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## The Year's Best: Interpersonal Elements of Bisexual Women's Most Satisfying Sexual Experiences in the Past Year

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*Sexual satisfaction is commonly defined and discussed in physiological terms of arousal and orgasm. Yet this narrow discourse does not accommodate the complex, multidimensional, and interpersonal aspects of sexual experience. To broaden and deepen our understanding of sexual satisfaction, we employed McClelland's (2014) holistic four-factor framework of sexual satisfaction in a theoretical thematic analysis of 39 behaviorally bisexual women's descriptions of their "best" partnered sexual experiences from the past year. We found women's accounts mapped on to four elements: emotional attunement, emotional gratification, partner gratification, and sensory gratification. Relational and emotional dynamics, including emotional security, quality of interpersonal interaction during and after a sexual encounter, mutuality, intimacy, partner skill, novelty, and communication, were key to participants' best sex experiences. Our findings support a multifaceted model of women's sexual satisfaction that accounts for emotional, relational, and embodied experiences and the diverse relationships and behaviors these might involve.*

Sexual satisfaction is considered an essential component of healthy sexuality (World Health Organization, 2010) given its implications for relationship functioning (Byers, 2005; Fisher et al., 2014; Sims & Meana, 2010), mental health (Bersamin et al., 2014; Patrick et al., 2013; Schwartz & Young, 2009), and physical health (Syme, Klonoff, MacEra, & Brodine, 2013). Despite such evidence of its importance, sexual satisfaction is still not well understood (Fahs, 2014; McClelland, 2011; Schwartz & Young, 2009). In their review of literature on sexual and relationship satisfaction Schwartz and Young (2009) found that studies rarely defined sexual satisfaction and

instead presumed its meaning to be both intuitive and universal. It is common for a single item to ask participants to rate the degree of sexual satisfaction they experienced in their relationships without any further elaboration or definition (e.g., Fisher et al., 2014; Higgins, Mullinax, Trussell, Kenneth Davidson, & Moore, 2011) or to rely on physiological indicators such as arousal and orgasm (Gheshlaghi, Dorvashi, Aran, Shafiei, & Montazeri Najafabadi, 2014; Gungor et al., 2015; Otero-Villaverde et al., 2015; Trompeter, Bettencourt, & Barrett-Connor, 2013). These approaches frame sexual satisfaction in static, individual terms, rather than as a dynamic facet of interpersonal engagement, one that continuously shifts in response to the interaction of individuals and their circumstances.

One notable exception to this vague and limited treatment is McClelland's (2014) model of four distinct yet interrelated dimensions of sexual satisfaction. In the current study, we used her model as the starting point for an exploration of behaviorally bisexual women's "best" sexual experiences. Our goal was not simply to test the applicability of McClelland's model to an understudied group of sexual minority women but also to contribute to an understanding of sexual satisfaction as a relational and context-dependent experience.

### Sexual Satisfaction: Medicalized and Gendered

Prevailing notions of sexual satisfaction are often filtered through the decontextualized, problem-focused lens of a medical model of sexuality (Tiefer, 2006, 2010). From this perspective, sexual desires, behaviors, and experiences are assessed as normal or pathological and treated (e.g., pharmacologically, surgically) according to standardized metrics and practices. Within this narrow framework, the quality of one's sexual experience is typically assessed in physiological terms of arousal (i.e., vaginal lubrication, penile erection) and orgasm (Cacchioni & Tiefer, 2012; Pronier & Monk-Turner, 2014; Tiefer, 2006). Yet, as critics point out, the medical model emphasizes biological factors while neglecting psychosocial, political, economic, and other critical determinants of sexual function and wellness (Tiefer, 2006, 2010). Sexual problems are individualized without regard for proximal and distal influences, including relationship-based issues such as decision-making power and communication patterns, nonsexual circumstances including finances and employment status, and sociocultural factors (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2007; Kaschak & Tiefer, 2002; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Tiefer, 2006).

Dominant discourse surrounding sexual satisfaction reflects not only a reductivist medical model but also prescriptive gender norms. Rarely viewed as sexual beings in their own right, women are typically cast as respondents to men's sexual overtures (Gavey, 2005). According to heteronormative sexual scripts, these overtures are spurred by an irrepressible male sex drive to maximize the frequency and novelty of sexual contact. Serving as foils to men's pleasure seeking, women are conventionally cast as sexual gatekeepers whose primary objectives are sexual monogamy and emotional intimacy (Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison, 2012; Morokoff, 2000). These contrasting discourses combine to create a dichotomous, antagonistic model of heterosexuality in which men are pursuing (and even predatory) subjects and women are passive objects (Gavey, 2005; Tolman, 2006). This framework restricts female sexuality and sexual agency to permitting or resisting male sexual advances according to cultural dictates and largely negates female sexual desire, exploration, and pleasure, particularly outside the bounds of monogamous, long-term, heterosexual relationships (Gavey, 2005). Through this lens, female sexuality appears nonexistent except as a

by-product of emotional intimacy and relational commitment (Masters et al., 2012).

