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A critical review of sociological research on sexual pleasure

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Abstract

Sociologists of sexuality often invoke the theme of pleasure, but it is not always clear what scholars believe the implications and importance of pleasure are. To this end, this paper reviews the existing literature on sexual pleasure, specifically within the field of sociology, to demonstrate what questions about sexual pleasure are (and are not) currently being asked. Through a systematic literature review, I demonstrate that scholars often lack a justification for why pleasure is important. I also connect themes between the kind of questions being asked about pleasure and the justifications attached to these studies, relating to risk mitigation, relationship satisfaction and well-being, power structures, and moral oversight. Based on this review, I make recommendations for the future of sexual pleasure research with the goal of centering pleasure for pleasure's sake and embracing its liberatory possibilities.

KEYWORDS

erotic, literature review, pleasure, romantic relationships, sexual health, sexual morality, sexuality

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1 | WHY STUDY PLEASURE? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON SEXUAL PLEASURE

Pleasure has many definitions across contexts, but the simplest is “a positive evaluation of sensations, objects, one’s movements, people, and events” (Frijda, 2009, p. 99). This is vague and subjective when applied to sexuality, although it has seen increased attention in recent years. Pleasure activism—that is, work both scholarly and personal that reclaims the value of pleasure in many areas of our lives—is relatively new. Although sex-positive approaches have become more mainstream, not all sex-positivity is necessarily pleasure-centric, as commentators take positive viewpoints on sex to mean many things depending on the context. As pleasure has only recently gained greater attention in cultural considerations of sexuality, scholarship similarly lacks studies of sexual pleasure until more recently. Irvine (2003) noted 2 decades ago that the very stigma that scholars of sexuality study is the same stigma which keeps their work at the margins of sociology, while more recently Jones (2019a) notes the absence of sex from sexuality studies, possibly as a way of legitimizing the work and avoiding that marginalization. Jones also notes that much sexualities research is now about identity and inequality rather than sex as an act and experience (2019a, p. 96). Re-centering sexual pleasure can be a tactic to re-center sex in sexuality research, while still attending to identity and inequality and the roles they play in shaping pleasure and sex.

Like other subfields of sociology, sexuality scholars seem unclear what role pleasure may potentially play in the advancement of knowledge and in human interaction. As feminist theory, particularly regarding sexuality, has become more influential in sociology, those who study sexuality have been more diligent about including pleasure, often in relation to women’s sexual agency. Sexuality researchers take different approaches to the incorporation of pleasure into their studies, the meaning they and their participants assign to it, and the reasons they find it important.

Those who study sex workers, sociobiology, couples, and hookups, among many other areas, may consider sexual pleasure, employing sociological theories in conjunction with feminist and queer approaches. Although studies of sexual pleasure represent a tiny area of sociology, most studies of (consensual) sexual activity give pleasure at least some attention. Fewer studies take pleasure as their central theme, and how scholars define pleasure varies, making it challenging to identify links among existing work and understand its importance. Therefore it is necessary to review current research to explore existing connections and what gaps still exist.

Although pleasure, like other forms of joy, is absent in sociology in many areas (Shuster & Westbrook, 2022), I choose to focus here on sexual pleasure specifically as an early part of the broader conversation around this “joy deficit.” Sexual pleasure serves as an effective entry point because it has long been recognized that pleasure is one possible outcome or purpose of sex, but that depends heavily on who and what is being considered. The concrete nature of sex as a practice, like delicious food or other sensory pursuits, allow us to critically assess the more abstract concept of pleasure, and eventually to engage how more abstract experiences can also bring pleasure. Sexual pleasure is a vital place to focus, due to the role sexual exploitation has so often played in upholding power structures. Centering pleasure rather than power and exploitation is a step in the process of changing the overall narrative around sexuality.

This study reviews sociological studies of sexual pleasure from 2010 to present, to determine how pleasure is currently being studied, what justifications researchers offer, and how these justifications fit into larger bodies of feminist, sociological, and sexuality scholarship. I then examine pleasure activism and suggest future directions for pleasure research. Specifically, I identify three primary aims for studies of sexual pleasure: a cohesive definition of pleasure that can be employed across contexts—a goal I attempt myself, based on existing scholarship; expanded populations of study particularly with regard to sexual orientation, age, and race/ethnicity; and broader consideration of sexual acts. In achieving these goals, we answer the call of pleasure activists and other sexuality scholars to move to a concerted sociology of pleasure (Jones, 2019b). As I demonstrate, sexual pleasure is engaged by all major social institutions, making it a central and crucial part of sociological inquiry and understanding the impact of social structures on the intimacies of individuals’ lives and choices.

