Mis/representation and the media: A reflection on experiences with media engagement

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Findings from our recent article in *Sexualities*, entitled 'Faking to finish: Women's accounts of feigning sexual pleasure to end unwanted sex' (Thomas et al., 2017) were first presented in July 2016 at the annual conference of British Psychological Society's (BPS) Section on Women and Psychology (Thomas et al., 2016). The BPS issued a press release highlighting the findings of the research, which sparked a flurry of media attention, and resulted in multiple interview requests and over 100 print, online, and radio pieces across 20 countries including Canada, India, Italy, Nigeria, the UK and the USA. In this commentary, we reflect on these experiences with media engagement, including the opportunities and challenges they presented as sites of discursive resistance.

The initial focus of our qualitative research was on women's accounts of feigning sexual pleasure. Despite being recruited to talk about consensual sex, we were struck by the degree to which participants connected negative sexual experiences to the practice of faking orgasm. For this analysis, we focused on all instances in

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which participants spoke of sex that was anything other than enthusiastically consensual *and* wanted. The analysis highlighted two central findings. First, participating women appeared to struggle in their articulation of negative sexual experiences – meaning those experiences not represented with words such as 'rape' or 'coercion', but that were nonetheless experienced as problematic. Second, participants routinely described faking orgasm as a means of ending these negative sexual experiences. To speak of them, participants drew on a number of discursive strategies. For instance, women routinely used negative evaluations (e.g. 'it [sex] was bad') and a variety of hedging devices (e.g. modifiers, disclaimers) to describe a wide range of experiences from sex that was wanted yet unsatisfying to sex that was painful, unwanted, and distressing. We present these ways of accounting as moments of meaning-making in the absence of adequate vocabularies to represent a host of negative sexual experiences. Further, we call for linguistic innovation to expand our existing vocabularies in order to better 'speak' to these facets of women's lives. Our central point highlighting the difficulty in articulating and communicating troubling sexual experiences (in particular, those not represented with the language of sexual assault or coercion) became even more apparent in our interactions with the media.

Media play a critical role in circulating knowledges to both the general public and policy makers. As Rentschler (2014) has argued, social media in particular represent a key juncture where rape culture is both perpetuated (e.g. via misogynistic comments) and resisted (e.g. through feminist education and activism). Given that a primary aim of our research was 'to move beyond the existing limiting and dichotomous conceptualizations of heterosex' as either consensual and wanted *or* nonconsensual and unwanted (rape) (Thomas et al., 2017: 17), we were cautiously optimistic that engaging with the media would open space for discursive resistance – that it would allow for a 'counter-public' dialogue (Salter, 2013) about the lack of available language for a range of negative sexual experiences that are largely rendered invisible as a result.

In many ways, the response to our research echoed the findings themselves, mirroring points of both resonance and resistance. On the one hand, we heard time and time again that our findings validated women's experiences and highlighted the often-overlooked aspects of their negative sexual encounters. For example, female reporters were often eager to engage with us and many spoke knowingly about their own experiences of 'problem' sex as well as those of their female friends. Further, the media attention sparked conversations in our personal and professional lives about how often these 'untellable' experiences resonated with those close to us. These interactions underscored the degree to which consensual but unwanted sex is a 'problem with no name' (Friedan, 1963), but one that women are eager to unpack, understand, and resist.

On the other hand, this research was met (not surprisingly) with a great deal of resistance. The negative reactions to our study (especially, for instance, in angry remarks in online comments sections) highlighted women faking orgasm in response to problematic sexual experiences as a practice that fundamentally

threatens hegemonic masculinity. The mere topic appeared to incite a mixture of fear, insecurity, and anger and was readily dismissed on many occasions. Moreover, media representations of the work often failed to note the central point of the research regarding the inadequacy of our cultural vocabularies to articulate negative sexual experiences. Indeed, many pieces reproduced the very problem our article intended to clarify, collapsing all negative experiences of sex into either 'rape' or 'just sex' (Gavey, 2005). Similarly, some writers reverted to known terms such as 'coercive' to describe our participants' experiences (e.g. 'Women are faking orgasms to get out of coercive sex', Harvey-Jenner, 2016) despite our assertion that most participants did not describe their experiences in this way. Perhaps most troubling were those pieces that reduced women's experiences of unwanted and negative sexual experiences to a simple lack of assertiveness and empowerment – ultimately blaming women. Indeed, some articles instructed women not to fake orgasm but instead to simply tell partners when they are not interested in or enjoying sex. Being missed here are the material (e.g. threat of abandonment, violence) and cultural (e.g. inadequate discourse for representing) conditions that often do not readily allow for such conversations. Thus, our findings calling for discursive resistance were often (over-)heard in terms of dominant (patriarchal) discourse. As a result, media interview questions (e.g. 'Why are women lying to their partners?' 'Do you think it's good or bad for a man to hope a woman orgasms?') and subsequent publications positioned women as responsible for unwanted, negative, and painful sexual experiences. Accordingly, faking orgasm to end unwanted sex emerged as doubly 'unspeakable' – once because of a paucity of language with which to refer to it and second because of the (sometimes violent) negative reception that awaits when spoken.

Initially, we were frustrated with the various misrepresentations our research received in the media. However, we have come to understand them as common reactions to early efforts of discursive resistance. As articulated by McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2014), discursive resistance is an often complex and fraught process. Emergent efforts to resist hegemonic discourse are often met with a range of counter-challenges, not least because we are so accustomed to understanding the world in terms of the master narrative. Thus, (hedged and qualified) efforts to point to consensual but unwanted sex were readily framed in terms of 'rape' or reduced to a woman's failure to assert herself. Indeed, both misrepresentations and the efforts to challenge such misrepresentations signal the need to redouble our efforts to speak beyond the binary of consensual/wanted or non-consensual/unwanted.

In conclusion, we contend that both the expressions of resonance as well as resistance could be heard as indications that our findings had hit a cultural nerve. In reflecting on these experiences with media engagement, we aim not to offer solutions, but rather to raise more questions and consider our 'response-ability' (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013) to engage in public resistance. Where media offer access to a wide audience, they provide an important opportunity to both attend to discursive borders and transcend them (Mohanty, 2003). Our initial

reaction to misrepresentation in the media was to decline further interview requests, however in thinking about the possibilities for transcendence, the question is not whether we *should* engage but rather *how* can researchers and media engage with each other in ways that present possibilities for expanding hegemonic dialogues. In thinking about how our voices, and the voices of our participants, were both (mis)heard and silenced by media, we are hoping to call attention to the problems inherent in challenging dominant discourses when engaging in critical dialogue. As such, several scholars have been invited to respond to the media attention garnered by our article. Finally, we hope to extend the conversation beyond the academic sphere and to challenge journalists, writers and other public voices to consider the ways in which we all hold an ethical responsibility to carefully unpack the complexities of daily life and to consider how language use reinforces privileged constructions. Media are in a powerful position to either perpetuate the status quo or to make cracks in it and offer opportunities for spaces to engage in new dialogues.

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