### Sexual Satisfaction: Multidimensional and Mutual

A growing body of research refutes conventionally medicalized and gendered depictions of women's sexuality and satisfaction. Studies have found that relational factors such as emotional closeness (Philippsohn & Hartmann, 2009; Pronier & Monk-Turner, 2014), relationship happiness (Fisher et al., 2014), intimacy (Kaschak & Tiefer, 2002; Štulhofer, Ferreira, & Landripet, 2014), effective communication (Byers, 2005; Galinsky, 2009), and mutuality (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2003; Fahs, 2014; Pascoal, Narciso, & Pereira, 2014) are positively associated with sexual satisfaction among women. A recent study on women's orgasms found that interpersonal connection, novelty, partner skill, equality between partners, and a combination of emotional connection and physical arousal heightened pleasure (Fahs, 2014).

This evidence of the bearing of relational factors on sexual satisfaction should not be mistaken as confirmation that women's sexuality is predicated solely on romantic and affiliative needs. For both men and women, sexual satisfaction is influenced by an array of individual factors, including embodied sensation (McClelland, 2014; Pascoal et al., 2014), gender attitudes (Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005; Schick, Zucker, & Bay-Cheng, 2008), and agency (Pronier & Monk-Turner, 2014). Researchers have also found that women derive diverse forms of sexual pleasure from an array of sexual activities (Bay-Cheng, Robinson, & Zucker, 2009; Braun et al., 2003; Mark, Herbenick, Fortenberry, Sanders, & Reece, 2014; McClelland, 2011; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Opperman, Braun, Clarke, & Rogers, 2013), debunking notions of penile–vaginal intercourse as the consummate sexual act and orgasm as the sole signifier of sexual gratification.

McClelland has been a vocal proponent of an expanded and enriched understanding of sexual satisfaction, including her proposal of a four-factor model (McClelland, 2014; see also McClelland, 2010, 2011). She derived the model from a Q-sort analysis (Watts & Stenner, 2012) of descriptions of sexual satisfaction offered by 40 emerging adult undergraduates (approximately 50% women, 50% racial minorities, and 50% sexual minorities) during semistructured interviews. Q-sort studies require participants to sort a number of statements that reflect different facets of a concept, in order to indicate how they prioritize different dimensions of that concept (for more on Q-sort, see Serfass & Sherman, 2013; Watts & Stenner, 2012). McClelland's Q-sort study indicated that sexual satisfaction is composed of four different dimensions, each of which might be experienced or perceived to varying degrees by different individuals:

- Factor A. Emotional and masculine,
- Factor B. Relational and feminine,
- Factor C. Partner focused, and

Factor D. Orgasm focused.

Factor A (emotional and masculine) was composed of the elements of emotional security with a partner (e.g., trust, comfort, rapport) that enabled sexual satisfaction. Participants associated these feelings with being able to let their guard down, relax, and enjoy a sexual interaction. Also falling within this factor were feelings and modes of interaction often associated with masculinity, such as initiating sex, directing or being in control of the encounter, and penetration. While Factor A focused on the emotional connection and synchrony between partners during an interaction, Factor B (relational and feminine) highlighted the larger relationship context and how intimacy and connections might be strengthened through sexual interactions. Factor B's relational focus also emphasized monogamy, which participants associated with the affiliative dimension of femininity.

McClelland (2014) found the third dimension, Factor C (partner focused), to encompass participants' prioritization of a partner's experience, including but not limited to a partner's physical pleasure. Male participants in her study described gradually coming to recognize the importance of their female partners' pleasure and orgasm (which also accentuated their own satisfaction), whereas the female participants described their male partners' pleasure, specifically their orgasm, as crucial to their own sexual satisfaction. Factor D's (orgasm focused) references to sexual satisfaction linked this directly to orgasm and postorgasmic sensations of physical and mental relaxation. This was the only dimension in which orgasm (one's own or a partner's) was used as a defining feature of sexual satisfaction. Included under this factor also was the importance of facilitating a partner's orgasm as a matter of sexual quid pro quo and fulfilling one's "duty" (McClelland, 2014, p. 88) as a reciprocal sexual partner.

### Overview of the Current Study

Our central objective in the current study was to add both breadth and depth to understandings of sexual satisfaction by exploring these in a sexually diverse sample (i.e., behaviorally bisexual women) and in relation to specific experiences (i.e., participants' most enjoyable partnered experiences from the past year). Capitalizing on the capacity of McClelland's (2014) model to accommodate the multiple dimensions and subjective perceptions of sexual satisfaction, we used it as the theoretical cornerstone of our analysis. We focused on two questions: How do behaviorally bisexual women describe their best sex experiences? Do their descriptions reflect the dimensions of sexual satisfaction identified by McClelland?