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | The evolution of pleasure scholarship

Though this study focuses on modern sexual pleasure studies, pleasure is not a new topic for sociology, particularly scholars influenced by feminist theory. Scholars for decades have noted the absence of pleasure in core sexuality theories (Laws & Schwartz, 1977), along with related concepts such as desire (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006). Others have addressed how pleasure is often used as a tool, for better or for worse, such as serving as the foil to the presence of danger in sexuality (Vance, 1984) or as a conduit for one's own internal power and joy (Lorde, 1978/2007). Feminist emphasis on pleasure can minimize the patriarchal structure in which women act, but an excessive focus on danger can ignore women's sexual agency. Much contemporary sexuality research still employs Vance's framework, seeing most forms of sexual activity for both men and women¹ as inseparable from competing forces of pleasure and danger, while missing the vital perspective Lorde and other Black Feminist scholarship offers.

2.2 | Gender theory and feminist approaches

Gender theory underlies much of sexuality, and pleasure is no exception. Many studies in sexuality research rely on sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1984, 1986), which proposes that social life functions according to 'an operating syntax,' like a mental version of a computer code, which on the institutional, interpersonal, and intrapsychic levels determines how people behave in any given situation. Such scripts are not static, but rather continue to evolve over the life course, meaning the development of sexuality is a process, more than a singular paradigm shift. Gender (and heteronormativity) shapes these sexual scripts, and successfully fulfilling expectations created by these scripts can be understood as "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Failing to meet those gendered expectations can be stigmatizing. Prioritizing one's own pleasure in sexual activity, particularly partnered intercourse, is typically cast as "masculine"; for a woman to prioritize her pleasure, then, would be a poor performance of femininity.

Changing these scripts has long been a goal of the feminist movement, promoted in the form of sexual agency. If agency is the opposite of objectification, then, some argue, sexual agency removes women's objectification within sex, allowing women access to the same sexual freedoms accorded to men, such as promiscuity, use of pornography, and lack of concern about pregnancy (Levy, 2005). Not all feminists agree on this, with scholars arguing that "having sex like a man" is not real equality (MacKinnon, 1989). There seems little doubt, however, that on the whole, even as sexual double standards and gendered gaps in orgasm rates persist, the United States has accepted at least the idea that women can and should be sexual agents (Bay-Cheng, 2019). Accordingly, scholars in many disciplines do increasing amounts of work addressing how women use their agency, particularly to access sexual pleasure, among other aims.

Although Black Feminist Theory has been thinking about pleasure and the erotic extensively over the years, these approaches are still often missing from scholarship that is not specifically focused on Black women. Because Black people's, and in particular Black women's, sexuality across the centuries has been alternately demonized, exploited, and erased as suits the needs of those in power (Nash, 2012), Black Feminist scholarship has attended to the erotic and to pleasure far more substantially, developing a subfield of theory known as Black Erotics. In exploring how the erotic is more than just a sexual concept (Lorde, 1978/2007), as well as how those whose sexuality is the source of much social stigma in various forms embody, claim, and prioritize their own pleasure, both sexual and otherwise (Lane, 2019; Miller-Young, 2014; Nash, 2017), Black Erotics provides a blueprint for centering pleasure as its own area of scholarly inquiry. In choosing to examine sexual pleasure independent of how it is normatively expected to exist—in orgasm, in partnered sex, etc.,—far more liberatory possibilities for creating a fulfilling life emerge, and this is the priority I aim to set forth in this paper.

