

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Making Sense of Erotically Oppressive Lifeworlds: Dynamics of Testimonial Smothering and Testimonial Quieting

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Correspondence: Paul Giladi (paul.giladi@gmail.com)**Received:** 25 October 2023 | **Revised:** 13 October 2024 | **Accepted:** 19 October 2024**Keywords:** epistemic oppression | heteropatriarchy | sexual arousal | testimonial quieting | testimonial smothering

In this paper, I focus on applying Kristie Dotson's (2011) critical social epistemological framework to the topic of women's sexual arousal. My paper is divided into three parts. In Section 1, I provide a brief history of the DSM sexological discourse about sexual arousal, and conclude by proposing that there is a mutually sustaining relationship between mainstream media, androcentric pornography, and the DSM-IV vocabulary, insofar as each of these feeds myths about arousal to each other. The mutually sustaining relationship between mainstream media, androcentric pornography, and the DSM-IV vocabulary (re)produces longstanding oppressive social norms and concomitant cultures of erotic expectation in western heteropatriarchal contexts. In Section 2, I contend that the epistemic harms of these erotically oppressive lifeworlds involve testimonial smothering as well as testimonial quieting. In Section 5, I conclude the paper with two critical responses to Richard Balon and Anita Clayton's objection to DSM-5's radical changes to conceptualizing issues with women's sexual arousal.

1 | §1

1.1 | A Brief History of DSM Sexological Discourse

The clinical concept of “psychosexual dysfunction” was first introduced in the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM-III). The DSM-III's inclusion of this pathological category stems from the gradual normalization of the physiological studies conducted by William H. Masters and

Virginia E. Johnson,¹ which resulted in “the solidification and implantation of an entire sexual mosaic” (Foucault 1978, 53). The physiology-centred scientific naturalism of Masters and Johnson about sexual activity, as Marta Meana writes, is typified by the “quest to operationalise and measure the sexual response” (Meana 2010, 104). Sexual response in human beings, according to Masters and Johnson, involves a linear, cyclical psychophysiological relation between the respective phases of “excitement,” “plateau,” “orgasm,” and “resolution” (Masters and Johnson 1966, 4). Incorporating the Masters and Johnson framework's approach to “normal” quad-stage human sexual response cycles,² DSM-III construed psychosexual dysfunction as constituting “inhibitions in sexual desire or the psychophysiological changes that characterise the sexual response cycle” (DSM-III 1980, 279).

Talk of “inhibition,” with its overtones of frigidity and Puritanical self-abnegation, was replaced as part of the significant revisions to DSM-III in the run-up to the publication of DSM-IV in 1994. Under DSM-IV, psychosexual dysfunctions were reclassified in terms of a person suffering from “disturbance in sexual desire and in the psychophysiological changes that characterise the sexual response cycle” (DSM-IV 1994, 493). However, as Cynthia Graham observes, “[i]n contrast to earlier versions of DSM (e.g., DSM-III), there was no mention of lack of subjective arousal or pleasure or of any non-genital changes associated with sexual arousal [in DSM-IV]” (Graham 2016, 36). This is evidenced by the marked difference between the below two passages—the first is from DSM-III, which also brought in the clinical categories of hypoactive sexual desire disorder

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(HSDD) and female sexual arousal disorder (FSAD); the second is from DSM-IV:

Diagnostic criteria for 302.72 FSAD.

A. Either (1) or (2):

1. persistent or recurrent partial or complete failure to attain or maintain the lubrication-swelling response of sexual excitement until completion of the sexual activity
2. persistent or recurrent lack of a *subjective sense of sexual excitement and pleasure* in a female during sexual activity ... [My emphasis]. (DSM-III 1980, 294)

Diagnostic criteria for 302.72 FSAD.

A. Persistent or recurrent inability to attain, or to maintain until completion of the sexual activity, an adequate lubrication-swelling response of sexual excitement ... (DSM-IV 1994, 502)

A key difference, then, between DSM-III and DSM-IV is that the latter may be said to have abandoned any residual, to use a turn-of-phrase from Wilfrid Sellars, “manifest image” talk of sexual arousal³ in favor of a “scientific image” discourse that only treats vaginal and clitoral lubrication—*wetness*—as constitutive and descriptively exhaustive of women’s sexual arousal. The extent of this apparent scientific move is that one is worryingly encouraged to think that genital response is exhaustive of sexual arousal. I will return to elaborate this point using two key resources from critical social epistemology in Section 3 and Section 5.

In response to the conceptual narrowing of women’s sexual arousal by DSM-IV, which preserved the DSM-III clinical categories of HSDD and FSAD, sexologists increasingly recognized that the definitively established nonconcordance (cf. “desynchrony” (Rellini et al. 2005, 116)) between testimonial reports of arousal and genital response in women⁴ means that there is “greater erotic plasticity in women than in men” (Baumeister 2000; Meana 2010, 111).

