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ARTICLES

Women's Negotiation of Cunnilingus in College Hookups and Relationships

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Using in-depth interviews with 43 college women who were, on average, 21 years old ($SD = 0.79$), the authors explored women's attitudes toward and experiences of cunnilingus. The authors found that cunnilingus posed interactional challenges for women, but that these varied by relationship context. Drawing on scripting theory, the authors argue that the sexual scripts available to contemporary American college students assume cunnilingus in relationships, but not in hookups, where the incorporation of the practice is more contested. For individual women, tension emerged when their preferences for cunnilingus contradicted the sexual script of the relationship context. Women who desired cunnilingus in hookups had to be assertive to get it, whereas those who did not want cunnilingus in hookups were relieved that it was not expected. The taken-for-granted nature of cunnilingus in relationships was a source of pleasure for women who enjoyed it and of difficulty for women who wished to avoid it. In relationships, some women's reluctance about cunnilingus was transformed by men's enthusiasm. More generally, this study implies that ambiguity in sexual scripts may heighten the interactional challenges of sex by creating uncertainty about expectations and gaps between sexual scripts and individual preferences.

The National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (NSSHB), a probability survey of American sexual behavior released in October 2010, found that 59% of 18- to 19-year-old men had received oral sex from a woman and 61% had given oral sex to a woman. The NSSHB also reported that 62% of 18- to 19-year-old women had received oral sex from a man, and 61% had performed oral sex on a man (Herbenick et al., 2010).¹ Other recent studies have also found that more

than one half of American adolescents reported either receiving or performing oral sex (Leichtler, Chandra, Liddon, Fenton, & Aral, 2007; Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). This behavior reflects a sharp rise from mid-century findings that 17% of female adolescents had performed fellatio and 11% of males had performed cunnilingus (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) described the incidence and frequency of fellatio and cunnilingus as the most "basic change in the script for sex between women and men" (p. 102) to take place over the course of the 20th century.

A rise in oral sex is not the only change in sexual scripts to occur over the past 50 years. The United States has also seen a diversification in the types of relationships in which sex occurs. The adoption of oral sex by young people over the past century coincided with the development of greater acceptance of sex outside of marriage and outside of relationships (Gagnon &

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¹Among 20- to 24-year-olds, the percentage of men who had received oral sex increased to 74%, and the percentage who had given oral sex increased to 71%. In this age group, 80% of women had received oral sex from a man, and 78% had performed oral sex on a man.

Simon, 1987; Laumann et al., 1994). In the last few years, there has been increasing interest in scholars in the practice of “hooking up,” which, following the lead of young people, scholars have defined as sexual activity, ranging from a kiss to intercourse, occurring outside of an exclusive relationship (Bogle, 2008; England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2007; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000). This scholarship sometimes exaggerates the novelty of casual sex among American adolescents. Indeed, the largest behavioral change occurred with the Baby Boom cohort: Rates of premarital intercourse are roughly the same for all cohorts born after 1948 (Finer, 2007). Yet, the meanings of casual sex for young people have continued to evolve in the post-sexual revolution era. Casual sex has become more normative, and new types of relationships (e.g., “friends with benefits”) continue to emerge (Armstrong, Hamilton, & England, 2010).

A convergence of men’s and women’s premarital sexual practices marks a third change in American sexuality over the last 50 years. For example, Laumann et al. (1994) reported that 26.4% of men born between 1933 and 1943 did not have premarital sexual intercourse, and this proportion only slightly decreased to 22% for men born between 1963 and 1974. In contrast, 55.1% of women born between 1933 and 1943 reported never having sexual intercourse before marriage as compared to 30.2% of those born between 1963 and 1974. This change is associated with a relaxation—although not the demise of—gender double standards with respect to sexuality. Armstrong, England, and Fogarty (2009, 2010) argued that one of the changes in this time period has been the decline of this sexual double standard within committed relationships outside of marriage. This has not translated into similar approval of sex for women in more casual contexts. Many scholars report that young people still judge women who have sex outside of relationships more harshly than men (Carpenter, 2001; Martin, 1996; Tolman, 2002).

There is still much we do not know about how these changes in sexual scripts shape the sexual experiences of contemporary young people. In this article, we contribute to knowledge in this area by drawing on in-depth interviews with undergraduate women in which they discuss their experiences of cunnilingus in casual and committed relationship contexts. We focused on oral sex because of its changing place in sexual scripts and on cunnilingus because of recent changes in gender expectations related to sexuality. By comparing hookups and relationships, we gain insight into how sexual scripts vary by level of commitment. That cunnilingus in casual sex is common enough now among American young adults to study is a consequence of the changes described earlier. Yet, we suspect that the changes are not so complete as to make the negotiation of cunnilingus among young people unproblematic.

Scripting Theory and the Experience of Cunnilingus

Scripting theory assumes that the meanings that individuals attribute to sexuality derive, in part, from social life. According to Simon and Gagnon (1986)

[C]ultural scenarios not only specify appropriate objects, aims, and desirable qualities of self-other relations but also instruct in times, places, sequences of gesture and utterance and, among the most important, what the actor and his or her co-participants (real or imagined) are assumed to be feeling. (p. 105)

The existence of cultural scenarios does not determine the flow of sexual events, as cultural scenarios are sometimes ambiguous or may be out of sync with scripting at the interpersonal or intrapsychic level.

