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Sexual improvement as if your health depends on it: An analysis of contemporary sex manuals

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Abstract

Adding to a small but growing feminist literature, this article critically examines popular, contemporary American sex manuals from a feminist social constructionist perspective, focusing specifically on how these manuals construct gender and sexual norms. With notable exceptions, the majority of these manuals are geared toward white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, and cisgendered audiences. We argue that in addition to positioning sexual activity as a biological, essential (albeit gendered) human need, and as the ultimate path to individual fulfillment and empowerment, a new rationale for the importance of sex (and working on sexual improvement) is now prominent in contemporary sex manuals. Reflecting the "healthicization" of sex in the post-Viagra era, authors frame frequent pleasurable sexual activity as an important factor in the maintenance of health and wellness, an argument that gives further weight to the importance of "sex work" as a fundamental aspect of particularly women's work in heterosexual relationships. These findings are in keeping with a growing body of literature that highlights the rise of the "sex as health" discourse as well as literature examining the growing pressure to master, improve, and work on sex.

Keywords

Sexuality, sex manuals, sex advice, self-help, popular psychology, "sex work," "sex for health," "healthicization of sex"

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Over the past 40 years, feminist scholars have critically examined western English-language sexual advice manuals in order to identify the messages they have conveyed about gender and sexuality in various historical contexts (Gavey, 2005; Geppert, 1998; Gordon, 1969, 1971; Gordon and Bernstein, 1970; Gordon and Shankweiler, 1971; Laipson, 1996; Melody and Peterson, 1999; Neuhaus, 2000; Porter and Hall, 1995; Potts, 1998; Seidman, 1989; Tyler, 2008; Weinberg et al., 1983). As argued by these critics, while these texts may not reveal the prevalence of actual sexual practices, they both reflect ideas about sex already in circulation and actively construct notions of appropriate sexual behavior (Irvine, 2002; Neuhaus, 2000; Potts, 1998; Tiefer, 2012). From these manuals, we can see what kinds of ideals "experts," including religious leaders, doctors, psychologists, and cultural commentators, disseminate to the public.

Scholars have argued that over the years, authors of these texts have portrayed heterosex as a means to reproduction, a matter of pleasure, a path to empowerment, an issue of danger and hygiene, and a compulsory ingredient of individual and interpersonal happiness.[1] Historians writing on this topic have suggested that before the 20th century, there was no distinct genre of western sexual advice literature; however, advice about sexuality was offered in marriage manuals (Gordon and Bernstein, 1970). In the 18th century, the most popular marriage manual in England and the United States was *Aristotle's Masterpiece*. This text was primarily focused on reproduction – it offered advice about sex in order to help married couples work their way through first intercourse and conceive and bear healthy children (Porter and Hall, 1995). According to Gordon and Bernstein (1970), in the 19th century, North American marriage manuals often positioned sex as a potentially dangerous activity that should be engaged in solely for procreative purposes. In the early 20th century, a new genre of sex manuals appeared in countries such as the United States and England, offering explicit sexual advice to married and soon-to-be-married couples (Geppert, 1998). As Laipson (1996) and Neuhaus (2000) have argued, these early 20th century manuals, such as *Married Love* (1918) by British birth control campaigner Marie Stopes, positioned sexual pleasure as an important part of middle-class marital happiness. They often placed responsibility for a woman's sexual satisfaction on her husband, providing advice to husbands on how to awaken their wives' dormant sexuality. However, as highlighted by Lewis (2010) and Neuhaus (2000), by the mid-20th century, North American texts, such as *A Guide to a Good Marriage* (1955) by Richard Steiner, shifted their focus to female frigidity, blaming women for their lack of enthusiasm for sex, and placing responsibility on them for solving their own sexual problems. Following Freud's insistence on the vaginal orgasm as the hallmark of women's maturity, frigidity was usually defined as the inability to reach orgasm during vaginal penetration and was linked to physiological and psychological deficits (Lewis, 2010; Neuhaus, 2000).