Indeed, such is the importance of nonconcordance that concerted effort was invested into making substantive changes to DSM-IV by Graham and her team as part of the research needed for DSM-5:

the previous references in the DSM-IV definition to “psychophysiological changes” and the “sexual response cycle” no longer feature in the DSM-5 definition; the reference to pleasure reflects our subworkgroup’s goal of putting greater emphasis on the subjective experiences of sexual desire/arousal and orgasm.

(Graham 2016, 40)

What Graham writes here appears to be justified by the content of the DSM-5 definition itself, which replaces HSDD and FSAD by re-framing matters *qua* women in terms of female sexual interest/arousal disorder (FSIAD):

A. Lack of, or significantly reduced, sexual interest/arousal, as manifested by at least three of the following:

1. Absent/reduced interest in sexual activity.
2. Absent/reduced sexual/erotic thoughts or fantasies.
3. No/reduced initiation of sexual activity, and typically unresponsive to a partner’s attempts to initiate.
4. Absent/reduced sexual excitement/pleasure during sexual activity in almost all or all (approximately 75%–100%) sexual encounters (in identified situational contexts or, if generalized, in all contexts).
5. Absent/reduced sexual interest/arousal in response to any internal or external sexual/erotic cues (e.g., written, verbal, visual).
6. Absent/reduced genital or nongenital sensations during sexual activity in almost all or all (approximately 75%–100%) sexual encounters (in identified situational contexts or, if generalized, in all contexts). (DSM-5 2013, 433)

Crucially, there is reason to deem the DSM-5 discourse as displaying much greater sensitivity to the phenomenological complexities of women’s experiences of arousal in the wake of nonconcordance. However, despite the positive effects of (i) important sexological research that is critical of Masters and Johnson,⁵ and (ii) the DSM-5’s re-conceptualization of women’s sexual arousal,⁶ there are legitimate grounds to be concerned at the epistemic level.⁷

Unlike the newer, more capacious, and more phenomenologically inclusive vocabulary of DSM-5 discourse and nonconcordance, the vocabulary of DSM-IV and concordance appear to enjoy a hegemonic position in mainstream society.⁸ This observation appears to find support in the work of Emily Nagoski: “As far as most porn, romance novels, and even sex education texts are concerned, genital response and sexual arousal are one and the same ... Nonconcordance isn’t news—or it shouldn’t be. Sex researchers have had an increasingly clear idea that nonconcordance is a thing for a decade or two now. It’s been in the news, it’s been described in mainstream sex books ... and yet my students and blog readers are routinely surprised to learn about it, and both porn and mainstream culture continue to perpetuate the myth that genital response = sexual arousal” (Nagoski 2015, 192, 202). Not only that, the problematic naturalism of DSM-IV vocabulary and concordance appear imbricated with longstanding oppressive social norms and concomitant cultures of erotic expectation in western heteropatriarchal contexts. The situation now appears to be one in which a mutually sustaining relationship may be said to exist between mainstream media, androcentric pornography, and the DSM-IV vocabulary, insofar as each of these feeds myths about arousal to each other. The mutually sustaining relationship between mainstream media, androcentric pornography, and the DSM-IV vocabulary, I contend, (re)produces environments vitiated by at least two epistemic harms. As I shall go on to argue, the epistemic harms are types of testimonial smothering (Section 3) and testimonial quieting (Section 4).

2.1 | Erotically Oppressive Lifeworlds

Socialized agents, in general, often experience a range of intersubjective pressures and expectations exerted on them. Specifically, there is often deeply felt need to be seen (and to self-conceive) as “normal”; to be recognized as someone who “fits in”; to not be viewed as “weird.” In late modernity, this need and other closely related intersubjective pressures on and expectations of socialized agents in general are pathologically intensified by the ubiquitous activities of culture industries and social media sites. This is because such industries and social media sites are environments that deliberately reproduce cultures of constant hyper-observation and unrelenting judgment of others and oneself.

Significantly, however, the kinds of intersubjective pressures and expectations exerted on socialized agents in general are not equally distributed with respect to (a) the specific type of intersubjective pressure and expectation that is exerted, and (b) the phenomenological intensity of the exerted intersubjective pressures and expectations. To make already uphill struggles pertaining to intersubjective pressures and expectations more symbolically and materially difficult, socialized agents *belonging to one or more minoritised groups*⁹ are also confronted by, to use an expression from Jürgen Habermas (1987), lifeworlds that are constitutively oppressive.¹⁰

Lifeworlds that are oppressive for such groups are often built on stereotypes that are normalized in various culture industries. One such stereotype may be the enthusiastically self-describing “wet” woman ubiquitously depicted in androcentric pornographic film and video clips.¹¹ This stereotype can be thought of as erotically oppressive, since it appears designed to govern all women¹² with respect to the following.

- i. how their own sexual arousal is rendered intelligible both to themselves and to their partner(s) (regardless of their own sexual orientation and the sexual orientation of their partner(s))
- ii. how their bodies and speech are deemed “normal” and not “dysfunctional”
- iii. how sexual encounters are practised and appraised with respect to intersubjectively constituted and institutionally-mediated normative expectations (regardless of sexual orientation).¹³

In what immediately follows, my argument turns to developing an account of why Kristie Dotson's concept of “testimonial smothering” takes intellectual precedence over critical social epistemological insights from Miranda Fricker for making sense of the following radical communication dysfunction: under constant ideologically recycled pressures to “be and feel normal,” some women feel incentivized, perhaps even compelled, to modify their own hermeneutic grips on their own sexual arousal into a language that renders their sexual arousal more intelligible to heterosexual men at the cost of being fully expressive of their own sexual agency and their non-androcentrically-steered erotic subjectivity.