Gagnon and Simon (1987) highlighted the complexity of the meanings associated with oral sex, noting that the incorporation of oral sex into the sexual lives of young people involved “substantial ambivalences and difficulties”:

We must keep in mind the multiple *meanings* of oral sex which are less well measured or often may only be inferred on the basis of inadequate evidence. At different times in the same relationship or in differing relationships the same physical movements may be performed as an avoidance of coitus, an expression of intimacy, a sign of erotic competence, a measure of degradation of the self or the partner. (p. 24)

Although substantial time has passed since Gagnon and Simon wrote, more recent research suggests that oral sex continues to carry a multiplicity of meanings. Laumann and colleagues (1994) found the prevalence and appeal of oral sex to be uneven and suggested that the practice continues to be “fraught with symbolic ambiguity” in the contemporary United States (p. 101). Indeed, people tend to be evenly split in terms of whether they consider oral sex to count as having sex (Chambers, 2007; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Following Simon and Gagnon (1986), we approached this study expecting to find the meanings associated with cunnilingus to be context dependent and embedded in the meanings that individuals and groups bring to the encounter. We turned to scholarship on gender and the body to develop more specific expectations about the meanings young people attach to cunnilingus.

Ambivalence about Women’s Bodies

In Western culture, women are bombarded with messages linking femininity to specific appearance standards (Bordo, 1993). Images of beauty typically focus on the face and figure—particularly the breasts and buttocks—while celebration of imperfect bodies and female genitalia is largely absent. The vagina is often

represented as smelly, dirty, and potentially diseased (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). Women's genitals are frequently constructed as a source of concern through advice columns, advertisements for feminine hygiene products, expectations that hair be removed through shaving or waxing, and promises to improve vaginal appearance through female genital plastic surgery (Braun, 2005; Braun & Kitzinger, 2001).

While all sexual practices involve bodies, fluids, genitals, smells, tastes, and sensations, bringing the face into contact with the genitals highlights the embodied nature of sexuality in a particularly direct way. One would expect, then, that cultural ambivalence about female genitalia might lead women to feel shame about their genitals and to experience reluctance to receive oral sex (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). Researchers have found that comfort with weight and aspects of the body, such as sweat and body hair, impact sexual satisfaction and sexual decision-making (Schooler & Ward, 2006; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005; Weinberg & Williams, 2010; Wiederman, 2000; Wiederman & Hurst, 1998).

Reinholz and Muehlenhard (1995) found that college students had moderately positive genital perceptions overall, although women expressed more negative perceptions of their genitals and their partner's genitals than men. Positive genital perceptions increased sexual experience and enjoyment, but genital perception appears to be context dependent. Both men and women reported greater worry about their genitals while receiving oral sex than during masturbation, and expressed that women are more likely seen as degraded by performing and receiving oral sex compared to men who engage in oral sex.

Sexual Context and Ambivalence about Women's Sexual Pleasure

As Laumann et al. (1994) noted, oral sex is "often viewed as oriented primarily toward the pleasure of the receiving partner" (p. 101). This suggests that comfort with cunnilingus might be closely linked to whether—and in what contexts—female sexual pleasure is viewed as appropriate. We noted earlier that young Americans continue to be ambivalent about casual sex for women. This might generate ambivalence about whether female sexual pleasure in casual contexts is appropriate and, consequently, about whether cunnilingus is appropriate in these situations. Greater consensus about women's entitlement to pleasure in relationships suggests that cunnilingus may be more accepted as a practice in relationships.

Empirical research to date supports this line of reasoning: College women are less likely to receive oral sex in hookups than in relationships. In a recent study, women reported receiving oral sex in 26% of hookups as compared to 62% of relationship events (Armstrong et al., 2009, 2010). By comparison, men reported receiving oral sex in 41% of hookups and 70% of relationship events.

Thus, women receive oral sex only two-thirds as often of men in hookups but almost 90% as often in relationships. Other research supports the claim that relationship context influences sexual practices. Chambers (2007) found that most men and women feel comfortable engaging in oral sex in a committed relationship, but men are more comfortable than women with oral sex in less serious relationships. However, some men distinguished between giving oral sex to steady girlfriends and casual partners (Roberts, Kippax, Spongberg, & Crawford, 1996). In another study, young women reported that their partners were interested in and enjoyed performing cunnilingus, although they also noted that their male partners preferred fellatio to cunnilingus (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2011). Although this study included both casual and committed relationships, the data were not separately analyzed by relationship context. Therefore, it is unknown whether young women perceived their partners as less interested in cunnilingus in casual relationships.

Thus, we hypothesized that the negotiation of cunnilingus would be challenging for young people as a consequence of cultural ambivalence about women's bodies and sexual pleasure. We predicted this ambivalence to be reflected in a wide range of opinions about and experiences of cunnilingus among young women. We expected participants to report different challenges negotiating cunnilingus in hookups and relationships.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were 43 women attending Stanford University or Indiana University. Students were interviewed during the 2006 through 2007 school year. At Stanford, students were recruited via a probability sample of college seniors. At Indiana University, student names were randomly selected from a directory of students and contacted through Facebook[®]. The response rate was so low (at about 14%) that the Indiana University sample should be considered a convenience sample. Twenty-eight participants attended Stanford, whereas 15 attended Indiana. All participants were between 21 and 23 years of age at the time of the interview. Nineteen of the participants were White; three were African American; four were Asian; two were Latina; one was Native American; eight were multiethnic; and in six cases, race was inadvertently not recorded. Five of the 43 women were born outside of the United States. Twenty-five of the 43 participants had mothers who graduated from college. Twenty-seven identified as heterosexual, nine as bisexual, and nine as "not sure." For the purposes of this article, only heterosexual experiences of bisexual participants were included. Six reported that they had never had vaginal intercourse. There was more variation in race or ethnicity and sexual orientation among Stanford students.