We were drawn to McClelland's model for its holistic approach toward capturing the subjective experience of sexual satisfaction without being deterministic or reductionist. The Q-sort methodology used by McClelland enabled her to capture diverse perspectives on sexual satisfaction

resulting in a comprehensive model of sexual satisfaction. The sexual diversity of her sample (45% sexual minorities) also helps advance a model that contests the heterocentrism of most sexuality research (Armstrong & Reissing, 2013; Biss & Horne, 2005; Fahs, 2014; Holmberg, Blair, & Phillips, 2010; McClelland, 2011, 2014). Behaviorally bisexual women are particularly underrepresented in sexuality research (Marrazzo & Gorgos, 2012), despite growing evidence that they represent a sizable fraction of women (Gates, 2012; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007), are at elevated sexually transmitted infection (STI) risk (Austin, Roberts, Corliss, & Molnar, 2008; Mercer et al., 2007), and have distinct developmental experiences and trajectories (Diamond, 2008). In addition, studies of the quality of women's same-sex relationships often focus narrowly on frequency of sexual interaction and risk reproducing stereotypes of "lesbian bed death" (Cohen & Byers, 2014). Although we founded our analyses on the components of sexual satisfaction identified by McClelland, we also adapted her model to fit the perspectives shared by women in our study. In doing so, our hope was to expand understandings of both women's sexuality and their experiences of sexual satisfaction.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 45, with an average of 25.3 years ( $SD = 6.53$ ). The majority of the sample was White, with 12.9% identifying as women of color (four Black and one Asian American). When asked about their current financial situation, 45% of the participants reported that they had *Enough to get by but no extras*, 29% reported they had *More than enough to get by*, and 13.2% identified as *Well-to-do*. A minority reported having insufficient financial resources: 5.3% had *Barely enough to get by* and 8% reported they were *Very poor*. A little more than half of the participants (51.3%) had an associate's degree or attended some college, 31% had a bachelor's degree, 8% had a master's degree, 8% a high school education, and 2.6% had other education.

Participants self-identified as bisexual (41%), heterosexual/straight (23.1%), other (12.8%), queer (12.8%), lesbian/gay/homosexual (7.7%), and unsure/questioning (2.6%). Two-thirds of the participants (67%) reported that their best sexual experience was with a male partner, 28.2% with a female partner, and 5.1% with both a male and female partner (i.e., during a threesome). Comparable percentages of women reported that their best sexual experiences occurred within monogamous (48.7%) and nonmonogamous (51.3%) relationships.

### Procedure

A total of 80 behaviorally bisexual adult women were recruited to participate in the Women in Indiana: Sexual Health and Experiences Study (WISHES). Participants were

sampled from a midsize city in the U.S. Midwest (population > 750,000) and another smaller city in the Midwest (population < 750,000). Cisgender women who had engaged in genital contact with at least one cisgender man and one cisgender woman in the past year were eligible to participate in the study. These eligibility criteria were applied to meet the WISHES project's overarching goal of examining recent STI (i.e., incidence within the past year) among women who have sex with women and men. The project was designed to examine infection in the context of participants' diverse relationships, behaviors, and life circumstances, and therefore collected a wide range of relevant data, including descriptions of their most enjoyable sexual experiences from the past year. These experiences became the focus of our study.

Participants were recruited using paper-based flyers distributed in both lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)-specific and non-LGBT-specific locations, online posts on Web sites and electronic mailing lists, and through participant referral (i.e., snowball sampling). The study advertisements targeted adult female participants with male and female sexual partners in the past year. Eligible participants were directed to an online baseline survey that took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The baseline survey was used to collect demographic and sexual history information from participants.

Upon completion of the baseline survey, participants were invited to take part in an in-person timeline follow-back interview using the SEQUENCE calendar method. The SEQUENCE calendar, similar to an event history calendar, was developed for the WISHES study to collect detailed information on each participant's sexual behavior with various sexual partners over the previous 12 months. Beginning with any current relationships, participants were asked to identify all partners that they had been "dating, hooking-up with, or in a relationship with" in the past year. Participants assigned pseudonyms to all partners and provided demographic information, such as the partner's gender, sexual orientation, and characteristics of each relationship. After providing this information, participants were asked to share detailed descriptions of their most recent sexual encounters and their most enjoyable sexual encounters from the past year. These questions were intended to yield more narrative information about participants' sexual experiences, specifically two events (i.e., most recent and most enjoyable) that were likely to be salient and memorable. The SEQUENCE calendar method consisted of an electronic calendar displayed on a computer screen that was filled in by the interviewer, using the participant's answers to interview questions, to create a timeline of each participant's sexual behaviors with their sexual partners (for more on the SEQUENCE calendar, see Schick et al., 2016; Schick, Dodge, Van Der Pol, Baldwin, & Fortenberry, 2015). For example, if "Michelle" reported that her best sex experience occurred with "Danielle" in March, the interviewer would type in a verbatim description of the event in the "best sex" column, of the calendar, under the month of March, in

Michelle's presence. All participants could see the computer screen throughout the interview and were periodically asked to verify that information had been entered correctly.

Out of 80 survey participants, 54 (67.5%) indicated interest in the follow-up interview. All 54 interested participants completed the interview, but data from 14 participants were lost due to a coding error. Of the 40 SEQUENCE participants whose data were preserved, 39 described a best sexual event that took place with a specific partner(s), and one participant described an imagined experience. The one participant whose response was based on an imagined experience was excluded from analyses, resulting in a final sample of 39 women. Interviews lasted an average of 2.5 hours and were conducted by the principal investigator (the third author) or a trained doctoral student at a location chosen by the participant. A \$50 gift card was provided to participants who completed both the survey and the follow-up interview.