3.1 | Radical Communication Dysfunction: From MacKinnon (Through Fricker) to Dotson—Testimonial Smothering

According to Miranda Fricker, the epistemic pathology endemic in androcentric pornography's “dehumanising sexual ideology is such that the man never really hears the women at all—her utterance simply fails to register with his testimonial sensibility. This is one construal of the silencing that concerns [Catharine] MacKinnon: an extreme kind of testimonial injustice, characterised by a radical communication dysfunction (Fricker 2007, 140).” For MacKinnon and Fricker, pornography silences women because it serves to objectify women at every level. Because of objectification, women's speech acts cannot register as *speech*, because the objectification indispensable to the operations of pornography is dehumanizing. As Fricker phrases it, women are not seen in epistemic (and moral) color here (viz. Fricker 2007, 71). If they are not seen in epistemic (and moral) color, due to their objectified status, then they are ideologically deemed as non-communicative. Because women here are seen as devoid of epistemic (and moral) color, their lack of visibility in this sense means that their speech acts cannot register at the relevant doxastic level that saliently bears on an audience's testimonial sensibility and communicative interest (cf. McGlynn 2019, 408).

I agree with Fricker that the silencing activities of androcentric pornography involve a radical communication dysfunction. However, the kind of radical communication dysfunction I have in mind is different to the radical communication dysfunction identified by Fricker that focuses on pornography as providing a specifically gendered and patriarchal form of degradation and humiliation. The radical communication dysfunction that is of strategic interest to my argument is emblematic of not only androcentric pornography's erotic oppression of women's sexuality but also of *mainstream sexual culture in western heteropatriarchal contexts*. My view is that the stereotype of the enthusiastically self-describing “wet” woman not only engenders forms of ignorance about nonconcordance between subjective report and physiological markers. The stereotype *qua* the toolkit of an erotically oppressive lifeworld also functions to exert disciplinary power on women's *own* hermeneutic capacities to *freely* make sense of, disclose, and share their *own* embodied sensibilities. The stereotype of the enthusiastically self-describing “wet” woman, therefore, erects a barrier that prevents women from being able to express and communicate their phenomenologically-informed experiences of arousal and sexuality independently of androcentric-steering mechanisms. This is where Dotson's concept of “testimonial smothering” come into my argument for revealing the type of radical communication dysfunction I have in mind.

According to Dotson, testimonial smothering involves “the truncating of one's own testimony in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence. Testimonial smothering exists in testimonial exchanges that are charged with complex social and epistemic concerns [, which involve contexts in which] ... (1) the content of the testimony must be unsafe and risky; (2)

the audience must demonstrate testimonial incompetence with respect to the content of the testimony to the speaker; and (3) testimonial incompetence must follow from, or appear to follow from, pernicious ignorance ... But this silencing should be seen as a type of coerced silencing. Many forms of coerced silencing require some sort of capitulation or self-silencing on the part of the speaker. Testimonial smothering is merely a type of coerced silencing” (Dotson 2011, 244).

Central to the practice of testimonial smothering is not so much the type of “natural” (or “ordinary”) epistemic vulnerability that is part and parcel of a speaker *sans phrase* placing their beliefs in a public space of reasons. It is rather how the gaze of a potentially or actually hostile audience *adversely affects comparatively more vulnerable speakers’ own internal communicative dynamics*, to the extent that the power relations operating in the social structure(s) in question coercively impel such speakers to produce speech acts and verbal reports that involve *self-silencing*.¹⁴ As Dotson makes it clear, self-silencing *qua* testimonial smothering stems from a speaker’s recognizing that their own testimonial reports—if left in their non-truncated form—are *unsafe*: the content of the non-truncated testimony is such that a potentially or actually hostile audience can easily fail to find accurately intelligible due to motivated (or non-motivated) ignorance on the audience’s part. The lack of safety “runs the risk of leading to the formation of false beliefs that can cause social, political, and/or material harm to speakers” (Ibid.).

Minoritised folk readily recognize that in many contexts their non-truncated testimony is unsafe, insofar as what they are communicating to a culturally hegemonic audience risks exposing the speaker(s), or even exposing all members of that minoritised group, to a plurality of hostile reactive attitudes. As a result, these speakers edit their own speech acts and verbal reports to make their testimony, and thereby themselves and even their social group, safe(r) from symbolic and material dangers such as humiliation and physical violence. In self-silencing via truncating to ensure safety, such speakers distort the communicative content of their *own* speech acts and verbal reports, to make the communicative content uptake-able (viz. Hornsby and Langton 1998, 25) to the testimonially incompetent audience in question.