Compared to the Indiana sample, a higher percentage of Stanford students reported that they had never had vaginal sex. Any female college senior who volunteered was interviewed: No screening was done on the basis of prior sexual experience. All of the women in our sample reported having received oral sex.

Interview Methods

Interviewers were female graduate and undergraduate students, based on the premise that similarity of age and student status would facilitate rapport. All interviewers were trained in research ethics and interviewing techniques. The study was approved by the human subjects committees at both Stanford and Indiana Universities. Interviews were conducted in a private place on campus selected by the respondent. The participants were assured that their responses and identities would remain confidential and that they could stop the interview at any time. As an incentive to participate in the study, students were awarded online gift certificates for the amount of \$25 upon the completion of the in-depth interview. On average, interviews lasted about one hour. Digital recorders were used to document the interviews, which were later transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities.

Using a semi-structured interview guide and a conversational manner, interviewers led participants through their college sexual careers, asking about hookups, dates, or relationships in each year and in the summers between academic years. They were asked about their experiences with orgasm as they described specific events, and also asked about their experiences with and views on orgasm in more general terms toward the end of the interview. Students were asked about experiences with fellatio and cunnilingus, and probed about whether oral sex was reciprocal in their hookups and relationships. They were asked whether sex was better in hookups or relationships, and more generally about the advantages and disadvantages of being in a relationship versus participating in hookups. The same interview guide was used at the two institutions (see the Appendix for a shortened version of the interview guide).

Data Analysis

We used ATLAS.ti 5.0 (Berlin, Germany: Scientific Software Development GmbH) qualitative data analysis software for the management and analysis of interview materials. The first and third authors identified all passages in the interviews related to discussions of oral sex, including cunnilingus, fellatio, orgasm, sexual pleasure, and reciprocity. We then coded each interview according to the respondent's general view of cunnilingus and whether the interviewee considered it to be more or less intimate than intercourse. Our initial analysis of the data revealed that some participants used euphemisms

for cunnilingus and fellatio, so we also searched for the keywords "oral," "sex," "going down," and "bases." We allowed themes related to experiences of cunnilingus to emerge through repetitive reading and discussion. Whenever we identified a new theme from one interview, we then coded all transcripts on this theme. We deployed what Hsieh and Shannon (2005) described as a "conventional" approach to content analysis. Sometimes referred to as "inductive category development," this approach is useful in cases where relatively little is known about a phenomenon and the goal is to allow categories and insights to emerge from the data. Quotations represent the full range of opinions and experiences of study participants. Themes were consistent across universities. Later, we report on the prevalence of each finding in our data whenever possible.

Results

In the following, we describe variation in women's preferences for cunnilingus and the range of attitudes expressed about the intimacy of the practice. We then turn to hookups and relationships, first describing the experiences of women who wanted cunnilingus in that context and then the experiences of those who did not. The last sections discuss the experiences of women whose ambivalence about cunnilingus in relationships was transformed by a willing partner.

Views of Cunnilingus

Women's views of cunnilingus varied: Some viewed it as central to their sexual pleasure, whereas others viewed it very negatively. Nearly three-fourths of women viewed cunnilingus positively, whereas the rest maintained negative views. Women with a positive outlook on cunnilingus highlighted the effectiveness of oral sex in providing orgasm and sexual pleasure. In fact, a few women specifically stated that cunnilingus was the best way for them to attain orgasm. Jackie said, "[I]t's [cunnilingus is] usually the only way I can orgasm." According to Marjorie, "[A]bout 60% of the time I have an orgasm, it's from oral sex," whereas Annie stated that she had an orgasm "every time with oral sex."

Some women actively expressed their desire for cunnilingus to their partners. For example, Shannon did not consider sex to be over until she achieved an orgasm through oral sex or some other means. To ensure that she had orgasms, she communicated an interest in trying different positions that facilitated her pleasure. She explained, "So now I've just been encouraging him more like, 'You know, why don't we do this? Why don't we 69 for a little bit?'" Likewise, Fiona ensured that she received sexual pleasure by repositioning her partner to "make him go down first." Becca elaborated: "Well, I don't do it [oral sex] unless it's reciprocated. Because

here's my theory, okay? One, a guy always can, [but] girls just can't always get off through penetration." By introducing new positions, prioritizing reciprocity, and managing the sexual order of events, these women ensured that they received cunnilingus.

However, not all women expressed positive views of cunnilingus. Twelve of the 43 women (28%) used adjectives such as *weird*, *bizarre*, *dirty*, and *nasty* to describe the practice. Rachel described cunnilingus as "intrusive and kind of gross." The women were not able to articulate very well why receiving cunnilingus is weird or bizarre, but their comments suggested discomfort with the body, particularly the genitals. When asked to elaborate about her negative view on cunnilingus, Denise explained:

I talk to a lot of my friends and they have the exact same feeling. For them, guys going down on them, it's just you know, bizarre to them and something they're not comfortable with. And maybe it is a body thing. It's just, I don't know really how to describe it.

Several of the women felt nervous about the "up close" nature of having her partner's face and mouth in contact with her genitals. Erin said that the intimate nature of the act made her "feel very self conscious that somebody's down [there], up in my business." Lenora explained, "The whole like thing is kind of, I don't know, weird to me a little bit. I don't know why but . . . just their face being down there." Ashley found cunnilingus to be so weird that she would "rather be on the giving than on the receiving end."