## Measures

**Sociodemographics.** Participants responded to a series of single-item questions about their age, race/ethnicity, subjective socioeconomic status (SES), education, sexual orientation, and relationship status. Age was self-reported and race categories included *White*, *Black*, *Asian*, or *Other*. A text box was provided for participants to describe their *Other* race category. Following the model used by the second author in other studies (Bay-Cheng, 2016; Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2015), subjective SES was measured by asking "How would you describe your family's current economic resources?" and was assessed on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Very poor; not enough to get by*) to 6 (*Extremely well-to-do*). Education included categories of *Less than high school*, *High school or GED*, *Some college or associate's degree*, *Bachelor's degree*, *Master's degree*, *Professional (MD, JD, PhD)*, or *Other*. Participants selected their sexual orientation from the following response options: *Lesbian/gay/homosexual*, *Bisexual*, *Heterosexual/straight*, *Unsure/questioning*, *Queer*, *Asexual*, or *Other*. If a participant chose *Other*, she could describe this sexual orientation further using an open text box.

**Best Sexual Experiences.** Data for the current study consisted of participant responses to the following question from the SEQUENCE interview: "What was your best sex event over the past 1 year?" Participants could refer to a single event or a series of interactions with a particular partner. Participants were further prompted to indicate what it was about that event or series of events with a partner that caused them to rank the encounter(s) as their best sexual experience. Based on findings from prior studies, we wanted to tap into the fluid, relational, and context-dependent nature of sexual satisfaction. To achieve this end, we chose to ask participants to describe their best sex experiences to capture vivid narratives of women's salient experiences of sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

**Partner Characteristics.** Partner gender was assessed by asking the participant to indicate the gender of each partner over the previous year (e.g., male, female, trans man, trans woman, genderqueer). Participants chose the following response categories to describe their relationship with their best sex experience partner: *Completely monogamous*, *Monogamous in some ways but not others*, *Not in a monogamous relationship*, or *Unsure*. The format of the interview also allowed for participants to provide an additional description of their relationship boundaries outside of the provided options.

### Analysis Strategy

We conducted a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using McClelland's (2014) four-factor framework of sexual satisfaction as an initial coding frame. The goal of this approach was not to prove or disprove McClelland's model but to use it as a foundation for examining the constituent elements of women's best sexual experiences. Analyses began with the first author conducting open coding and developing an initial coding scheme. The second author also reviewed participant data and then reviewed the first author's assigned codes. After reading and rereading the initial codes and the data, the first and second author agreed that the patterns emerging from the data matched McClelland's (2014) model of sexual satisfaction. The first author then directly translated McClelland's four factors into codes to guide the thematic analyses. The second author also reviewed the participant data and the new coding framework. Thereafter, the first and second author met to compare coding and to reconcile discrepant interpretations. Upon discussion, the first and second author modified McClelland's model by adding, removing, and refining categories to achieve an optimal conceptual fit to the data. The first and second authors approached coding as a collaborative process to build consensus and therefore did not quantify the degree of agreement between them. Last, the first author revised the coding scheme and assigned codes accordingly. Codes were not mutually exclusive, leading to the assignment of multiple codes to some participant responses. The first and second authors conducted all data coding and analysis. Although they engaged in a rigorous and iterative process of constant comparison, the validity of the

study findings may be mitigated by the lack of an independent coder (e.g., one unaware of the study's focus) and a quantified measure of interrater reliability.

In addition to thematic analysis, we conducted chi-square analyses to identify differences by age, sexual orientation, relationship type, and partner gender for each element. Due to the small sizes of some subsamples (e.g., age groups), analyses were conducted using constructed dichotomized variables (e.g., aged 18 to 24 or aged  $\geq 25$ ).

### FINDINGS

We found evidence in the current data for each of McClelland's (2014) original four factors, with occasional and minor variations. Given the single gender and diverse sexual identity composition of our sample, we did not attempt to map masculinity and femininity onto Elements A and B, as McClelland did in her study. To reflect this and other variations based on the current data, we renamed the factors as follows:

Element A. Emotional attunement,  
 Element B. Emotional gratification,  
 Element C. Partner gratification, and  
 Element D. Sensory gratification (see Table 1 for brief definitions of these modified elements).

We did not pose any a priori hypotheses regarding group differences but scanned the data for response patterns related to participant age, participant sexual orientation, relationship type, and partner gender. Chi-square tests revealed no statistically significant differences among any of these subgroups in participants' depictions of their best sexual experiences. In addition to definitions of the elements, Table 1 includes their frequencies for the overall sample and specific subgroups based on age (aged 18 to 24 or  $\geq 25$ ), relationship type (monogamous or not), and partner gender (male or not). These dummy codes were selected based on frequencies and are not intended to privilege one age group, relationship type, or partner gender over others.

**Table 1.** Participants' References to Elements of Sexual Satisfaction

Factors	Definition	Frequency (%) in Overall Sample (n = 39)	Frequency (%) within Subgroups		
			Aged 18 to 24 (n = 23)	Occurred with Male Partner (n = 26)	Occurred in Monogamous Relationship (n = 19)
A. Emotional attunement	Emotional context and foundation of a sexual interaction (e.g., partner rapport, communication)	71.8	57.1	57.1	46.4
B. Emotional gratification	Affective response to a sexual interaction (e.g., feelings of connection)	28.2	81.8	63.6	72.7
C. Partner gratification	Partner's pleasure and wishes	10.3	100	100	50
D. Sensory gratification	Bodily sensations and sexual novelty	66.7	53.8	73.1	42.3

Throughout the Findings section, we provide direct quotes from participants' SEQUENCE entries to illustrate each element. Due to the method of data collection and entry into the calendars, responses varied syntactically (e.g., verb tense used, fragments or complete sentences, first- or third-person voice). All but one participant's responses could be coded in accordance with at least one of the identified elements; in some cases, multiple elements reflected in participants' responses. We examine this conceptual confluence in a section that follows. We also review the one case that did not reflect any of the elements.