In the 1960s, some North American and European manuals began to approve of premarital sexual intercourse for women and men and sexual experimentation within committed relationships (Gordon and Shankweiler, 1971; Weinberg et al., 1983). As the North American sex manual industry rose to prominence in the 1970s (Hawkes, 1996), these manuals embraced a humanistic model of sexuality, wherein

sexual pleasure was seen as a means to individual and interpersonal awareness (Tiefer, 2012; Weinberg et al., 1983). As Weinberg et al. (1983) have argued, authors writing within this framework were divided between those who recommended committed, loving relationships (if not marriage) as the ideal context for sex and those who challenged the concept of monogamy altogether. Some encouraged women in particular to embrace sexual autonomy, suggesting that this would lead to autonomy in other aspects of life. As Seidman (1989: 309) has argued, although many manuals written in the 1970s claimed to embrace sexual experimentation and fluidity, the majority continued to convey "a clear heterosexist bias" and were inconsistent in their portrayal of homosexuality. For example, while Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* (1970) defended all types of mutually consensual heterosexual expression and deemed bisexuality to be "natural," this first edition labeled homosexuality a "major social problem" (Comfort, 1970: 60, in Seidman, 1989: 309). By contrast, the 1977 edition constructed homosexuality as "normal" and discussed gay rights (Seidman, 1989). Nevertheless, as Melody and Peterson (1999) have outlined, a growing body of manuals directed specifically at gay and lesbian audiences also emerged in the United States in the 1970s, for instance, *The Joy of Gay Sex* (1977). At the same time, a genre of sex manuals emerged in the United States aimed specifically at a Christian readership, which tended to celebrate sexuality as a way of maintaining heterosexual marriages (DeRogatis, 2005).

According to Melody and Peterson (1999), the dominance of the humanistic approach was tempered somewhat during the 1980s in the United States when more texts were written from a public health or "safe sex" perspective, influenced by the rise of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. For example, the once "sex liberal" sexologists William Masters, Virginia Johnson, and Robert Kolodny collaborated on a book titled *Crisis: Heterosexual Behavior in the Age of AIDS* (1988), cautioning on the risks of heterosex in the age of HIV.

Although a number of scholars have analyzed contemporary sexual advice discourses found in newspapers and women's magazines (Farvid and Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Jackson and Scott, 1997; Krassas et al., 2001; Tyler, 2004), only a handful have specifically investigated recently published sex manuals and have each focused on one or a few books only: Potts (1998) examined the best-selling book *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom* (1995) by John Gray, Melody and Peterson (1999) analyzed Dr Ruth's sex manuals from the early 1990s, DeRogatis (2005) examined American religious manuals from the 1990s and 2000, and Tyler (2008) assessed five books currently recommended by sex therapists in Australia. Overall, these analyses highlight a number of themes, especially the way in which sex is described as a biological need, particularly for men; the legacy of binary representations of female and male sexuality; the continual recommendation of monogamy as the ideal context for sexual exploration; and the endurance of phallocentric definitions of heterosex. All highlight the ways these texts call upon women in particular to please men sexually.

In recent years, there has been an effort to (re)medicalize sex as seen following the blockbuster success of Viagra in the late 1990s and the pharmaceutical

industry's race to find a Viagra-like drug for women (Cacchioni and Tiefer, 2012; Hartley, 2006; Loe, 2004). Since drug companies have entered the industry of sexual improvement, scientific sexology and sexual medicine have attempted to eclipse the reigning humanistic model that characterized the majority of sexual advice from the 1970s onward (Tiefer 2006a, 2006b). In medical discourse and even sex therapy, sexual pleasures and displeasures are increasingly framed as sexual "function" and "dysfunction" (Hartley, 2006; Loe, 2004; Tiefer, 2008). Similarly, Gupta (2011) and Jackson and Scott (1997) have argued that the notion that sex is an important part of physical, psychological, and interpersonal health has also gained currency in contemporary expert and popular writings. In addition, as rationales for the importance of sex have multiplied, as pointed out in a growing body of feminist literature, women are increasingly called on to work on what Cacchioni (2007) has termed "the labor of love," or the rationalization, improvement, and mastery of sexual activity in personal sexual relationships. Scholars have identified this discourse as prominent in women's magazines (Evans et al., 2010; Gill, 2003; Harvey and Gill, 2011; Jackson and Scott, 1997) and in professional approaches to treating "sexual dysfunction" (Cacchioni, 2007).