Concerns about menstruation and pubic hair also raised anxiety for a few women. One woman reported that two previous sexual partners asked her to shave her pubic hair. The first man refused to perform cunnilingus unless she shaved, but because their relationship was already having problems, she did not meet his request. The second partner was enthusiastic about going down on her, but he also brought up the issue of shaving:

[He was] gung ho, ignoring the hair and whatever. After which, he did ask me if I'd ever thought about shaving. And he did it in a very respectful way. It was like, "You know, would you ever do this?" And I said, "Yeah, I thought about it a lot but I never got around to it because like, I mean it's got to be difficult, before I ever did it," so I did. Because he had shown me that it didn't have to be shaved which was a very big part.

Other women noted that their partners encouraged shaving or getting a bikini wax and that this, in turn, increased their partner's enthusiasm for sexual activity.

Intimate or Casual?

Just as women's views about the appeal of the practice varied, so did their views on its intimacy. Among

the young women, there was no clear consensus as to whether they considered cunnilingus to be "sex" or whether it was more or less intimate than vaginal intercourse. For example, although Veronica acknowledged that oral sex was sex, she viewed it as more casual than intercourse. She explained that, "I can have oral sex with someone and be completely, you know, unattached. But with intercourse, it's just a whole other ball game in terms of emotional involvement." She further noted that she didn't "know how many people I've had oral sex with but it's more than [I've had intercourse with]." Women frequently excluded oral sex partners from their total number of sexual partners, counting only intercourse partners. Oral sex was often regarded as foreplay, and one woman described oral sex as something that "would've been in the progression of leading up to *real sex*" (italics added).

More commonly, however, women regarded oral sex, in general, and cunnilingus, in particular, as highly intimate; and, in some cases, even more intimate than sexual intercourse. Audrey explained that cunnilingus made her feel "more exposed than sex does." For this reason, relationship context mattered for many women in our sample. Thirty-five percent of the women did not view hookups as an appealing context for receiving oral sex. These women preferred to be in a serious relationship when receiving oral sex, and several refused to engage in giving or receiving oral sex in casual relationships. Lenora said, "I would never do it [fellatio] . . . if it was a one night stand, I would never do it. And I wouldn't want them to do it on me, either." Other women reported having similar guidelines against one night stands, such as Erin who said that she "hated" cunnilingus and would not consider it unless she was in a relationship for two months. Adding yet more variety to the views of oral sex, some viewed cunnilingus as a more significant act than fellatio. Margo said, "It feels like a guy going down on you is a bigger step than you going down on a guy which is probably unfair."

Relationships, in contrast, provided the opportunity to create a comfort level that allowed women to let down their guard and experience cunnilingus in a positive way. Denise said that she preferred receiving oral sex in relationships instead of hookups. She explained:

Maybe part of it is just that I'm not entirely comfortable with whoever the guy is and that's more of what it is than anything. So I think you know, in a stable relationship where there's an emotional investment, I think that you're more likely to be comfortable with them going down on you.

Fifteen women cited the emotional aspect of oral sex as central to their comfort and enjoyment and this, in turn, prevented them from treating cunnilingus casually. Describing cunnilingus as a "powerful feeling and powerful connection that you can have with someone," Annie perceived it as an emotionally loaded act in which

the physical and emotional are interconnected. The majority of women felt that they needed to know and trust their partner in order to enjoy cunnilingus. For the two women who discussed their history of sexual assault or molestation, trust was an even bigger issue.

Along with trust and intimacy, women brought up feeling as though they had to give up control in order to have an orgasm from cunnilingus. Becca said, “When it comes to oral, oral sex for me is such a trust issue. I have to trust the guy, otherwise I’m not going to let myself go.” Jackie found that allowing a man to perform oral sex on her deepened the level of intimacy and trust in her relationship:

But again, it was sort of this emotional thing the first time he performed oral on me and it was really, really nice. It was taking awhile and I’m a control freak. I have trouble orgasming, you know . . . and I guess it was really satisfying for me to know that I had let go enough control to let him do that.

Challenges of Attaining Reciprocity in Hookups

Previously, we saw that not all women find cunnilingus appealing, and some enjoy it in relationships, but not hookups.² Women’s comments also suggested that not all men are willing to engage in cunnilingus in hookups. This means that in heterosexual hookups, particularly first hookups, neither partner can anticipate the others’ preference. Uncertainty about whether cunnilingus is expected in hookups and about whether a particular partner is likely to want or expect cunnilingus creates interactional challenges. Women who desire cunnilingus in hookups find they have to be assertive to get it—and sometimes still do not.

Approximately two of three women valued reciprocity of oral sex regardless of relationship context. These women did not differentiate between the inclusion of fellatio and cunnilingus during a sexual encounter and viewed the performance of these acts as an equal exchange. If they gave their partner oral sex, they expected to receive oral sex from their partner in both hookups and relationships. Approximately 37% of the women reported engaging in reciprocal oral sex during a hookup. In most of these cases, the male partners initiated cunnilingus without much prompting by the women. Only a few were outspoken and motivated enough to demand it from their hookup partners. Becca felt that it was important to communicate her desires regardless of relationship context:

²We let participants decide when a liaison was a hookup and when it was a relationship. Hooking up multiple times with the same person was common. Participants typically viewed sexual exclusivity and an acknowledgment of the relationship (e.g., posting on Facebook[®], referring to each other as boyfriend or girlfriend) as distinguishing a relationship from a hookup. Some hookups evolved into relationships; some relationships evolved into hookups.