### **Element A: Emotional Attunement**

In all, 28 (71.8%) participants referred to emotional attunement with a partner as fundamental to their best sexual experiences. A slight majority (57.1%) of these participants were between 18 and 24 years old. In their comments, participants characterized emotional attunement in terms of easy communication, harmonious rapport, and mutual trust. Illustrative quotes of these interrelated components follow in this section. These feelings, based on both verbal and nonverbal cues, provided the foundation for a pleasurable sexual interaction.

For instance, Dagny (29, White, bisexual) explained how her best sexual experience occurred with a nonmonogamous male partner because they "talked a lot beforehand ... he took that into consideration when having sex. Communication before about what was wanted. [I] Didn't orgasm, but said before [the interaction] that wasn't going to happen, so didn't feel pressure to make it happen." Shan (29, White, queer) expressed a similar sentiment in her account of a threesome that was "really hot ... everyone was really attentive to each other ... both what is feeling good and signs of hesitation ... there was a moment of pain and there was a pause and communication. Navigated to make sure that everyone felt good and not left out." Similarly, Katy (31, White, bisexual) explained that she experienced greater sexual satisfaction with her female partner as compared to her male partner, with whom she was in a nonmonogamous dating relationship, owing to her ability to communicate with the former. She described her monogamous female partner as "sex positive and doesn't have any hang-ups that a typical guy might have ... talked and communicated interests and desires."

Attunement also manifested in the form of harmonious, nonjudgmental rapport. Heidi Beth (40, White, lesbian) described her best sexual experiences with her nonmonogamous male partner: "We've known each other for a while and just seem to know what one another likes. We just seem to connect very well sexually and he is a very good friend." Likewise, Jane (22, White, heterosexual) enjoyed sex when "all [partners] had the same emotional and sexual attitudes about it. No weird complications after."

Other participants framed attunement in terms of trust. Cordelia (26, White, bisexual) explained, "Sexual events with primary partner has positive aspects. Having trust with primary partner is what makes it comfortable." Similarly, Ari (26, White, bisexual) enjoyed sex with her nonmonogamous

male partner, whom she "knew and liked and trusted ... was comfortable with him. Not a lot of pressure." In both these instances, participants felt comfortable with their partners because they trusted them. Shan (29, White, queer) underscored the importance of trust and comfort in sexual encounters and reasoned that her best sexual experience occurred with her male partner as "sexual acts require a lot of intensity and vulnerability ... trusted him. He was present and good at communicating and interested in going to intense places." She saw trust, communication, and harmonious, nonjudgmental rapport as mutually reinforcing concepts that were instrumental in laying the emotional foundation of pleasurable sexual encounters.

### **Element B: Emotional Gratification**

A total of 11 (28.2%) participants identified emotional gratification as a component of their best sexual experiences. The majority (81.8%) of participants who referred to various aspects of emotional fulfillment were between 18 and 24 years old. Emotional attunement was related to gratification insofar as the former may have enabled the latter. The primary distinction between the two elements was that attunement characterized partners' rapport preceding and during an interaction, whereas gratification pertained to the sense of fulfillment and intimacy a participant derived from an interaction. Participants emphasized the feelings of connection and intimacy that emerged from a sexual encounter. For instance, Kessa (19, White, lesbian) described her best sexual experiences with her monogamous female partner: "Not one specific event, but sexual events with Deandra are better because you are attracted to her. Less about the behavior more about the connection." In a similar vein, Michelle (21, White, heterosexual) described her best sexual event with her monogamous male partner during which she felt "so much love involved. Really connected. Made love."

For one participant, coinciding and mutual pleasure was an important component of emotional gratification. Cornelius (28, Black, heterosexual) described, "It was very spontaneous ... we both finished at the same time. There was a gentleness to it ... an emotional connection." Another participant, Carmen (19, White, bisexual), explained how she felt connected with her partner because she could only orgasm with him: "Things are best with Christopher because he is the only one who [I can] orgasm with ... feel emotionally connected to him. Emotionally intimate." Tessa (20, White, bisexual) shared that her sexual encounters are "best with Lisa because she was the first girl [I was] intimate with sexually and emotionally ... more sexually and emotionally connected with her." For these two participants, a shared history of intimacy with their partners enabled them to experience emotional gratification in their sexual encounters.