2.3 | Definitional issues

Part of this dearth of research may be due to definitional issues—what IS sexual pleasure? Is it satisfaction? Orgasm? Satisfaction and pleasure are sometimes used interchangeably; sometimes one is treated as a component part of the other, with other component parts (such as orgasm). Research demonstrates differences both in how people define sexual satisfaction—orgasm, emotional or physical pleasure, a sense of intimacy—and in who they consider when reporting satisfaction, such as their partner (McClelland, 2011, 2014). With definitions varying widely, and often not clearly operationalized when used as a variable within studies, research is not readily comparable across populations or settings. Many definitions used by researchers rely on heteronormative sexual scripts which push a ‘coital imperative’ (Fahs, 2014), where sex is defined by both participants and researchers only as penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse ending when the male partner ejaculates—an ‘orgasmic imperative’ (Frith, 2013; Potts, 2000), and rarely include a woman's orgasm (unless simultaneous with a man's). Just as in these established “imperatives” which only permit one definition, some also now caution against a ‘pleasure imperative’ where individuals may feel something is wrong if their sexuality and intercourse is not pleasurable in a specific and narrowly defined manner (Allen, 2012). Clearer definitions and operationalizations of sex, pleasure, and satisfaction are central to advancing pleasure research.

Across the nearly 50-year span of research briefly summarized here, as well as the sampled texts below, however, no scholar seems to offer one specific definition of the concept of pleasure. Some scholars acknowledge that pleasure is not exclusively composed of orgasm (or that orgasms are always a marker of pleasure) or corporeal sensations more broadly, but may also include socio-emotional factors. Some scholars use sexual satisfaction as their measure, avoiding the difficulty of parsing satisfaction and pleasure. Still other scholars put pleasure in close conjunction with desire, suggesting that perhaps pleasure is the result of fulfilled desire.

Considering all of these concepts, I venture a definition of sexual pleasure which draws on all of them, as well as from Frijda's (2009) basic definition of pleasure more broadly. Sexual pleasure is the result of an overall positive evaluation of a sexual experience, including the physical sensations produced—not limited only to orgasm; the impact of the experience on one's self-assessment or their evaluation of their relationship with the other person/people involved; and whether the goal of that sexual encounter—orgasm, reproduction, earning money, etc.—was achieved.

Humans experience pleasure in a variety of contexts, in which we understand more expansive approaches to pleasure, and we should not limit ourselves when considering sexual pleasure. For example, when partaking in a delicious meal, we can consider not only the sensory engagements of taste, sight, and smell, but also the experience of satiation—achieving the goal of feeling full—or the affective responses we have to a particular food because of the people we share it with or memories associated with it. Taking a similar approach to sexual pleasure provides a more holistic consideration of the human experience and the pursuit of pleasure broadly.

2.4 | Present study

This background points to several goals for sexuality researchers, including clarifying definitions and better articulating the goals of studying pleasure, while focusing on embodied experiences of diverse sexual expressions. This paper reviews and synthesizes existing research and makes recommendations for future research. I argue that researchers must more clearly address feminist and queer theory's urgings of the importance of pleasure to sexuality discourse. The field of sexuality, which is often a space of exploitation and power imbalances, has the ability to make real change in society. Scholars must consider these impacts and use them to shape study design from start to finish. I examine the field of pleasure studies thus far to uncover the places and people that merit further attention.

3 | METHODS AND DATA

This study is a comprehensive literature review of major sociological and relevant subfield journals from 2010 to 2023 as well as a few relevant books; many journals published no articles meeting the selection criteria. I selected this time period as an approximate beginning of the fourth wave of feminism; a point where digital media, especially dating apps, were beginning to intervene significantly in sexuality; and as a 10-year retrospective on the field when the data collection began (updated with the years since the first round of data collection). The collective cultural shift at this time had several implications for pleasure, including drawing more researcher attention to this topic. I focused on empirical articles, but also included review articles, which usefully contextualized where pleasure studies have been and where scholars feel they ought to go next. Using the search terms “sexual satisfaction,” “pleasure,” and “orgasm,” due to the aforementioned definitional issues, I reviewed several top generalist sociology journals as well as leading journals in relevant subfields (Appendix A), as the best sample of where research on pleasure was most likely to be published as well as its penetration into broader sociological theory. I also searched the most popular interdisciplinary sexuality studies journal, *The Journal of Sex Research*,² for pieces that employed a sociological approach to sexuality, indicated by use of sociological theories, methods, and citations, to ensure I included how pleasure is discussed across disciplinary boundaries. I excluded articles which employed only a biological approach.