In any general hookup, I’m very vocal about what I want because I’m just like, it’s like a roadmap. Unless they know where they’re going and what they need, you know, and how to get there, then they’re not gonna reach their destination. That’s my theory. So I’m pretty vocal and I will, if I’m about to go down on a guy, I’ll say, “By the way, if this isn’t gonna get reciprocated, then just leave.”

For the women who wanted reciprocal oral sex to occur, they had to be explicit about their expectations because an equal exchange was not always assumed. Fiona explained how she negotiated the hookup interaction to ensure that reciprocity is achieved:

I hate it when a guy is like take your head and try and push it down, because I then just switch it around to make them go down first usually. And some guys say no and then I just say no if they say no. Uh, but for the most part, “Oh, dude, she’s taking, she’s taking the initiative, hot,” and usually it works out but. So, I guess that’s just one thing I’m working on is making sure that I am getting as much as I am giving.

In a few cases, women reported that they performed oral sex in a hookup and expected reciprocity, but their partner did not “return the favor.” This occurred when women were not assertive about making sure that it happened. For example, Mary said that she “didn’t ask for it and he didn’t just go for it,” so she did not receive oral sex during one hookup.

Some women found the lack of reciprocity in hookups frustrating. Natalie recounted a “very annoying” hookup in which “I just was with some stupid guy at a frat party and like we were in his room I guess and I gave head. And I was kind of waiting and he fell asleep. And I was like, ‘Fuck this’, and I just left.” At times, even repeat hookup partners failed to reciprocate; as Hadley explained, she could “probably count the number of times he’s done it for me which was unfortunate and I was angry about it. Part of the whole self-centered issue.” Callie expressed her frustration with a hookup partner who only reciprocated oral sex once or twice, and she believed that this behavior was due to his lack of past relationship experience. She said:

His relationships with women were purely sexual, so he always was expecting to get certain things . . . and it didn’t surprise me because when I had hooked up in the past it was just like I had always expected certain things. And apparently in his situations, he always received oral sex and didn’t necessarily give it and didn’t really like giving it.

Cunnilingus Avoidance in Hookups

Not all women wanted to receive cunnilingus in hookups. Those who preferred not to receive

cunnilingus in hookups were often relieved that it was not expected. Ten of the women in our sample were ambivalent or opposed to receiving oral sex during a hookup, tried to avoid it, and were relieved when they succeeded. Tara had a hookup partner who did not reciprocate the first time, and she said, "I was not necessarily upset about that. I was actually fine with it." She went on to explain:

Well, I really wasn't sure that I wanted oral sex from him anyway. I was fine giving oral sex but I didn't do it just to get it returned. . . . I don't know why not the first time but the second time. It might just be what he's ready to do. In some other people, they're ready to receive and not give and vice/versa. Some people are ready to give and not receive.

Distaste for the practice was not the only reason why women avoided cunnilingus in hookups. Some women avoided cunnilingus in hookups because they did not trust that they or their partners would stop there. Leslie said, "I know that I really didn't necessarily want him to reciprocate because I was drunk enough to realize that if my pants came off, things might go where they shouldn't be . . . so the pants stay on." Leslie ensured that she was not vulnerable to unwanted intercourse by limiting her partner's access to her body. In this situation, her strategic avoidance created relief since she was better able to control the situation.

Other women avoided cunnilingus in hookups because they worried that their male partner would not find cunnilingus enjoyable. Denise said, "I don't understand like what guys enjoy about going down on a girl. I just don't get it." Women also reported feeling guilty about prioritizing their own pleasure. In particular, some said that they worried about requiring too much time or effort from their partner to produce an orgasm. Whereas Bethany's partners encouraged her to give them oral sex and complimented her skills, she did not feel comfortable asking for the same:

It made me a little bit nervous. . . . I didn't feel comfortable, I guess. I don't know. I think I felt kind of guilty almost, I felt like I was kind of subjecting people to something they didn't want to do and I felt bad about it.

These women's comments suggest that they are receiving messages that it is inappropriate for them to expect cunnilingus in hookups, leading them to feel "nervous" or "guilty" about receiving pleasure and, thus, relieved when cunnilingus is avoided.

Reciprocity in Relationships

Our data suggest that cunnilingus has come to be a standard practice within relationships. Women who enjoyed cunnilingus found this to be positive. Over

one-third of participants explicitly stated that sexual reciprocity in committed relationships was important—meaning that both partners should be willing to perform oral sex if that is what their partner wanted. Kiley captured this idea by saying love means a relationship should be sexually equal:

I feel like if you love someone, you should be able to do that [perform oral sex] for them. . . . I feel like you should be balanced. I feel like if I love someone, I'll be willing to do that for them and I think they'd be willing to do it for me.

Although most interpreted reciprocity to mean a literally even exchange of sexual acts and orgasms, a few interpreted it more loosely. In cases where the woman gave but did not receive oral sex, some women redefined reciprocity. They viewed it as a matter of overall sexual pleasure, rather than "keeping a score card." For example, Marjorie explained her acceptance of non-reciprocity: "Because if I didn't receive oral sex, I probably received something else, so that I would get pleasure out of it. . . . I never did it thinking, 'Man, I better get repaid for this'." Describing her relationship as "almost equal but not quite," Jackie said that she was "not particularly bothered about the give and take" because reciprocity was a value in their relationship even if was not always achieved. Likewise, Shannon did not expect perfect reciprocity with oral sex in her relationship:

I don't think it's necessary, a one to one kind of ratio when we engage in oral sex. For the most part, since I do get orgasms pretty easily, I don't necessarily need like oral sex or anything like that. So, I think we might have gotten into the pattern where I don't necessarily need it or want it.