For example, in the case of Black women reporting sexual violence by Black men¹⁵—or Black men reporting sexual violence by Black women¹⁶—out of fear that reporting sexual violence to testimonially incompetent audiences risks reproducing either the racist-misandrist myth that Black men are hyperviolent, or the racist-misogynist myth that Black women are aggressive matriarchs,¹⁷ those who experience sexual abuse do not truly communicate the *full* content and range of their experiences. Instead, speakers’ negative “assessment of an audience’s ability to find potential testimony accurately intelligible” (Dotson 2011, 245) compels speakers to crimp their testimony to make sure that the racial inequities are not reproduced and polarize interracial group dynamics even further.¹⁸

I think there is reason to contend that the domain of intimate sexual encounters is one where practices of testimonial smothering frequently occur. For that matter, one has good

grounds to think that such a domain may be a *locus classicus* for this pathological epistemic practice.¹⁹ To see why, it would be useful to reflect on the following quotations from two interviewees featuring in Episode 3 of Netflix’s *The Principles of Pleasure*:

There was a lot of self-editing [when I was talking about my arousal], if that makes any sense. (Anonymous)

... your partner notices that your genitals are responding and says something like “Oh, you really like that, huh?,” and you go, “Mm-hm [awkwardly].” Your genitals are responding and you’re not experiencing pleasure. You don’t want to hurt your partner’s feelings and so you let them believe that what your genitals are doing is an honest indicator of how you really feel.

(Nagoski)

The remarks by the interviewees may be thought of as standing in an important relationship with, what Erin Cooper et al. have called, “The Faking Orgasm Scale for Women (FOS)—Sexual Intercourse Subscale,” which provides four reasons for why women commonly fake orgasm:

1. Altruistic Deceit [faking orgasm out of concern for a partner’s feelings]
2. Insecure Avoidance, faking orgasm to avoid feelings of insecurity
3. Elevated Arousal²⁰
4. Fear of Dysfunction, faking orgasm to cope with concerns of being abnormal. (Cooper, Fenigstein, and Fauber 2014, 423. Cf. Muehlenhard and Shippee (2010))

The remarks by the interviewees stand in an important relationship with FOS, not least because the stereotype of the enthusiastically self-describing “wet” woman reproduced and endemic in mainstream sexual culture in western heteropatriarchal contexts is connected to the stereotype of the enthusiastically self-describing “orgasmic” woman also reproduced and endemic in mainstream sexual culture in western heteropatriarchal contexts.

Rather than construe (a) “self-editing” and (b) “Mm-hm [awkwardly]” as more illustrative of someone simply trying to boost their partner’s ego and confidence as a lover, (a) and (b) *in relation to* (2) and (4) may in fact point to something more pernicious: testimonial smothering. If left in their non-truncated form, what the women are testimonially reporting appears unsafe, as the audience in question will find the non-truncated testimony not accurately intelligible due to motivated (or non-motivated) ignorance on their part. The testimonial smothering of women’s sexual arousal and/or sexual pleasure, as such, means that one never really hears the *free* voice of women at all here. This is because of the pressure on women speakers that emanates from the stereotype of the enthusiastically self-describing “wet” woman reproduced and endemic in mainstream sexual culture in western heteropatriarchal contexts.²¹

4.1 | The Case of Testimonial Quieting

This stereotype exerts disciplinary power by encouraging women to internalize its normative content and accompanying sexual scripts in such a way that the internalizing process, as a form of *unlearning*, mutates their own speech acts about and their own habits of successfully and freely communicating their sexual arousal and/or sexual pleasure. Not only is the web of erotic meanings defined from a reductive physiological perspective, but erotic agents regard their own sense-making practices in that very way.²² This, in turn, makes their truncated reports *principally* acceptable and intelligible to hegemonically-positioned audiences exhibiting testimonial incompetence about women's sexual arousal.²³ Because of this, I find the testimonial smothering framework more relevant than the testimonial injustice *qua* credibility deficit attribution framework when it comes to explaining the power relations responsible for women not being able to *freely* express their sexual feelings/desires/wishes.

In contexts of testimonial smothering, a more complicated situation unfolds, one which is articulated by one of the anonymous interviewees in *The Principles of Pleasure*:

if you allow the conventions of a society to step into your relationship or even your own psyche, you do yourself a disservice.

(*The Principles of Pleasure* Episode 3)

Under constant ideologically recycled pressures to “be and feel normal,” the interviewee at some point felt incentivized, perhaps even compelled, to modify their own hermeneutic grips on their own sexual arousal into a language that renders their sexual arousal more intelligible to heterosexual men²⁴ at the cost of being fully expressive of the interviewee's own sexual agency and their non-androcentrally-steered erotic subjectivity. As Cooper et al. note about the related practice of women faking orgasm *qua* safeguarding against heightened sense of vulnerability,

women's choice to fake orgasm may be an attempt to avoid being viewed as physiologically and/or psychologically abnormal (Cooper, Fenigstein, and Fauber 2014, 425) ... Fear and insecurity were also a primarily self-focused construct representing faking orgasm to avoid negative emotions and/or self-evaluation

(Ibid.: 428).