I identified all texts discussing sexual pleasure as a primary aspect of their paper (i.e. dependent or independent variable, or main topic in a qualitative study). This included any population regardless of race/ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation, excluding entirely non-US samples due to the different sexual norms which may contribute to variation. In total, this yielded a sample of 55 articles and 3 books that were written on this subject in the specified time frame (Appendix B, Table B1).³

3.1 | Analytic strategy

I read and inductively coded each article, noting the methods, population, theoretical approach, and justification or implications for the study. As I reviewed each article, I coded for commonalities in how authors presented their understanding of pleasure and why these scholars felt pleasure was important. I ultimately identified four major themes that spanned the studies, and then reviewed all articles again, to identify all places these themes were present as many studies addressed more than one. In collecting these themes and connecting them to existing gender, sexuality, and feminist theory, I was able to develop a coherent argument for where the state of pleasure research is currently, and where it is important for it to go next.

4 | FINDINGS

Though there is great variety in, as well as lack of, justification and implications for research in the current studies, four key elements emerge from the sample. First, contemporary sexuality studies continue to emphasize risk more than pleasure, and pleasure as a “treatment” for risk. Second, many studies connect pleasure to benefits for relationships, general well-being, and life satisfaction. Third, some scholars situate pleasure within the context of broader power relations. Finally, some scholars discuss the moral and social oversight of sexuality and pleasure. The texts also vary in the populations and methods used (Appendix B, Table B2). Some articles do not mention certain demographics about their populations, with the most common omissions being race/ethnicity and, surprisingly, sexual orientation. Additionally, some articles in the sample are literature reviews or content analyses, and therefore do not have sample characteristics.

4.1 | Pleasure as risk mitigation

Proceeding from Vance's (1984) argument that patriarchal gender structures make danger inherent to sexual activity for women, many studies consider the role that sexual pleasure plays in risk and/or risk mitigation, although Vance is rarely cited in these studies. This theme occurs most commonly in studies regarding adolescents and other groups perceived as "high-risk" in sexual activity, and often integrates with sexuality education and public health frameworks. Rather than pleasure meriting study for its own sake, pleasure in these populations is presented as a tool to mitigate the chances of risky behaviors and exposure to "negative outcomes" of sexual activity such as unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Although only 13 articles/books explicitly engage the pleasure/risk framework as the implication (or primary focus) of the study, nearly every text in the sample mentions risks at least once, whether pregnancy, STIs, or sexual violence.

Risk receives greater attention when considering populations already deemed "at risk," such as adolescents (Canan & Jozkowski, 2017; Pearson, 2018; Salières et al., 2017); gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM) (Hoppe, 2011); or sex workers (Jones, 2016). In this approach, the benefit of pleasure is its ability to protect individuals from both physical and psychological risks, such as individuals undergoing gender transition (Goldbach et al., 2023) and cisgender women as part of fighting sexism, managing fertility, and preventing sexual assault (Haus & Thompson, 2020; Kimport & Littlejohn, 2021; Miller, 2021; Waling, 2023). The intensity of the focus on risk suggests how inseparable it is from any broader understanding of sexuality—because of course, these dangers do exist—and how entrenched an anti-risk message is in sexuality discourse.

When increased focus on pleasure is argued as a risk-prevention strategy, risk and danger are still centered. Marginalized groups in particular are seen as being at greater sexual risk and in turn are even more likely to be framed in the risk-prevention approach than cisgender and heterosexual people, (white) men especially. This is reflective of our overall approach to sexuality data collection which persists in centering the 'charmed circle' (Westbrook et al., 2022) that prioritizes heterosexual marital sex, among other characteristics (Rubin, 1984). While attention to risks (especially those that are inarguably real) is not inherently a bad thing, I return to Vance's argument that such a focus can mask the agency of marginalized groups often categorized as "high risk." Moreover, pleasure assumes an incredible burden in trying to mitigate all these risks, always having to play a role beyond simply pleasure for pleasure's sake, limiting its liberatory possibilities.

4.2 | Relationships and general well-being

The next theme is the connection between pleasure and increased satisfaction with one's relationship, as well as between pleasure and other markers of psychological wellness. Both the presence and absence of pleasure contribute to how people feel about themselves, their partner(s), and perhaps even their life in general.