### **Element C: Partner Gratification**

Only four participants (10%), all aged 18 to 24 years, identified partner gratification in their reports of their best

sexual experiences. This does not mean that participants did not value partner gratification, only that participants did not explicitly or discretely refer to it. It is noteworthy that in all cases participants mentioned their partners' sexual gratification in the context of reciprocal and mutual pleasure (i.e., participants were not solely focused on a partner's pleasure). Michelle (21, White, heterosexual) described her best sexual experience as one where she and her nonmonogamous male partner "did not have any inhibitions and were trying to please one another ... knew ... what one another liked. Maybe anal sex because he wanted to—was open to it. Didn't mind it, depends on the situation." Kristy (20, White, bisexual) similarly shared that sex was "always best with Mark ... not just doing it to do it—doing it, make the other person happy, you actually care." Both these participants reported sexual encounters in which both partners were invested in pleasing each other and derived satisfaction from each other's gratification.

One participant also described how much she enjoyed witnessing and facilitating her partner's sexual satisfaction. Julien (23, White, queer) recalled her best sexual experience with her nonmonogamous male partner as "one of the first times had used a strap-on without problems—smooth and easy. Felt empowering. Being more of a top. Felt fun to make someone feel awesome."

#### Element D: Sensory Gratification

McClelland (2014) identified her fourth factor as specifically orgasm focused. Instead, we noted participants' references to any form of sensory gratification regardless of orgasm. In this study, 26 (66.7%) participants referred to sensory gratification as a component of their best sexual experiences, with the slight majority (53.8%) of them between 18 and 24 years old. Of the 39 participants in the current study, seven (18%) seemed primarily focused on orgasm. To illustrate, Hill (21, White, bisexual) shared her best sexual experience as one where she "had the most amazing orgasm ever ... when you hit the G-spot and you have an orgasm, you go crazy." Another participant, Oliver (21, White, queer), explained, "The number of orgasms and lots of ejaculation [equals] awesome."

The remaining participants referred to a range of bodily sensations (including but not limited to orgasm), novelty, and partner skill as elements of sensory gratification. For Heaven (41, White, bisexual), a threesome was best: "Because she [a third partner] was involved, it made us both more aroused. We were so much more aroused. We were able to go longer and have multiple orgasms and not be done." Kitty (22, Black, bisexual) described her favorite sexual encounter as one in which she and a nonmonogamous male partner "hadn't been together for awhile. Was horny ... ovulating. Extra sensitive. Passionate but rough. Sexually satisfying." Another participant, Jules (26, White, other), recalled that her best sexual experience occurred with her nonmonogamous male partner because "touching bodies better ... physically connected. Entire body feels as

though melting. Lasts long with lots of variety. Not necessarily a function of the behaviors themselves. It's more the way you physically feel during the behaviors."

Seven participants identified novelty as an element of their sensory gratification. April's (19, White, heterosexual) best sexual experience was one where she had "never done anal combined with a vibrator ... was a first." Similarly, Talina (45, White, pansexual) described her favorite encounter as one that "was unusual. It was naughty by society's standards. It was my first time with an Irish guy. It was mostly the anticipation." Cordelia (26, White, bisexual) shared that sex is best with her partner because he "looks for ideas in porn and watch[es] and may replicate if both comfortable." The novelty of trying out a new sexual act, breaking a taboo, or being with a new partner heightened sexual pleasure for these participants.

Partner skill played an important in sensory gratification for four participants. Shan (29, White, queer) described her partner's skills as essential to good sex: "Best sexual experiences were also with Sean. More S&M [sadism and masochism]. He has a lot more experience with it. It has been part of his life for a long time." Likewise, Ali (26, White, queer) shared: "No one [single] experience with Ted, but experiences with Ted are the best ... good at what he does." Bianca (23, Black, heterosexual) evoked a similar sentiment that her best sexual experiences occurred with her partner who, "sexually, he is just more aware of a woman's body compared to any other man that I'd been with."

#### Element Confluence

Although there are conceptual distinctions among elements, participants often invoked more than one element in recounting their best sexual experiences. The most commonly paired elements were A (emotional attunement) and D (sensory gratification). In 17 cases (43.58%), participants reported feeling a strong sense of both emotional security and sensory gratification in their best sexual experiences. For instance, Molly (22, White, heterosexual) described her favorite sexual encounters with her monogamous male partner as "not one particular event ... always pretty good ... connected, emotionally and physically." Similarly, Jane (22, White, heterosexual) shared, "Recent sexual events with Joe were 'better' in terms of the emotional connection and physical pleasure." Danielle (26, Black, bisexual) recalled her favorite sexual experiences: "Generally speaking, sex is best with Amanda because of the emotional attachment and because it was [physically] good." In all three instances, participants differentiated between the physical and emotional "connection" they felt with their partners while also seeing them as mutually enhancing. The following quote from Oliver (21, White, queer) exemplifies the convergence between affective and embodied aspects of an interaction:

It felt like there was a strong emotional connection, and it pushed the sexual experience towards being really great. Talked a lot and cried and had some exploration time before that. The emotional connection led to a strong physical connection. Ejaculated many times and was exciting. Is something that

happens regularly with him, and it comes from trusting and relaxing.

Communication, trust, and comfort laid the foundation for a sexual encounter that was ripe with emotional and physical gratification.

### Exceptional Case: Sexual Identity

Although all participants' comments cohered to some degree with the four factors originally proposed by McClelland (2014), one participant's response also tapped a distinct thematic vein. Reflecting on her two best sexual experiences, both of which involved threesomes with one male and one female partner, Chica (31, White, bisexual) shared:

Both threesomes were the best because there is something very fulfilling about being with a male and a female partner at the same time. Less about physical fulfillment and more about forming an identity—exploring and experimenting within the limits of one's identity. Gender fucking is something [one] loves doing ... messes with roles ... empowering.

