touches on how there's a stigma attached to conducting research on women's sexual health because the researchers are often viewed as perverts or deviants by their peers and the public due to the invasive nature of inspecting the vaginal region; this has severely

hampered the appeal of attempting such research. Despite new technology—which allows researchers to use robots, cameras, and other probe-like technology to make more detached assessments of the vaginal region—women’s sexual health still fails to be explored to its full potential. This perpetuates a stigma around the entire topic of sexuality (both physical and psychological) for women, which in turn results in a fear of candid, honest, knowledgeable social commentary about women’s sexual health. This allows the cultivation of many cultures that shame women who display a strong sexual presence or desire.

Roach’s work in *Bonk* is written from a place of passion, not qualification, as she admits to having no degree in science. Her personality in the text is a large part of what inspired me to take this paper in more of a “social relevance” and less a “cold, hard science” direction. The stark difference between the results of Roach’s research on male sexual history and female sexual history left me anxious to comment on why female sexual research appears to display emphasis on psychological effects during sex while male sexual research shows more attention to the physical, tangible characteristics of sex. It appears to all boil down to the idea that women can’t be *physically* observed in a sexual light because it’s unbecoming. But all that means is there’s a preexisting social standard that can be changed with extended effort to normalize the discussion of sex between the sexes. I’m a strong advocate for the normalization of discussing sex in common conversation—especially for the sake of communication and clarification between the sexes—because I’ve heard so many heterosexual women commenting on how their boyfriends don’t understand what to do for them in bed. However, I do believe that the key term is *communication*, which means we need men standing up for women’s rights to discuss sex without being slut-shamed, and we need women to help reassure men that they don’t have to constantly play into the traditional, hyper-masculine role.

A 1797 example condemning open female sexuality, and contributing to the idea that women should obey societal standards, is Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*. The story, greatly influenced by the time when it was written, is a fictional version of the events that occurred resulting in the death of Elizabeth Whitman. By the end of the story, Eliza (the fictional representation of Elizabeth) dies giving birth to an illegitimate child. But the reason that the (fictional) Eliza dies isn't just because of historical fact. Women of this time period were expected to settle down early, remain faithful to one man, and maintain a clean, domestic life. Eliza threatened this role of the woman in eighteenth century society by flirting with two men at the same time and refusing to settle down with the socially honorable reverend—choosing instead to chase after the morally deviant character of Major Sanford. While the piece itself is only fiction, it remains faithful to the standards placed on women of the 1700s and early 1800s. And if flirting is off the table, then being up close and personal with a lady's vagina isn't going to resonate well with the general public of that time either. In this era, some doctors wouldn't even look at a woman's pelvic area when performing surgery for fear of being deemed indecent! From this information, it's reasonable to deduce that most, if not all, of the money available for scientific research wouldn't be granted toward trying to embrace female sexuality.

Novels like *The Coquette* aren't the only problem. In fact, many women worldwide turn to superstition and spiritual beliefs for guidance in their sexual endeavors. One study found that as many as 60% of Saudi Arabian women believed infertility is the product of envy (Boakaie et al. 379). Other beliefs about women's fertility across the globe include the ideas that adoption will lead to increased fertility for a woman, that masturbation weakens the body, and that holding the feet above one's head after sex increases the chances of becoming pregnant (379, 381-82). Such beliefs permeate their cultures and typically have negative social effects on the women of those cultures. The more drastic effects of this way of

thinking are seen in developing countries like Zimbabwe and Mozambique where the push for women to become mothers causes enormous social pressure (383). But even in the developed world, common social consequences of beliefs like these come in the form of blaming and shaming women for fertility issues. These accusations often spawn regardless of whether the reason for infertility is known to be hers or not—sometimes even in spite of knowing that the infertility is coming from the male counterpart’s sperm count being low. One Iranian woman testified that, despite her husband having *no* sperm count, he still blamed her for their fertility problems (381). Further research and examination of human female sexual and reproductive health would be useful in clarifying what this lack of sexual fitness is caused by, and it could potentially aid in the development of remedies for this state of reproductive health (Loutsch and Shaw).

Despite masturbation being a prime suspect of infertility for many people, and a topic worthy of scorn when women discuss it in social circles, Alfred Kinsey is a rare example of a researcher who explored the nature of masturbation and sexual pleasure for women around the 1950s. This research enthymematically suggests that the reason heterosexual women find it difficult to orgasm during sex is that women simply don’t talk about the details of sex enough. Because of this, most men fail to understand the intricacies of female stimulation (Kinsey). This is entirely understandable when broken down: imagine being presented a vagina for the first time without access to any materials (academic texts, pornography, etc.) explaining how to help the person it belongs to achieve an orgasm. Sex is a daunting activity without focusing purely on the “how-to” aspect of it, but add in the expectations toxic masculinity imposes on men (giant penis, great in bed, smooth talker, and any other “macho” characteristics possible), and suddenly it seems strange that society expects men to know exactly what to do in bed while women are expected not to talk about it! And, paralleling that idea, it’s strange

that society looks down on women for openly discussing details that could lead to better sex for both parties involved.

In more recent years, there has been an abundance of sexual overtones in contemporary media—yet the topic of sex, specifically in relation to women, remains uncomfortable for many people. However, many celebrities have started to give societal expectations the metaphorical middle finger. Iggy Azalea is a stark example of this. Based on the lyrics in her song “Pu\$\$y,” it’s obvious she feels no need to censor herself for society’s comfort. After an intro where the word “pussy” is used three times in under eight lines, the lyrics “Will you stop saying ‘pussy’? / People are eating in here” come up. This is self-aware commentary on how the song is intended to make people feel uncomfortable based on the subject matter—female genitals. And Azalea doesn’t stop after the intro: immediately following that line, she repeats the word eight times consecutively and explicitly describes sex from a woman’s point of view throughout her song. Other lines such as, “Open ya mouth / Taste the rainbow / Taste my Skittles, ah!” maintain no hint of subtlety when it comes to the Australian rapper’s explicitly open enjoyment of sex for more than just procreation. While this is an extremely raunchy and provocative example, it can open doors for the discussion of female sexuality in a way that’s not limited to academics or between only lovers.

Due to the wide variety of media available for consumption by the general public, spreading information has never been easier. This allows idols to sway the social reception of information merely by releasing content that reflects their personal views. Of course, there are still cohorts strongly opposed to the new wave of sex-positive productions; however, the existence of this new media is enough to prod the subject of female sexuality into mainstream conversation. Over time, the effect of more mass-produced and destigmatized subject matter should trickle into the mindsets of the academic world, causing further destigmatization of future research on female sexuality and sexual health. ►►

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