Many studies of pleasure begin with marriage, again reflective of the available data on sexuality (Westbrook et al., 2022). A primary benefit of marriage, in the traditional view, is access to sexual activity, and sexual satisfaction is broadly related to overall marital satisfaction (Burke, 2016; Montemurro, 2014). Conversely, sexual dissatisfaction can be seen as symptomatic of other marital issues (Leavitt et al., 2017). When looking at committed relationships more broadly, there are similar connections between sexual pleasure and level of commitment (Armstrong et al., 2012; Beckmeyer et al., 2021; Fahs, 2014; Foust et al., 2022; Frederick et al., 2021; Frith, 2013; Leistner & Mark, 2023; Lentz & Zaikman, 2021; Ritter et al., 2018; Rivas-Koehl et al., 2023; Stephenson et al., 2011; Thorpe et al., 2021). Entrenched beliefs frame committed relationships as the only context in which pleasure can be achieved, and (a man's) pleasure as vital to relationship quality. These beliefs can contribute to gender inequity, particular with regard to sexuality, in heterosexual relationships and persistent homophobia for those whose relationships are seen as inherently taboo or even illicit.

Pleasure is also studied beyond participant experiences, yet even when people are not directly studied, conclusions center relationships in cultural norms of healthy sexuality (Cabrera & Menard, 2013; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012). The connection between sexuality and overall well-being is not exclusively limited to partnered sexuality, however; there are also positive benefits to psychological and physical well-being from masturbation and perhaps even non-sexual practices (e.g., Fahs & Swank, 2011; Haus & Thompson, 2020; Hensel et al., 2022; Pilcher, 2023; Thorpe et al., 2023; Waskul & Anklan, 2020). The experience and benefits of pleasure separate from relationship status, especially for women, have also received greater attention in recent years (Bonell et al., 2022; Boydell et al., 2021; Hensel et al., 2023; Missari, 2021; Shen & Liu, 2023; Thorpe et al., 2022; Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2021; Walker & Lutmer, 2023).

There is growing evidence that sexual pleasure can lead to positive effects beyond risk mitigation, including greater relationship satisfaction and overall better well-being. There are strong connections between pleasurable sexual activity in many forms and positive outcomes for life quality. In particular, the impact of pleasure on well-being suggests the importance of empowering individuals, especially women and other marginalized individuals, to discover what they find pleasurable and advocate for it. This approach comes closer to centralizing pleasure in sexuality discourse, but I also contend that sexual pleasure is a worthy goal even if it doesn't have a significant impact on relationships, self-advocacy, or even physical health.

4.3 | Power structures

Addressing broader power structures requires that we question who is allowed pleasure and who is not? The erasure of pleasure is closely intertwined with the reproduction of heteronormativity and erasure of marginalized racial, gendered, classed, and sexual identities (Jones, 2019b). By limiting the spaces in which pleasure is permitted to exist—typically married, heterosexual (White) penetrative penis-in-vagina intercourse (Rubin, 1984)—individuals who have sex in ways outside these boundaries are excluded from sexual discourse. Sexuality is a domain in which individuals feel great pressure to enact social roles, particularly those associated with gender (Bonell et al., 2022; Boydell et al., 2021; Fahs, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2011; Harvey et al., 2023; Haus & Thompson, 2020; Leistner & Mark, 2023; Lentz & Zaikman, 2021; Miller, 2021; Missari, 2021; Pilcher, 2023; Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2021; Waling, 2023; Waskul & Anklan, 2020). This serves to reinforce existing inequalities stemming from such roles, especially the notion that women exist primarily in service to men (Burke, 2016). However, some forms of sexual activity and increased focus on the sexual agency of groups marginalized based on identities other than gender, such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation, can also trouble these power structures (Fahs & Swank, 2013; Jones, 2016, 2020; Parra & Garcia, 2023; Rivas-Koehl et al., 2023; Snapp et al., 2023; Thorpe et al., 2021, 2022, 2023). Orgasms represent a central battleground in pleasure research, with the gendered orgasm gap being referenced similarly to the gender pay gap (Armstrong et al., 2012; Fritz & Paul, 2017).

Racialized sexual roles and persistent heteronormativity in mainstream culture can contribute to power imbalances in sexuality, but pleasure research typically centers power differentials in gender relations, mainly between heterosexual couples. Gender inequality in heterosex is a focus of research whether a particular sexual act or attitude is reinforcing or troubling patriarchal structures. The extensive focus on risk rather than pleasure typically pushes queer couples to the margins even when addressing power structures. Understanding sexuality as an axis of oppression requires expanding considerations of the power inherent in sex not only on the basis of gender but also race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other marginalized identities. In particular, class is often absent from considerations of sexuality at all, and given the connection between sexuality and consumerism discussed in the next section as well as the role of financial vulnerability in sexual exploitation, this is a notable omission.