Chica's response signals the relevance of sexual behavior to identity and self-exploration. In her case, sexual interactions provided a platform for transgressing gender prescriptions and expanding definitions of oneself. As she implies, these experiences were gratifying and meaningful beyond the sexual domain.

## DISCUSSION

Most studies on sexual satisfaction are conducted with a narrow range of participants (i.e., those in long-term monogamous, heterosexual relationships) and rely on vague references or simplistic metrics (e.g., orgasm). Through the current study, we hoped to expand and enrich our understanding of sexual satisfaction. We pursued this by examining the best sexual experiences from the past year of a sample of behaviorally bisexual women through the lens of McClelland's (2014) four-factor framework of sexual satisfaction. With a few adjustments, we found her model captured the diverse experiences of the study's participants. Recognizing the complexity and subjectivity inherent to sexual enjoyment, we did not set out to define "best sex" or its factors. Instead, we wanted to showcase the fluid, variable, and context-dependent nature of sexual enjoyment. Beyond confirming the multifaceted nature of sexual satisfaction, our findings also help reveal the ways in which these facets work in tandem to produce richly pleasurable sexual experiences that combine elements of physical gratification, emotional intimacy, mutuality, and novelty. The quality of one's interaction with a partner, the partner's sexual skill, the circumstances surrounding an interaction, and the sexual acts engaged in during an interaction were all

important, intersecting determinants of the pleasure and satisfaction derived from a sexual experience.

As one example of the breadth of the dimensions of sexual satisfaction, participants' best sexual experiences were rarely centered on orgasm (theirs or their partners') or defined by a single sexual act (Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Tiefer, 2006). To the contrary, the acts that composed sexual interactions were diverse and did not follow a pre-scripted sequence culminating in coitus (Schick, Van Der Pol, et al., 2015). Only seven of the study's 39 participants referred to orgasm when describing their best sexual experiences. This relatively infrequent reference to orgasm is a notable divergence from dominant discourse, in which orgasm is treated as the defining feature of pleasure and even of sex itself (Braun et al., 2003; Gavey et al., 1999; Herbenick et al., 2010; Jackson, 1984; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001; Opperman et al., 2013; Tiefer, 2006). It was in response to participants' broader construal of embodied pleasure, as composed of diverse sensations, novel experiences, and partner skill, for instance, that we opted to refer to Element D not as "orgasm focused" as McClelland (2014) did, but as "sensory gratification." While an interesting finding, we must be conservative in speculating about its meaning. We found only that most participants did not explicitly mention orgasm, not that they explicitly disregarded or downplayed it. Therefore, we cannot determine whether participants did not refer to orgasm because it was not a central feature or priority in their sexual interactions or whether they saw it as automatically implied and unnecessary to state. Nevertheless, the infrequent reference to orgasm warrants additional, focused attention that can be explored in future studies.

Participants' responses also expand conventional views of the importance of emotional intimacy to women's sexual experiences (Fahs, 2014; Umberson, Thomeer, & Lodge, 2015). Participants' references to emotional attunement and gratification (Elements A and B, respectively) in describing their best sexual experiences make clear that the interpersonal quality of an interaction was not predicated on a long-term, monogamous, romantic relationship. In fact, 15 of the 28 (53.6%) participants whose responses referred to emotional attunement (Element A) were in nonmonogamous relationships and/or were with nonromantic (i.e., casual) sexual partners. This indicates not only that the emotional quality of an interaction, both in terms of the understanding between partners in the moment and the consequent emotional gratification, matters even if it occurs outside of a conventional romantic relationship but also that nonromantic sexual interactions are not simply crass, selfish pursuits of individual pleasure, as they are often depicted (Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010; Littleton, Tabernik, Canales, & Backstrom, 2009).

These findings make two compelling points: that women may value the emotional quality of a sexual interaction not because the relationship itself is their central priority but because it can amplify sexual pleasure; and that the relational quality of a sexual interaction matters even when occurring outside the bounds of traditional romantic attachment. Related research has found that while lesbian, bisexual,

queer, and questioning women endorsed emotional reasons for having sex in relationships, these reasons were not equated with love and commitment (Wood, Milhausen, & Jeffrey, 2014). Similarly, undergraduate heterosexual women in another study reported greater pleasure, desire, and wanting in friends with benefits relationships because of intimacy, ease, and comfort in this type of relationship (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009). Both of these studies indicate that the emotional and relational quality of a sexual interaction is crucial to women's sexual satisfaction and that these are not necessarily predicated on conventional romantic terms. These findings, along with the growing prevalence of nonromantic and/or nonmonogamous sexual relationships (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Jonason, Li, & Richardson, 2011), indicate the need for studies that do not equate physically and emotionally gratifying sexual interactions with romantic commitment.