Women risk capitulation into silence, not because the exercise of ideological discursive formations deprives them of having a voice as such, but because their voices risk being self-truncated by the ideological pressures of having to conform to the univocality of the aroused (and orgasmic) woman in mainstream western heteropatriarchal sexual culture contexts. Women risk capitulation into silence, not because they can no longer speak, but because their voices internalize erotic invalidations that exclude, negate, and nullify their free thoughts and feelings about their own sexual arousal. However, I think there is another critical social epistemological dynamic in play.

I previously claimed that I find the testimonial smothering framework more relevant than Fricker's testimonial injustice *qua* credibility deficit attribution framework when it comes to explaining the power relations responsible for women not being able to *freely* express their sexual feelings/desires/wishes. But, in those cases where women's subjective reports of arousal are *dismissed* due to a mismatch with the supposed physiological markers,²⁵ the testimonial smothering framework is *not* what may be used to critically make sense of dismissal:

“Okay, so Henry and I were messing around and I said, ‘I'm ready, I want you,’ and he said, ‘No, you're not wet, you're just humouring me.’ And I said, ‘No, I'm totally ready!’ And he didn't believe me because I wasn't wet. So ... should I see a doctor? Is it hormonal? What's wrong?”

(Nagoski 2015, 191—emphasis added)

In this intimate situation, the interviewee's testimony about her arousal is non-truncated and free. In saying, “I'm ready, I want you”—and then more insistently “No, I'm totally ready!”—the interviewee makes it clear that she is sexually aroused and expresses desire for sexual gratification with her partner, Henry. But, rather than accord the interviewee the default level of epistemic respect and doxastic appreciation provided by, for example, Tyler Burge's Acceptance Principle Burge (*viz.* Burge 1993), Henry evaluatively perceives the interviewee as devoid of good faith and legitimate credibility as an authority of their own embodied state and disposition. Henry, as such, “quiets” the interviewee's testimony, insofar as he “fails to accurately identify the [interviewee] as a knower, thereby failing to communicatively reciprocate in a linguistic exchange due to pernicious ignorance ...” (Dotson 2011, 243).

Furthermore, the second part of Henry's initial response—“you're just humouring me”—suggests that he deems the interviewee's speech act as infelicitous because it is not *sincere*. In this way, the interviewee may be said to have been deemed as someone who violates norms of assertion through the “abusive” qualities in their speech act (*viz.* Austin 1975). Henry then insisting that because their partner was not wet their partner cannot justifiably claim to be sexually aroused strips their partner of their long-cultivated sense of having legitimate credibility as an authority of their own embodied state and disposition. Testimonial quieting, then, deprives the interviewee of their rightful place as someone moving autonomously in the space of reasons, to use a Sellarsian *tourneure de phrase*. Their considered, reflective sense of their own arousal is precisely a *reason* to think that when the interviewee says “I'm ready, I want you,” they are *sincerely* and *accurately* describing their heightened erotic state. The failure to properly recognize the interviewee serves to deprive the interviewee of a progressive and caring environment in which the epistemic recognition accorded to them plays a significant role in

helping maintain healthy agency.²⁶ The asymmetrical nature of the environment is such that the interviewee not only risks thinking and feeling that the space of reasons is not welcoming to them, but also that they are at fault somehow, that they are even “abnormal.”

There is something particularly *cruel* about such recognition failures. The epistemic-moral injury that comes part and parcel of either being misrecognized or nonrecognized not only can agonize speakers, but have the agony work in such a way that it prevents speakers from reconstituting themselves. By way of illustrating this Rotan point (viz. Rory 1989, 177–78), I would like to briefly touch on gaslighting.²⁷ According to Kelly Oliver, gaslighting is a type of “colonisation of psychic space.” As she writes,

[G]aslighting works as a form of domination through colonising the psyche. In order for gaslighting to be successful, the target(s) must internalise the worldview, norms, and values of the perpetrator(s). This internalisation is not benign. The internalisation of norms that undermine one's self-interpretation as a reliable agent is essential to the operation of gaslighting—in this case, sexist norms enforced by misogynistic practices. Gaslighting turns its targets into unreliable narrators of their own experiences. Its tactics are decidedly psychological with distressing material affect ... Gaslighting puts the victim in an affective double bind: damned if they do stand up to their abuser and damned if they do not stand up to their abuser. It is this affective double bind, the affective injustice inherent in gaslighting, that makes its unconscious and unintentional perpetuation so pernicious and harmful to its targets, whose very souls are penetrated.

(Oliver 2022, 119–20, 127)

Successful gaslighting as the colonization of psychic space tears victims' minds to pieces and puts them together again in new shapes through losing (i) the concept of the world as an environment facilitating and encouraging trust and (ii) the concept of oneself as a sane, reliable epistemic authority. To repeat that chilling line in 1984 when O'Brien speaks to Winston Smith before Winston is sent to Room 101: “Whatever the Party holds to be the truth, *is* truth.” Getting Winston and anyone like him to see reality through the eyes of the Party and love Big Brother is accomplished by breaking Winston and anyone like him “in a very particular way, namely in such a way that their minds can subsequently be enslaved” (Conant 2000, 290). This is how the colonization of psychic space functions to not simply cause the subject epistemic-moral injury, but to have the agony of that injury prevent the subject from reconstituting themselves.