4.4 | Moral and social oversight

Historically, sexuality was often under the purview of those claiming to be moral authorities such as religious leaders and medical professionals. “Moral panics” around sexuality are often really political and ethical disputes over what sexuality should mean (Bernstein, 2007). While religious and medical powers still exist and exert control over sexuality, as American spending power and consumerism increased post-WWII, a new overseer has become more involved: capitalism (Bailey, 1989). Forces of capitalism monitor and manipulate sexual behaviors because pleasure is closely tied to consumption behaviors; in late stage capitalism and a consumerist society, many goods are purchased out of a hedonistic desire to seek pleasure, rather than exclusively to fill a basic need (Alba & Williams, 2013). These potent forces serve to both determine and respond to social norms around sexuality and pleasure, making them a crucial player in pleasure in the United States.

It is easy to trace the history of social oversight of sexuality through societal shifts, from families, communities, and religious organizations (Burke, 2016; Stahl et al., 2019; Thorpe et al., 2021, 2023), to the law (Jones, 2020; Kimport & Littlejohn, 2021; Minichiello et al., 2013; Waling, 2023), to modern consumerist capitalism (Burke, 2016; Cabrera & Menard, 2013; Hensel et al., 2022; Jones, 2020; Regan, 2021; Waskul & Anklan, 2020). The seeking of pleasure is a motivational force, which contributes to decisions and behaviors, because it is functionally the pursuit of happiness (Biswas-Diener et al., 2015). Despite legal restrictions, plenty of sites have found ways to maximize profit through selling sex, including potentially pleasurable taboo experiences that, under the auspices of capitalism, may become more socially acceptable (at least in private)—as long as they make money.⁴

Capitalism's oversight operates differently from religious or legal authorities. Consumerism encourages pursuit of personal sexual pleasure, through purchasing sexual aids, pornographic materials, and sex workers' services. Legislation has had to change in response to these markets, often moving in a decriminalization direction, while religions are grappling with shifting their teachings or incorporating new messages in the face of these threats. However, market forces dictate the availability of products and sexual experiences; where little or no demand is perceived, there will be no supply. This can indirectly contribute to what is defined as “acceptable” sexuality and by extension acceptable pleasure, as people contend with their inability to access certain forms of sexual experiences and what that may mean for pleasure.

4.5 | A note on pleasure activism

While scholars might still be assessing the role of pleasure in research, activists, sexuality educators, and others doing work in this realm have made their verdict. Pleasure activism is defined as “the work we do to reclaim our whole, satisfiable selves from the impacts of oppression and supremacy” (brown, 2022). Activists contend that pleasure is not only good for us in many ways, but also that, following in Audre Lorde's (1978/2007) footsteps, pleasure can be power and can be used to challenge systems of inequality (brown, 2022). Indeed, Black pleasure or Black Erotics rooted in Black feminist theory provides a great deal of scholarly inquiry on how pleasure can be used to challenge cultural perceptions—controlling images, perhaps (Hill, 1990)—that contribute to the oppression of “abject bodies” (Miller-Young, 2014; Nash, 2017; Scott, 2010). Sexuality has been a space of exploitation of Black bodies from slavery to sex work, and Black Erotics scholars identify strategies which can be used to not only stop this exploitation but also to empower Black individuals, especially women, and value their experiences of sexuality and pleasure. These strategies can expand far beyond this population, however, and be considered by all scholars of pleasure as ways to combat exploitation and prioritize pleasure for the many groups whose sexuality and bodies are considered abject. This framework is already being employed, as in studies of sexuality and disability (Schalk, 2022) and by those advocating for the inclusion of pleasure in sexuality education (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2020; The Education Team, 2018). As scholars who study people, in the areas of gender, sexuality, race, social movements, inequality, power, health, class, and a host of other sociological topics, we do well to listen to the calls

of pleasure activists to embrace and better understand the role that pleasure can play in our lives. In the discussion, I lay out some of the ways that we as scholars can improve our approach to this topic and better study pleasure.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Scholars of sexual pleasure take myriad approaches to their research and provide an array of explanations for the importance of studying pleasure. Many look at how pleasure can reduce risk and improve well-being, while others note pleasure's role in broader power structures, and still others argue that research should care about pleasure because society does. However, compared to other areas of interest in sexuality such as pornography, sexual violence, and sexual health (narrowly defined), there is very little research done on sexual pleasure, and very little cohesion within that research. Throughout this paper, I have suggested places where the current focuses of sexual pleasure research could be improved or adapted; here, I suggest several directions for future research in this area to expand on what currently exists.