Participants' references to the interpersonal quality of sexual experiences also did not simply recapitulate the gendered discourse of women having sex as a means to emotional or romantic ends. Instead, participants viewed comfort with a partner as an essential component of mutual trust and an easy rapport, both of which ultimately led to greater sexual pleasure (e.g., by lessening the interference of self-consciousness, performance anxiety, and miscommunication; Opperman et al., 2013; Pascoal et al., 2014; Schwartz & Young, 2009; Tiefer, 2010). Emotional attunement was seen as enabling uninhibited expression and communication and therefore more enjoyable interactions. Participants also saw one's comfort with a partner as the foundation for sexual experimentation, paving the way to novel experiences. We saw support for this in the frequent coincidence of emotional attunement and sensory gratification in participants' best sexual experiences. This finding challenges the common view of relational stability and security as antithetical to sexual excitement and novelty (e.g., the stereotype of lesbian bed death; Cohen & Byers, 2014; Nichols, 2004; Umberson et al., 2015). Instead, comfort, trust, and open communication can lead to richly gratifying sexual experiences involving diverse behaviors and partners. In addition, participants also reported best sexual experiences that included both emotional and sensory gratification, contrary to the popular belief that intimate, long-term monogamous relationships result in sexual monotony.

Participants' best sexual experiences were also firmly rooted in a discourse of reciprocity and mutuality, wherein both partners invested in the quality of each other's experiences. This differs from female respondents in McClelland's (2014) study who described their own sexual satisfaction strictly in terms of their male partners' orgasms and/or prioritized their partners' pleasure over their own. Participants in the current study also did not appear to frame providing their partners' pleasure in terms of duty or obligation, as McClelland observed among some of her participants. Our participants' descriptions of their best sexual experiences denoted mutuality and shared pleasure

rather than the obligation, entitlement, duty, or exchange that is often bound up with heterosexual sex (Braun et al., 2003; Opperman et al., 2013; for more on mutuality as a component of sexual ethics and care, see Lamb, 2010). Of course, the current study explicitly and exclusively solicited details of participants' "best" sexual experiences, unlike other studies (such as McClelland's) exploring both sexual satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Thus, the predominance of favorable impressions and relative absence of unfavorable ones (e.g., framing partner pleasure in obligatory terms) in our data must be at least partially attributed to the study's design.

The study participants' departure from unequal heteronormative scripts may stem from their nonconformity as sexual minority women, which may embolden them to transgress gendered sexual norms (Cohen & Byers, 2014). Indeed, explorations of same-sex relationships indicate that views and expectations regarding intimacy, sex, power, and emotional work often differ from those in heterosexual relationships (e.g., Goldberg, Smith, & Perry-Jenkins, 2012; Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008; Umberson et al., 2015). Even when involved in relationships and sexual encounters with male partners, it is possible that behaviorally bisexual women deviate from normative gendered and sexual scripts. However, the current data are insufficient to substantiate this claim. Future studies on sexual satisfaction can investigate this in more detail.

The data for our study were limited in numerous ways. First, our select sample represents a narrow range of women with regard to region, race, education, and SES. Behaviorally bisexual women who must also contend with racial or ethnic stigma and/or socioeconomic disadvantage may have very different perspectives and experiences in their sexual and romantic relationships. Second, while our sample was diverse by sexual orientation, it was exclusively cisgendered. Exploring how best sexual experiences could differ for transgender and genderqueer individuals could further our understanding of the impact of gender and heteronormativity on sexual satisfaction. Third, the study sample had a wide age range of 18 to 45 years, and our sample size did not allow us to separately analyze the different experiences of women from older and younger cohorts. In the past two decades, we have witnessed rapidly increasing acceptance of sexual diversity and women's sexual behavior (Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012; Tolman & McClelland, 2011), a shift which may produce significant cohort effects. Our small sample size also prevented us from accounting for developmental differences. For instance, it is possible that the perspectives of the four participants whose experiences were coded under Element C (partner gratification), all of whom were between 18 and 24 years old, may be attributed to their relative youth and/or limited life and relationship experience. Future studies with larger and/or more diverse samples may be better able to investigate the relation of sexual satisfaction and sexual experiences to other contextual factors.

Our goal was to explore behaviorally bisexual women's best sexual experiences using McClelland's (2014) holistic four-factor framework as a starting point. In doing so, we wanted to test its applicability to sexual minority women who were diverse in sexual orientation, behavior, and relationship type. We found support for each of McClelland's four factors upon minor modification of the initial framework. Echoing other studies, relational and emotional dynamics, including emotional security, quality of interpersonal interaction during and after a sexual encounter (Fahs, 2014; McClelland, 2014; Philippsohn & Hartmann, 2009), mutuality (Braun et al., 2003; Pascoal et al., 2014), intimacy (Umberson et al., 2015), partner skill, novelty (Fahs, 2014), and communication (Byers, 2005; Galinsky, 2009) were key to participants' pleasure and enjoyment, yet these were not contingent upon romantic attachment (monogamous or otherwise) (Opperman et al., 2013; Schwartz & Young, 2009). We see these findings as contributing to the literature regarding the complexity of women's sexuality, one which contests simplistic medicalized, heterosexist, and/or gendered models that equate satisfaction with penile–vaginal intercourse and orgasm or reduce women's sexuality to a responsive or romantic mode. Instead, our findings support a multidimensional model of women's sexual satisfaction that accounts for emotional, relational, and embodied experiences and the diverse relationships and behaviors these might involve.

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