At the end of Section 1, I claimed that a mutually sustaining relationship between mainstream media, androcentric pornography, and the DSM-IV vocabulary may be said to exist,

insofar as each of these feeds myths about arousal to each other. The stereotype I have discussed shows how physiological descriptors are socially operationalized in unjust ways. Because sexological scientific naturalism equates physiological responses with sexual arousal, the vocabulary of scientific naturalism thereby comes across as either hostile to or not especially invested in the reliably authoritative subjective reports of women:

Now the focus on what is testable and verifiable has taken root in the study of sex and gender, there is less acceptance of personal opinion as the only source of evidence. This, by the way, is a good thing (Magnanti 2013, 12) ... The difference between what women report is turning them on and what is actually getting their bodies to respond, is significant. We may think we know what turns people on, but the data are giving researchers a very different picture

(Ibid., 19).

[lubricating vulvas and tumescent penises are] unambiguous agents of sincerity. (de Botton 2012, 17)

The scientific naturalist approach to women's sexual arousal dangerously flirts with viewing women's own subjective reports of their sexual arousal as dishonest indicators Angel (2021): what is exhaustive and serves as the honest indicator of their sexual arousal is simply their genital response. In short, the physiological descriptors are the genuine evidence for sexual arousal in women; what women say in their subjective reports about trust as erotically affecting, etc. are either illusions or even straightforward lies about their sexual arousal. This view engenders a punitive epistemic culture of structural credibility deficit attribution, so much so that there is a real risk that the spirit of “Whatever the Party holds to be the truth, *is* truth” is present under the unjust socially operationalization of physiological descriptors: the epistemic power relation here is one which sees women's authority of communicating and making sense of their own embodied state and disposition eroded by heteronomy. When the interviewee asks “what's wrong (with me)?,” the answer is in fact *nothing* to do with any putative psychophysiological “failings” on her part. What's wrong is western heteropatriarchal contexts and their moral-epistemic cruelties. In the final thematic section of the paper, I wish to address a criticism of DSM-5's introduction of FSIAD, a criticism that may be construed as bearing on the overall philosophical suaveness of what I have been arguing throughout.²⁸

5 | §3

5.1 | Reflecting on Balon & Clayton's Objection to DSM-5

In response to the DSM-5's introduction of FSIAD and concomitant attempt to go beyond reductive psychophysiology,²⁹ Richard Balon and Anita Clayton have argued that *DSM-5's*

conceptualisation of women's sexual arousal is epistemologically and even morally problematic:

[t]he concept of female sexual arousal ... in DSM-5 is unclear. The diagnostic criteria of FSIAD do not even mention functional change or lack of lubrication ... The failure to include lubrication in the criteria may also have an impact on treatment selection. Clinicians may be less inclined to recommend the use of lubricants for women diagnosed with FSIAD. While physiological changes measured with currently available tools may not always correlate with patient report (such divergence suggests the measures are inadequate), why are we replacing them only with psychological measures that may also be unreliable and vary between clinicians? ... The establishment of the FSIAD diagnosis has a potential to inflict harm (e.g., by excluding women from a DSM-5 diagnosis who currently meet the DSM-IV criteria for HSDD or FSAD). It seems to us that the creation of FSIAD was based on ideology and personal beliefs, rather than on published scientific and clinical evidence. This is a sad state of affairs as the DSM diagnostic system is supposed to be agnostic and atheoretical.

(Balon and Clayton 2014, 1228–29)

However, in response, I think Balon and Clayton's argument here appears to exhibit two discursive occlusions. The first is that they labour under the misapprehension that diagnostic systems ought to be "agnostic and atheoretical," which displays a concerning lack of awareness of well-established and voluminously discussed post-Kuhnian history and philosophy of science that has put to bed pre-Kuhnian value-neutral views of science.³⁰ The second is that in claiming that DSM-5's introduction of FSIAD has the potential to inflict harm, because it does not include women who experience HSDD and FSAD, Balon and Clayton not only appear to ignore A6 of the FSIAD "cluster" definition, but they also skate a little too closely to reproducing the epistemic harms of the previous iterations of the DSM. While Balon and Clayton at least recognize that divergence between physiological changes and subjective reports suggests that physiological measures are "inadequate," they can afford to make the more penetrative critique that thinking *purely* in terms of psychophysiological markers has the potential to inflict harm for many women. One such penetrative critique can be articulated in the following way.