First, scholars need to agree on a definition of sexual pleasure. Some research uses sexual pleasure and sexual satisfaction interchangeably—but are they in fact the same? If this review had limited itself only to sexual pleasure, the sample size would have been even smaller. However, similar to McClelland's (2014) argument, I am not convinced the two are the same. For example, couldn't an asexual-identified individual who is not currently sexually active (partnered or alone) consider themselves sexually satisfied, although they are not necessarily experiencing sexual pleasure? Definitional clarification is necessary to progress in this field, as the range of definitions makes it difficult to synthesize studies. Such clarification will come not only from scholars clearly operationalizing pleasure in their articles, but also from studies assessing how the populations being studied conceptualize sexual pleasure (e.g., Thorpe et al., 2022), and ensuring the questions used on surveys or in interviews provide these definitions, to limit variation in participant interpretation. I return to the definition I put forth at the start of this paper, which is that pleasure is the positive evaluation of all components of a sexual experience, including the physical and the socio-emotional/relational. Taking all these elements together will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how sexual pleasure can be created for many people across many experiences, which is central to my next suggestions.

Second, the populations studied merit expansion. Much sexual pleasure research focuses on three groups, due both to researcher choice and the availability of existing data (Westbrook et al., 2022): (1) heterosexual marriages or committed relationships, (2) gay men (or other MSM), and (3) women across the life course, particularly post-menopausal or adolescent. This is limiting in several ways. Little is known about how sexual pleasure may vary for LGBTQ+ individuals, and by extension the commonalities with and differences from their cisgender/heterosexual counterparts. If pleasure is an important part of sexual activity as well as human life, then it ought to be equally important and accessible for everyone, regardless of identity. Marginalized groups may face greater barriers to pleasure than heterosexual/cisgender individuals, and therefore merit further study to begin to remove these barriers. As stated in the introduction, pleasure can be achieved not only through concrete practices but also in more abstract experiences, such as gender euphoria for transgender individuals (shuster & Westbrook, 2022). Building out our theoretical understanding of pleasure in multiple contexts can lead to more holistic understandings of the experiences of marginalized populations.

Marriage rates are declining, and alternative relationship structures are becoming increasingly common. Studying pleasure in more contexts—for example, polyamorous relationships, casual hookups, and sex work—can all improve understandings of how pleasure operates in society. Finally, accounting for more stages of the life course in sexuality for all genders, rather than just cisgender women, is important for understanding sexuality as a process, where beliefs and identities are constructed in real time. Sexuality is not a static concept, but rather one which develops and changes through identity development and the experiences one has, so an expanded gendered sexuality over the life course perspective (Carpenter, 2010) can allow scholars to trace pleasure as it develops

through these same processes, understand the role sexual pleasure plays for individuals of many gender identities and sexual orientations, and challenge hegemonic understandings of what sexuality is or should be.

Additionally, most pleasure research, particularly on queer populations, enrolls predominantly white individuals. Sexuality intersects with race and ethnicity, as well as class and other identities, to shape experiences and understanding (Fields, 2019). It is therefore important to have racially/ethnically-inclusive samples, as well as studies of populations of color specifically, to understand pleasure in wider variety of communities. For queer populations in particular, norms around gender transitions and sexual orientation can vary widely; queer of color populations deserve special attention in sexuality and pleasure research. However, it is imperative that studies of these populations learn for and with them, rather than just about them, to avoid objectification of these individuals and their experiences (Fields, 2019). Additionally, as capitalism is increasingly the main form of social oversight of sexuality, additional attention to the manner in which socioeconomic status or class shapes experiences of sexuality becomes all the more important. The close ties between sexuality and consumption or even consumerism indicate that differing access to consumption will necessarily impact how sexuality is embodied and experienced.