Reverse reciprocity in which the woman received oral sex, but the man did not, was also reported by several women in relationships. In these cases, men performed oral sex as foreplay, and instead of reciprocating, the couple would use intercourse for what Holly described as the "functional equivalent" to achieve orgasm for the man.

Even in relationships, the execution of cunnilingus was a challenge that required communication and practice. Relationships provided a context for men to become more skilled at cunnilingus. Women reported that oral sex was often not good with first-time or inexperienced partners. As one woman noted, cunnilingus is "something especially that they have to learn over time, after being with someone for awhile. Because they're not going to really figure it out on their own." Six women specifically mentioned that their partners improved over time. However, communicating with partners about cunnilingus technique was tricky. For example, Lenora noted that she did not receive oral sex very often because

she did not know how to talk to her boyfriend about cunnilingus without offending or upsetting him:

Yeah. I guess just because he's so sensitive about it. If I say anything about it, he's always like, "Well I know I'm not good at it." You know, it's just really weird because he's not like that. So it's kind of weird for me when he's insecure about something because he's not at all insecure about anything . . . So he doesn't actually do it very much for me, because I think he's really self conscious about it.

The women we interviewed suggested that some of their male partners interpreted tips to improve at cunnilingus as a threat to their masculinity. In the following section, we further discuss the link between masculinity and sexual competency.

Cunnilingus Refusal in Relationships

Study participants seemed to take for granted that cunnilingus would take place in committed relationships. Whereas some women who wanted to receive oral sex in hookups had to vocalize their desire for oral sex because it was not a given, women in relationships had to be clear if they did not want oral sex. Men's expectations that they should like and want it in relationships raised other issues—and opportunities.

Five women in our sample directly told their relationship partners not to perform cunnilingus. Ashley found that cunnilingus did not achieve anything for her and said, "I feel I could choose nothing and I'm just like, 'Okay, well, can we stop now?' But I feel like they feel obligated." Erin felt so self-conscious about the act that she told her partner, "Okay, like you don't have to. It's fine," when he attempted to go down on her. After dating for several weeks, Clare told her partner that she wanted to perform fellatio but not receive cunnilingus by saying, "I want to do this but I don't want to get it back." Ava remarked, "I mean, I enjoy giving oral sex. So, I feel like I'm not necessarily contributing to reciprocity because I would certainly not want to give up giving oral sex just because I'm not very good at receiving it." Cherie regarded intercourse as more reciprocal than oral sex and said, "Intercourse feels like a mutual activity and oral sex feels like something like an obligation."

Annie hated cunnilingus and used avoidance tactics rather than directly communicating with her partner. Instead, she described "enduring" it for her partner's sake because of her partner's genuine enthusiasm for cunnilingus:

But sometimes I can get myself out of it and I'm not going to lie, I'm happy about that. And he actually really enjoys—well, he tells me—he really enjoys giving it. I really believe it though, because he's like, "Oh, you know, I want to make you happy. I want to please you and I want to give this gift to you."

She went on to say that she was able to "wiggle free" from cunnilingus about one out of every five or six times.

Transforming Reluctance

In some cases, men's enthusiasm for giving oral sex changed women's opinions about the practice. Seven women reported that it was their partner who transformed their initial reluctance or aversion to oral sex into acceptance and enjoyment. These men seemed authentically concerned with their partners' sexual pleasure. For example, Amy said, "He was very into me feeling good. You know, very into it. And I didn't cum during sex but I did cum from oral sex, but it was sort of like in between the sex. So he made sure I came before he came."

Men's enthusiasm about cunnilingus was particularly effective in making women who initially felt self-conscious about their bodies and genitals feel comfortable. Andrea explained, "I didn't like to look at myself or touch myself or anything down there." She expressed feeling nervous and awkward when her partner initiated cunnilingus. She described her first experience as "shitty" and disliking it so much that she wanted to tell her partner to "go away." But, she explained that he reassured her that he liked it and complimented her genitals:

He'd go, "I like this. It's pretty." I was like, "Yeah, right. Liar." He would always be like, "Yeah, I want to do it." I'm like, "You're scared. I know you're scared. I feel you're scared. Stop shaking."

After more experience, her feelings transformed into enjoyment, and she now regards cunnilingus positively. She explained, "And I don't know what happened. I don't know but maybe a year ago, he started going down on me and then I was like, Hmm, pretty good." Likewise, Annie told a similar story in which she was sexually naïve and her partner persuaded her to enjoy cunnilingus:

Well I was not expecting it at all. I had no idea what oral sex was and I was like, "What? You want to do what, where? Are you kidding me? That's nasty. Gross. Go away. Ew." It took some convincing. He's like, "No, I promise. It's okay." And I was like, "Uh-huh. Um, I'm not sure about that one."

Rachel explained that it took her a long time to be comfortable with receiving oral sex, but after giving it a chance, she now thinks it is "pleasant" and feels confident enough to be able to ask for cunnilingus in future sexual encounters. Even women who resisted receiving oral sex at first found their views changing after they gave it a chance and their partners improved their technique. This indicates that learning to like cunnilingus is often a collaborative and negotiated process.