In this study, we examine a broad sample of 17 North American sex manuals published between 2000 and 2010. In our analysis, we focus on what kinds of messages about sexuality and gender prevail in contemporary US manuals. We consider the ways in which these texts link to their predecessors, as well as how they highlight evidence of new discourses surrounding sex. As a unique focus, we investigate the extent to which these manuals participate in the (re)medicalization of sex, whether they identify sex as contributing to physical and mental health, and whether these manuals serve as yet another vehicle for "the labor of love" discourse, enjoining readers to actively work on their sexual lives.

Methodology

Our aim was to analyze a broad sample of popular North American sex advice manuals published since 2000.[2] We were not able to find an authoritative listing of the best-selling sex manuals; thus we exercised our judgment in selecting books to analyze. To select our books, we looked at the best-selling and most reviewed sex manuals on Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com. We also referenced AbeBooks.com's list of the top 10 best-selling sex manuals in 2007.[3] In addition, we visited a local Barnes and Noble bookstore and created a list of the sex manuals that were available on the shelf. We then selected 17 books to examine, choosing titles that appeared on more than one list and with the intent of capturing the diversity of the genre. We selected manuals with an eye for the following distinctions: religious versus secular; explicitly feminist versus not; intended to strengthen relationships versus to increase pleasure; aimed at readers with sexual difficulties versus without sexual problems; written for men versus for women versus for men and women (none had an entirely trans* or gender queer focus, although some had chapters dedicated specifically to these audiences); targeting a strictly heterosexual audience versus a gay or lesbian audience versus a sexually diverse or queer

audience; and focused on a particular sexual activity versus a range of sexual activities.[4] A list of the manuals analyzed is included in Appendix A.

After selecting our sample of texts, we used discourse analysis to examine key messages about sexuality. Specifically, we analyzed each text in order to ascertain the following: what meanings and values are afforded to sexual activity by the text? According to each text, who is seen as capable of experiencing sexual pleasure and how is sexual pleasure depicted as (best) achieved? How does the text frame sexual displeasure, difficulties, or dysfunction? What recommendations does the text make for sexual improvement? Are any of the above messages gendered, and, if so, how? We then compared texts in order to identify trends and considered the relationship of these trends to trends within the broader society.

Contemporary sex manuals

Contemporary sex manuals are different in obvious ways. As in the study by DeRogatis (2005), the Judeo-Christian manuals we analyzed (Boteach, 2000; Leman, 2003; Wheat and Wheat, 2010) encourage women to submit to the leadership of their husbands, celebrate sexual activity only within the context of a married, heterosexual relationship, and endorse coitus as the pinnacle of sexual activity. By contrast, the manuals informed by feminist and queer perspectives (Joannides, 2009; Newman, 2004; Silverstein and Picano, 2006; Solot and Miller, 2007; Winks and Semans, 2002) endorse same-sex and/or gender queer sexual activity and explicitly challenge the privileging of coitus over other forms of sexual activity.[5] On the whole, the manuals are addressed to a middle-class audience, evidenced by the fact that the authors assume that readers have the time and money necessary for sexual improvement projects, and to a white, cis-gendered, and able-bodied audience, evidenced by the fact that the accompanying images include only white and able-bodied people. By contrast, a minority of manuals attempt to address disability and bodily diversity through text or images (e.g. Comfort and Quilliam, 2009; Newman, 2004), cultural and ethnic specificity with some depictions of people of color (e.g. Newman, 2004; Solot and Miller, 2007), and gender non-conformity through sections addressed to trans* and intersex readers (Joannides, 2009; Newman, 2004; Silverstein and Picano, 2006; Winks and Semans, 2002).