Emily Nagoski rightly claims in response to the scientific naturalist discourse that "[i]f we persist in the false belief that women's genital response reflects what they "really" want or like, then we have to conclude that if their genitals respond during sexual assault, it means they "really" wanted or liked the assault" (Nagoski 2015, 209). The very idea of gaslighting a woman who has experienced sexual violence by telling her that her vaginal lubrication is proof that the sexual encounter was in fact *consensual* and *enjoyable* is so cruel and injurious that any framework which risks enabling such discourse must be rejected. As such, rather than contribute to women's liberation

via sexual liberation, the scientific naturalist approach erects a barrier to such emancipation. Instead of ensuring, to riff on the famous expression from Michel Foucault's "The Will to Power" (1976), that tomorrow sex will be good again, the scientific naturalization of the erotic makes sex worse through acts of injury to erotic dignity through regularly using "descriptions of our physiology to stand in for descriptions of our states of mind" (Nagoski 2015, 210).³¹

To conclude, I think it is worth reflecting on this line by an anonymous interviewee In Episode 1 of *The Principles of Pleasure*: "I wish [that] there were more realistic and thoughtful and complicated conversations around women's sexuality and how it develops and how it changes and evolves." If one starts to think in terms of how erotically oppressive lifeworlds constitutive of the mainstream sexual culture in western heteropatriarchal contexts involves testimonial smothering and testimonial quieting, such conversations are increasingly more likely to occur.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ Following Masters and Johnson (viz. Masters and Johnson 1966: 273–289), sexual arousal in women is physiologically characterized by genital vasocongestion (swelling caused by increased blood flow and localized increases in blood pressure); clitoral and labial tumescence (engorgement); increased heart rate; increased respiration; clitoral and nipple erection caused by increased myotonic tension (involuntary contraction of muscle groups); and increased vaginal and clitoral lubrication (wetness).

² The human sexual response cycle was deemed at the time substantively identical for men and women with differences between the two only in terms of intensity and duration.

³ Morokoff and Heiman (1980), Verhulst and Heiman (1988), Rosen and Beck (1988), Laan et al. (1995a), and Laan et al. (1995b), Brotto, Heiman, and Tolman (2009), Laan and Janssen (2007), Chivers et al. (2010), and Chivers and Brotto (2017), to varying extents, are all critical of sexological discourse that does not regard testimonial reports of arousal as part of the necessary conceptual architecture.

⁴ The landmark discovery is credited to Laan et al. (1995b). See Laan and Janssen (2007) as well.

Viz. a friend of Emily Nagoski's telling her about her first experiences with power play in a sexual relationship: "I let him tie my wrists above my head while I was standing up, and he positioned me so that I was straddling this bar that pressed against my vulva, you know, like a broomstick. And then he went away! He just left, and it was totally boring, and when he came back I was like, 'I'm not into this.' He looked at the bar and he looked at me and he said, 'Then why are you wet?' And I was so confused because I definitely wasn't into it, but my body was definitely responding" (Nagoski 2015, 192).

⁵ See, for example, Kaplan (1974), Tiefer (1991), and Basson (2000, 2002, 2006).

⁶ See Brotto et al. (2015).

⁷ An additional epistemic concern, which is the subject of another paper, revolves around the justifiability and legitimacy of *general* DSM discourse about "dysfunction" and "disorder" across HSDD, FSAD, and FSIAD. For, as an anonymous reviewer astutely pointed out, it seems reasonable that one can treat subjective experiences as

important components of the architecture of sexual arousal, without also treating their absence as *dysfunction*. Indeed, one could argue that the absence of *subjectively feeling aroused* should not be treated as dysfunction for the same reason that I have critiqued the DSM-III's use of *inhibition*: it is not dysfunctional for a woman to *not* always feel aroused by sexual activity. For a feminist and deconstructionist take on DSM-5 sexological discourse, see Thomas and Gurevich (2021). See Tiefer (2012) for an interesting take on de-medicalisation in sexuality therapies.

⁸ Men's/women's magazines, self-help literature, therapeutic practices, TV shows, movies and other aspects of pop culture, including androcentric pornography, are part of the reductionist approach to sexuality and sexual desire.

⁹ For example, women, non-binary folk, people of color, economically underprivileged folk, disabled folk, trans folk, and queer folk.

¹⁰ "Lifeworlds" may be defined as "background norms coded into institutional structures, so as to (re)produce culture, society, and personality." Viz. Habermas 1975, 8–9; Habermas 1982, 268, 278–79; Habermas 1987, 137, 214, 217, 348–49. As the domain of *symbolic* (rather than *material*) (re)production, lifeworlds are constituted by communicative action, which is action guided by concerns for intersubjective consensus and interpersonal care. To quote Nancy Fraser here, "[s]ymbolic reproduction ... comprises the socialization of the young, the cementing of group solidarity, and the transmission and extension of cultural traditions" (Fraser 1985, 99).

¹¹ I think the following passage from an interview with Erika Lust, an indie erotic filmmaker, in Episode 3 of Netflix's *The Principles of Pleasure* is worth noting about the problem with androcentric pornography: "I didn't like what I was watching. It was all about nailing, banging, smashing, drilling, destroying, punish[ing] fucking women. Men were the centr[al] figures, they were the main characters. It was about their sexual experiences, but we, the women in porn, we were treated somehow as some kind of vehicle to their sexuality. We were there to please them." Additionally, as women in pornography are engaging in a form of sex work, there is also no guarantee—both in terms of the nonconcordance relation and with respect to the labour involved in sex work—that wetness is a definitive and "honest indicator" of the women performers' sexual arousal and their sexual pleasure.