Strategies for engaging these marginalized populations are also important to consider. For qualitative studies, many strategies exist for engaging “less visible” populations, many of whom have very good reason not to engage with researchers, especially white scholars studying people of color (Moore, 2019). These strategies include genuinely engaging in spaces before approaching them as research contexts exclusively⁵ and creating opportunities for people in a community to gather if they do not routinely exist, among other excellent suggestions (Moore, 2019). Implementing such techniques in studies of sexual pleasure can draw out the individuals who have often not been addressed in this research, especially those who are marginalized not only on the basis of race/ethnicity, but those who exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities such as race and queerness. For quantitative studies, ensuring the surveys have quotas based on race/ethnicity—whether equal numbers, representative samples, or exclusively focused on a particular racial/ethnic group as appropriate to the research question—and conferring with other scholars to ensure that a study is legible across populations are crucial first steps to expanding who is included in our studies.

Finally, more kinds of sexual acts merit study. Much sexuality research still operates on the coital imperative, and many also employ an orgasm imperative. Achieving pleasure in something other than two-person penetrative intercourse, as well as removing orgasm as the sole end goal and, in the case of the male orgasm, often defining characteristic of “sex” (as well as the sole indicator of sexual pleasure) expands the range of sexual experiences to be studied. More attention to masturbation, multiple partner experiences, and kink communities provides access to rarely considered experiences of pleasure. Embracing a wider variety of sex acts also challenges heteronormativity and compulsory monogamy (Schippers, 2016), which decrease the stigma and marginalization of those forms of sexuality that fall outside of Rubin’s charmed circle (1984). The decrease in stigmatization can improve gendered sexual relations and interactions around sexual orientations more broadly as well.

Although there are many possibilities for this field, these three areas are the ones with the greatest ability to push research in the sociology of pleasure forward. Not only increasing the amount of pleasure research being conducted, but strategically expanding research in the noted areas will provide a more comprehensive understanding of sexual pleasure. In identifying the many loci of variation in the experience of sexual pleasure, we can then build toward a more universal definition and understanding of pleasure. These recommendations reflect those put forward by Fahs and McClelland (2016) for critical sexuality studies more broadly: they foreground conceptual analysis, focus on sexual bodies often considered abject, and attend to heterosexual privilege. Sexuality is an ever-evolving area, and sexual pleasure evolves along with it. Tapping into some of the significant social changes that have occurred in the last decade or so illustrates just how much more there is to understand about sexual pleasure. Embracing women’s and queer sexuality, increased access to sexuality-enhancing toys, and sex work in the digital age are just a few of the ways that pleasure is changing—and that is just in the United States.

So why does pleasure matter? Pleasure—or the desire for and pursuit of it—is a significant part of the human experience. Humans seem to seek pleasure, whether sexual or other forms, and this seeking can motivate a variety

of behaviors. Pleasure can protect from risk or cause individuals to dismiss risks because the possibility of pleasure is more appealing. Pleasure can improve well-being and relationships with others and with oneself. Pleasure can disrupt and challenge power structures—or reinforce them. Social authorities are invested in monitoring and controlling pleasure, and that makes it important to understand how using and limiting pleasure affects society.

Whether through regulation and consumption or developing community norms, even the limited amount of existing sexual pleasure research demonstrates the intersection of sexual pleasure with all major social institutions, making pleasure as integral a part of society as other areas of sociological inquiry, and therefore deserving of equal amounts of attention. Attending to sexual pleasure can help us understand decision-making, especially in relationships; provides a fascinating case study of the boundaries of individual choice and state regulations; and may be part of exploring some of the modern manifestations of racism and sexism, just to name a few sociological spaces where pleasure plays a significant role. In short, when considering current priorities of sociology such as power, identity, and inequality, greater focus on sexual pleasure may provide significant insight into the dynamics at work.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Vance's work describes only men and women, as does much contemporary pleasure research even if they acknowledge broader gender diversity. The need for greater gender inclusion is described in the recommendations of this article.
- ² Although technically an interdisciplinary journal, the majority of article published in the *Journal of Sex Research* tend to come from those working in public health and psychology. I choose to draw on this journal in part to note the need for greater sociological consideration of these topics when looking across disciplines as well.
- ³ To provide a sense of proportion, *American Sociological Review* alone published 457 total articles from 2010 to 2020, and *American Journal of Sociology* published another 362.
- ⁴ The 2021 controversy over explicit content involving the camming site OnlyFans and Mastercard illustrates how in tension capitalist market forces can be over sex work.
- ⁵ This may be more difficult for those studying outside their own communities, as with white scholars studying people of color; all the more reason to boost the voices of marginalized scholars working with marginalized populations.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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