Despite these differences, all of the manuals share a number of common messages. Each presents sexual interaction and pleasure as an incredibly important part of personal, interpersonal, physical, and emotional happiness and fulfillment.[6] Overall, there were three main rationales given for the importance of sex: sex as a human need (albeit a gendered one), sex for women's empowerment, and sex for health and wellness. While the first two rationales have been central within sex manuals since the 1970s (Tiefer, 2012; Weinberg et al., 1983), we argue that the latter is reflective of the preoccupations of the period in which these texts were written, reflecting the recent (re)medicalization and healthicization of sex. With all of these rationales taken together, it is no surprise that almost all of the texts take for granted the importance of working on sexual improvement,[7] a form of work we will conclude is both explicitly and implicitly gendered.

Sex as a human need

Almost all of the texts we examined present sex as a fundamental human need. In the contemporary edition of *The Joy of Sex*, Comfort and Quilliam (2009:9) write that their goal is "to see sex as the ultimate in human play, but at the same time a developmental essential that helps us grow as people and partners." In *Real Sex for Real Women*, Laura Berman (2008: 11) echoes this message, writing, "Sex Is a fundamental part of humanity." In *Kosher Sex*, Boteach (2000: 80) writes, "We are all sexual creatures. To try to stifle our innate sexuality is mistaken at best, and hazardous at worst." In *The Good Vibrations Guide to Sex* (a manual informed by feminist and queer activism), Winks and Semans (2002: 2) write, "Our ultimate goal is to normalize sex as a vital, life-affirming, primal force in human experience."

In a related vein, the majority of manuals argue that sex is integral to the maintenance of a long-term relationship. According to these manuals, sex is the "glue" that holds a relationship together. Boteach (2000: 23) writes, "... love can be sustained only by constant sexual interaction. Only sex has the power to call forth our deepest, most powerful emotions." Similarly, in *Intended for Pleasure,* Wheat and Wheat (2010: 138) write, "Developing real sexual intimacy carries a couple safely through the traditionally dangerous waters of the first several years of marriage ... and on through old age, when sexual intimacy continues to be enriching, pleasurable, and very reassuring."

On the flip side, several authors warn that "bad sex" or a "stale sex" life will disrupt or end a relationship. For example, in *The Good Girls Guide to Bad Girl Sex,* Keesling (2009: 13) admonishes her female readers that if they aren't in touch with their "bad girl" sexuality, "it can ... take a heavy toll on your relationships; both in and out of bed." According to Comfort and Quilliam (2009: 102), if you stop having sex, your relationship may "walk out the door."

This cautionary tone is most forceful in Davis' *The Sex-Starved Marriage* (2003: 5). At the beginning of the book, she asserts, "I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that a marriage void of sexuality and intimacy is a marriage doomed to fail." According to Davis, if the "high desire spouse" isn't getting the sexual satisfaction he or she requires, he or she will feel hurt, angry, and alienated, will pursue extra-marital affairs, and will eventually almost certainly end the relationship. Almost the entire book is devoted to convincing the "low desire spouse" to engage in "sex work" in order to save her or his relationship. As we will argue later, this message could potentially render the "low desire spouse" vulnerable to exploitation.

Although the manuals generally present sex as a need for all, a number of the manuals suggest this need manifests differently in men and women. As argued by feminist critics before us, sexual advice literature often conveys sexist and heteronormative messages about sexuality (Farvid and Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Krassas et al., 2001; Melody and Peterson, 1999; Tyler, 2008). For example, in her analysis of John Gray's *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom* (1995), Potts (1998) argues that Gray represents male sexuality as a "need" and a "drive" while representing female sexuality as slower and more passive.