Masculinity and Giving Sexual Pleasure in Relationships

Selfless interest in their partners' pleasure was not men's only motivation for engaging in cunnilingus.

Pascoe (2007) noted that one way men demonstrate competent heterosexual masculinity is through their ability to master women's bodies. Women reported that their partners made this connection. Hilary explained, "I never orgasmed during oral sex. And for that particular reason, I don't find it particularly interesting but men seem to think it's useful." Mary said that her partner focused on her during foreplay because "Daniel had a macho thing going on, that he wanted to be able to give me an orgasm." When asked if her partner cared if she had an orgasm, Denise replied, "Yeah . . . I think most guys do care though. From my, at least my experience talking to them, it does seem to be important to them. It's a matter of their own personal confidence and success level, I guess." She attributed this to sex being a "result driven" pursuit for most men. These findings echo the unintended consequences of the heterosexual discourse outlined by Braun, Gavey, and McPhilips (2003) in that the emphasis on reciprocity obligates women to have an orgasm, leading women to sometimes fake orgasm. Since cunnilingus is focused on the woman, the pressure to orgasm is heightened because the orgasm serves as an affirmation of masculine sexual competency; and, as suggested earlier, women's concerns for men's egos sometimes made it difficult for women to communicate how they liked cunnilingus to be performed.

Discussion

We found that the negotiation of cunnilingus was challenging for the college women we interviewed. Whereas some women regarded cunnilingus as integral to their sexual pleasure, others expressed discomfort. Some women viewed cunnilingus as less intimate than sexual intercourse and treated it as foreplay. However, most women thought that cunnilingus was intimate and emotional, making it more appropriate in the context of a committed relationship. Relationship context produced different expectations and obstacles for the negotiation of cunnilingus. In hookups, some women reported frustration when they did not receive oral sex. A few women directly asked their hookup partner for reciprocity. Yet, some women expressed relief that cunnilingus did not occur in hookups because they wished to avoid it entirely or reserve it for relationships. Women reported that cunnilingus and reciprocity occurred more frequently in relationships than in hookups. Most were satisfied with this arrangement, although a few women disliked cunnilingus and faced the challenge of avoidance or refusal. A handful of women discovered that their reluctance to receive oral sex was transformed by an encouraging partner.

The finding that women confronted interactional challenges in the negotiation of cunnilingus suggests that sites where sexual scripts are changing rapidly or

are characterized by ambiguity intensify the interactional challenges of sex, requiring greater interactional skill, creating more stress, and increasing the frequency of failed sexual interaction. This is consistent with Simon and Gagnon (1986), who suggested that "greater demands are placed on the actor . . . where complexities, conflicts, and/or ambiguities become endemic at the level of cultural scenarios" (p. 99). To our knowledge, the implications of Simon and Gagnon's original observation have not been fully explored in the vast literature on sexual scripting, likely in part due to the difficulty of identifying when sexual scripts are in rapid flux, whether they are ambiguous or not, whether a particular type of sexual interaction requires an unusually high level of interactional work, or the degree of "success" of a sexual interaction. Although it is difficult to investigate these issues in a systematic empirical fashion, it is not impossible. For example, asking interviewees to narrate an instance of "bad sex," probing deeply into how, why, and when the sexual interaction broke down, could provide insights into the level of interactional skill sufficient to navigate particular sexual situations.

Our findings also suggests that gaps between levels of scripting—what individuals want and what they are culturally expected to want—may be particularly acute when sexual scripts are ambiguous and in flux or, as in this case, they vary from context to context. In this case, the mismatch between preference and expectation occurred in both contexts—with women who wanted cunnilingus disappointed when partners did not provide it in hookups, and those who did not want it negotiating to evade it in relationships. Our data hint that, for many women, distaste is fueled by self-consciousness or concern about whether partners are simply "enduring" it. When legitimated by either the publicly available sexual script or a particular partner's enthusiasm—or, ideally, both—most women seem to acquire an appreciation of cunnilingus. It is important to note that almost three-fourths of the participants in our study regarded cunnilingus positively. Previous studies have found that most women enjoy cunnilingus and believe that men enjoy it (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2011). Further research might delve more deeply into women's preferences for specific practices, as it would be interesting to gain a better understanding of the intrapsychic scripting that leads some women never to enjoy cunnilingus.

Our claims must be viewed as somewhat preliminary given that our small convenience sample does not allow us to generalize to a broader population. Our point is simply that even in a small, relatively homogenous sample, we find substantial diversity of opinion and experience related to cunnilingus. We suspect that a more diverse sample would yield an even greater variety, which would further support our claim that cunnilingus is a symbolically loaded and contested sexual practice. Despite the limits of our sample, qualitative studies provide nuanced insight into the nature of and response to

interactional challenges, and can be used to develop hypotheses for research that builds on these insights.

Future research should investigate whether our findings can be substantiated in other populations. For example, it is possible—indeed likely—that cunnilingus is less symbolically loaded for older women and that the ease of negotiating this practice—and all others—increases across all sexual contexts with sexual experience. It is also likely that the meanings and experiences of cunnilingus may be different for young women not attending college. Most problematic, however, given that the negotiation of heterosexual cunnilingus involves men, is the fact that our information on men's attitudes is based only on what women report about their partners. As men have as much—and likely more—influence on how sexual interaction in heterosexual hookups and relationships unfolds, their views on what practices are appropriate in these contexts and their preferences for participation are quite salient. Interviewing men about their views of cunnilingus would help ascertain whether the greater frequency of cunnilingus in relationships relative to hookups is driven by greater prioritizing of women's pleasure in relationships or women's greater comfort in relationships, or both.