¹² This, of course, does not mean that this stereotype necessarily always succeeds in actually oppressing all women. For, some women are oppressed in different ways that have nothing to do as such with erotically oppressive lifeworlds.

¹³ I think it is important not to lose sight of the way in which that androcentric pornography also involves the ideological reproduction of a stereotype about *men* and erotically appealing masculinity—particularly when it comes to the racialisation and aesthetic commodification of certain men's bodies. On this point, the matter is not so much the kind of speech acts men are expected to make regarding their arousal, but principally, given the established higher concordance between subjective reports and genital responses in men, the heightened normative expectations of their bodies.

¹⁴ To clarify this, as helpfully pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, so as to avoid construing the idea of speaking in self-silencing ways, it is important to note that Dotson is explicit that testimonial smothering need not result in conversational dead-air, but rather with the filling of conversational space with other, less risky speech—viz. "[s]peakers who smother their testimony do fail to produce a kind of locutionary act, though they need not be silent. Public silences are marked by either filling up space with inane chatter or remaining silent" (Dotson 2011, 253 n12).

¹⁵ See Crenshaw (1991) and Dotson (2011).

¹⁶ See Curry (2017, 2021).

¹⁷ See Collins (1999).

¹⁸ See Crenshaw (1991).

¹⁹ Rosa Vince (2018) draws a link between Dotson's account of testimonial smothering and pornography but focuses on a different link to the one I am articulating. Vince focuses on arguing how testimonial smothering is bound up with the silenced refusal of sex in cases of rape and sexual assault. I do not think our respective accounts are rival competitors. There is better reason to suppose they are complementary.

²⁰ As prompted by one of the anonymous reviewers here, Cooper et al.'s notion of elevated arousal refers to women faking orgasm to increase their own arousal—as opposed to either faking orgasm to try to elevate their partner's arousal, or faking orgasm because the women in question themselves are experiencing elevated arousal.

²¹ See Graham (2016).

²² The existence of women who find ways of freely expressing their sexual arousal needs to be explicitly recognized. Women who do not adopt the discourse may not fail to know themselves, but they may fail to be acknowledged and known by others who insist on applying scientific terminology to them. One might reply here and say that women might not care what the mainstream think of them, especially because they do not seek recognition from the mainstream. However, in response, I would contend that not being accorded recognition, regardless of one's own explicit interest in seeking recognition, puts the brakes on relations of solidarity, as well as narrowing the scope of communication. If the prospects of solidarity and wide communication are stymied, then such a situation is deleterious to cultures of care, which would in turn adversely affect our common humanity (viz. Gaita 2000).

²³ In terms of whether these concerns about testimonial smothering equally apply to non-heteronormative relationships, I suspect that they do not—or that if there are cases of testimonial smothering in non-heteronormative relationships, then the power relations responsible for radical communication dysfunction in non-heteronormative relationships are not the same kind of power relations operating in the stereotype I have focused on in this paper.

²⁴ The culturally hegemonic social group whose sexual pleasure is centred in mainstream sexual culture in western heteropatriarchal contexts.

²⁵ This was helpfully pointed out by an anonymous reviewer.

²⁶ As helpfully pointed out by an anonymous reviewer here, it is worth thinking about the relationship between testimonial smothering, testimonial quieting, and Fricker's concept of *pre-emptive testimonial injustice*. While testimonial smothering involves a speaker self-censoring on certain topics when face-to-face with certain audiences, pre-emptive testimonial injustice involves others prejudicially failing to solicit the input of certain people, which seems very similar to the pathological praxis of testimonial quieting. The focus on physiological symptoms of arousal looks liable to give rise to this dynamic too—in some contexts, the issue may be that women do not give voice to their experiences of arousal, but in others it may be that heterosexual men may not bother trying to communicate with them about this.

²⁷ See Abramson (2014), Manne (2017), Oliver (2004), and Stark (2019) for further on gaslighting.

²⁸ I wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pushing me to make this clarificatory transition point.

²⁹ A subtle way of doubling-down on the Masters and Johnson sense-making paradigm is by not developing a more reflective meta-response to the established problems of analyzing women's sexual arousal in laboratory environments (viz. "sexual psychophysiology is conducted in a laboratory environment where sexual arousal is induced using various types of sexual stimuli, a situation that is very different from the usually private experience of an actual sexual encounter ... [W]ith the development of ambulatory psychophysiological

equipment, more naturalistic assessments of women's sexual concordance will be possible") (Chivers et al. 2010, 49–50).

³⁰ See Kuhn (1970).

³¹ Despite my critique of wetness in this paper, I think it is important to draw attention to physiology's role in helping women not have painful, bad, dangerous sex. For, otherwise it can sound as though I am rejecting the importance that physiological elements could have as *part* of what arousal is to women. Other descriptions, like "tightness" and "looseness," perpetuate harmful myths (that women become "looser" when they are more promiscuous, etc.) by underappreciating the physiology of arousal, which is as much a problem as over-emphasizing wetness as the sole indicator of arousal. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

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