In our research, we found that the majority of contemporary sex manuals continue to present male and female sexuality as fundamentally different. For example, according to several contemporary sex manuals (Berman, 2008; Leman, 2003; Paget, 2000; Silverstein and Picano, 2006), men are more turned on by visual stimuli, while women are more turned on by tactile stimuli. In *The Joy of Gay Sex*, Silverstein and Picano (2006:81) write, "most men are physiologically visually oriented when it comes to sexual relations (this is true for both straight and gay men); as opposed to women, who have more complex, usually emotion-oriented reactions." Several of the manuals (Editors of *Men's Health and Women's Health,* 2011; Paget, 2000; Wheat and Wheat, 2010) argue that women need to feel emotionally close to a male partner before they are interested in having sex with him, while men need to have sex with a female partner before they feel emotionally close to her. In almost half of the manuals, men's sexuality is presented as naturally quicker and women's sexuality as naturally slower. In *The Multi-Orgasmic Couple*, Chia et al. (2002:94) write, "While male sexuality is easily ignited (men get aroused easily), it is also easily extinguished (men ejaculate quickly). Female sexuality, although slower to bring to a boil (women take longer to get aroused), is the stronger and more long lasting of the two."

Occasionally, contemporary manuals draw on claims from evolutionary psychology about evolved differences in male and female sexuality to support their arguments. For example, Laura Berman (2008: 19) writes, "Women take longer to become aroused and achieve orgasm because we're not as goal oriented as men. Women's brains have evolved to be more adapted to multitasking, and this means we cannot zoom from zero to 50 in under 5 minutes." In addressing their female readers, the editors of *Men's Health and Women's Health* (2011: 30) write: "So, on the most elemental level, a guy is like a big-eyed dog drooling over every female who walks by as if she was a juicy pork chop with breasts . . . Although he's not aware of it, instinctively his brain is driving him to ejaculate his DNA into the next generation by having sex with as many females as he can." In drawing on evolutionary psychology, these manuals suggest that these differences are innate and unchanging, thus eliding the role of society in producing gender differences in sexuality (for a feminist critique of evolutionary psychology, see Fausto-Sterling (2000)).

By contrast, one-fourth of the manuals we analyzed in some ways challenge a dichotomous view of gender norms. For example, some of the manuals emphasize the differences within the categories of "women" and "men," as opposed to the differences between them. In *The Guide to Getting It On*, when discussing gender differences in sexuality, Joannides (2009: 820) writes, "Instead of making silly assumptions about how your partner experiences sex, why not ask, explore, and find out for yourself?" Some manuals describe gender as a social construct and highlight the role of socialization in creating group differences between men and women in terms of sexuality (see Joannides, 2009; Winks and Semans, 2002). *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book* (2004) includes a chapter titled "Gender (Not Destiny)." A few manuals explicitly criticize stereotypes about female sexuality and critique the elements of gender role socialization that the authors see as

negatively impacting women. For example, Joannides (2009) critiques the fact that sexually active women are called sluts. In *I Love Female Orgasm*, Solot and Miller (2007) critique the fact that girls are often actively discouraged from masturbating.

Sex for (women's) empowerment

A small number of the manuals we analyzed promote the idea that the enjoyment and achievement of sexual pleasure is the most straightforward route to women's empowerment. This argument is made most forcibly by Keesling (2009) in *The Good Girl's Guide to Bad Girl Sex* and by Laura Berman (2008) in *Real Sex for Real Women*. According to these manuals, women have an inner sexy "bad girl" (Keesling) or "vixen," (Berman) and if they are able to "tap into" this inner sexiness, they will find that their sexuality is a source of empowerment. As Laura Berman (2008: 70) writes, "every woman has an inner vixen. Who is she? She is the no-holds barred, carefree, confident, brave, and sexual woman who lives inside all of us. She believes in the power of pleasure, high heels, and red lipstick . . . Men are in awe of her and women envy her - and that woman is you."