Conducting a systematic comparison of the meanings men and women associate with fellatio and cunnilingus is also a logical next step for research. Applying our extension of scripting theory to the case of fellatio offers the following predictions: We suspect that fellatio, like cunnilingus, is difficult to negotiate due to public gendered meanings. However, as the gendered meanings associated with men's bodies and sexual pleasure are distinct from those associated with women's bodies and pleasures, we would predict a different set of challenges. In heterosexual pornography, fellatio is often used to symbolize male dominance and female degradation. We expect that much of the tension around fellatio in heterosexual hookups and relationships will center on the interactional challenge of navigating the ever present possibility of this meaning of fellatio being invoked by either participant; that is, in hookups, women may in part be hesitant to engage in fellatio at all—or at least without receiving cunnilingus first—because of the fear of feeling degraded. The availability of this sexual script may make men hesitant to ask for fellatio in hookups, or insistent about reciprocating with cunnilingus to demonstrate commitment to gender equality. Conversely, men who are erotically charged by the fellatio-as-degradation script may be highly motivated to seek hookups as a site for the enactment of this script, irrespective of their partner's interest in playing the role of degraded female. From what we have learned from the women we interviewed about the relatively greater gender equality of sex in relationships, we suspect that relationships make the fellatio-as-degradation script less culturally accessible. These last paragraphs suggest the variety of possible

next steps for this research. Our investigation of college women's experiences with cunnilingus offers a starting point. More research is needed on sexual negotiation in interaction and the ways in which relationship context, gender, sexual identity, race, class, nationality, and other social identities influence how sexual interaction unfolds.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Interview Guide for Qualitative Interviews of Stanford Students, Fall 2006

Note to readers of the interview guide: In qualitative interviewing, interviewers are free to change the order or wording of questions and add probe questions to clarify the meaning of responses; the goal is to make it like an informal discussion so that respondents feel at ease. However, possible question wording is below, and the text below indicates the material to be covered.

Interviewers will have students sign consent form first. In this study we're trying to learn about social life and romantic and sexual relationships at Stanford. We want to know how things have changed for

you since your freshman year. So I'll ask you questions that ask you to go back over your years here and tell me some stories. But if there is anything you don't want to talk about, just tell me, and—no problem—we'll go on to the next topic.

Now I'm going to ask about your experiences. Just so that I'll know to ask about the right gender, what's your sexual orientation—are you straight, or gay, bisexual, or has it changed?

Let's talk about your freshman year. Some people come still in a relationship with a significant other from high school, and some people get in a serious relationship right away with a new person. Then others aren't in any special relationship the first year. What was your situation?

IF IN RELATIONSHIP FRESHMAN YEAR, ASK Tell me all about that relationship from the first time you two met until when you two considered it an “official” relationship.

PROBE FOR DETAILS ABOUT RELATIONSHIP A lot of people tell us that they hooked up some their freshman year. Did you, or didn't you like that scene? *IF NO probe for reasons. IF YES* Can you reach back in your memory and tell me about your most fun hook up experience freshman year? Also, tell me about your worst hookup experience. *Get detailed narrative of best and worst hookup and probe each for:*

- *what was fun/bad about it*
- *how many other times hooked up with that person*
- *whether R or partner wanted to turn it into relationship*
- *what happened sexually; did either have orgasm.*

[sections omitted]

From your experience, would you say that sex is usually “hotter” and more enjoyable for you in a hook up or a relationship? Probe for what makes it hotter and can you give me an example of a time that seemed really hot.

I want to talk a little bit about your experience with orgasm while in college. First, can you tell me about the first time in your life you had an orgasm with a partner?

Probe for

How old R was.

Was R in a relationship with partner, was this first hook up, regular hook up?

Had they received oral sex or had intercourse with prior partner and not orgasmed?

Why was it possible this time?

Some people find it easy to have an orgasm if they're having oral sex or intercourse with a partner, but a lot of people say it just doesn't happen. How is it for you?

Probe for what it depends on.

If you really want to have an orgasm, how do you go about trying to make sure you have one?

Can you describe a fantastic sexual encounter that involved an orgasm?

Probe for

Setting, was it hook up, regular hook up, or relationship?

What was fantastic about it?

Can you think of some fantastic sexual encounter you've had that did not involve an orgasm? Tell me all about it.

Probe for

Setting, was it hook up, regular hook up, or relationship?

What was fantastic about it?

Did you wish you could have an orgasm? What do you think kept you from having one?

Have you had the experience where you gave someone oral sex but they didn't reciprocate? Tell me about some time that that happened.

Probe for

Was it hook up or relationship?

Did R want to receive oral sex? Did R say anything?

How did R feel?

How important is it to you to have an orgasm in sex?

Do you find it is easier to have orgasms in relationships, in hook ups with a new partner, or in a regular hook up with someone?

Have you stopped hooking up with someone because you weren't having orgasms with them?

Have you continued hooking up with someone you didn't like very much because the sex was great?

Would you end a relationship if you are not regularly having orgasms?

If you had a friend of your same sex and sexual orientation just starting Stanford, would you advise them to hook up a lot with different people, or try to get in a relationship, or have a "friends with benefits" or what? Why would you suggest that?

That's all the questions I have, unless there's anything you think we've missed that you'd like to add.

Thanks so much for your time.