As in the manuals examined by Weinberg et al. (1983), these manuals suggest that women who are empowered in the bedroom will feel empowered in all aspects of their lives. Keesling (2009: 13) writes, "The changes I have seen take place in a woman's life when she . . . embraces a "new world order" where she is free to express her sexuality to its fullest, reach far beyond the bedroom. These changes infuse every aspect of her life. She becomes more powerful in her work, more effective in her communication, and more confident in her abilities." Similarly, Laura Berman (2008: 14) writes, "Women who are confident and content with their sex life feel their confidence and contentment extend beyond the bedroom. The true "afterglow" of sex might be that you feel more beautiful and loved after a great session with your lover, and those positive feelings spur you on to greater achievements in your career and personal endeavors." Although these authors do not address the broader structural context in which women's sexuality is expressed, their claims could be considered feminist as they encourage women to assert their sexual wants. However, as we will suggest below, these authors may also increase pressure on women to engage in "the labor of love," the work of sexual improvement (Cacchioni, 2007).

Sex for health and wellness

The association of sex with health and wellness (and by virtue, illness) is a prominent discourse in contemporary manuals, reflecting the preoccupations of the contemporary era. Subsequent to the release of Viagra and against a larger backdrop of medicalization and disease-mongering, a more medicalized view of sexuality has made its way into the majority of sex manuals.

We found that a majority of the manuals that address male sexuality encourage men with "erectile dysfunction" to consider taking Viagra or a similar medication. Several of the manuals also suggest that medications could help women with sexual

"dysfunctions." For example, Dr Jennifer Berman, a urologist at the forefront of research into sexual enhancement pharmaceuticals for women, has published sexual self-help books along with her sister Laura Berman. Indicative of the hopeful tone of what a more medicalized approach might offer, the Bermans introduce their 2001 book, *For Women Only,* stating: "*For Women Only* reflects the change in the treatment of women's sexual problems in the last few years . . . Female Sexual Dysfunction is at last on the table – a recognized and often treatable disorder, which affects the general health and quality of life of millions of women around the world" (Berman et al., 2001: xi). Throughout the book, medical treatments like Viagra, hormone replacement therapy, testosterone, estrogen, the EROS (a clitoral pump "FDA approved" for the treatment of FSD), and nerve-sparing surgery are mentioned as possible medical treatments for sexual dysfunctions. The *Whole Lesbian Sex Manual* (2004) is rife with similar suggestions for taking sexual pharmaceuticals to overcome sexual dysfunction.

Several of the manuals suggest that sexual dysfunction is a "warning sign," indicating other health problems. Readers are therefore advised to pay attention to and address any sexual dysfunction. Laura Berman (2008: 221) writes, "all the body's functions are inherently linked, so if something goes awry in the bedroom, there is a chance it might be an early warning sign of other physical problems." In addition, a majority of the manuals argue that it is important to continue having sex into old age, as regular sex is required to prevent sexual dysfunction. Again, a quote from Laura Berman (2008: 32) is representative: "The mantra 'If you don't use it, you lose it' holds true for genital health. If you don't engage in regular sex or masturbation, your genital circulation suffers and your sexual response decreases."

Even more widespread in contemporary sex manuals than the focus on sexual dysfunction is the idea that an active, pleasurable sex life will produce health benefits and psychological well-being; almost all of the sex manuals we analyzed at least suggest that sex can produce some health benefits. Gupta (2011) has argued that a "sex for health" discourse has developed in recent years; the main characteristic of this discourse is the use of medical and scientific data connecting regular sexual activity to quantifiable health benefits as a way of justifying a "sex positive" agenda. Our analysis suggests that this discourse is reproduced, in part, through contemporary sex manuals.

For example, Chia et al. (2002: xv) write, "modern medicine has recently confirmed that sex is in fact vital for our long-term health." According to Comfort and Quilliam (2009: 201), the health benefits of frequent sex include "reduced risk of heart disease, an immune-system boost, and a lower risk of depression." Similarly, *The Men's Health and Women's Health Big Book of Sex* (2011) includes a list of 10 ways sex can improve health in both the section for male readers and the section for female readers. The "sex for health" discourse is taken up in manuals informed by feminist and queer perspectives; for example, in the *Good Vibrations Guide to Sex*, Winks and Semans (2002: 60) write:

> You may well discover that tapping into your erotic energy has the potential to be profoundly healing. We're not just talking about the considerable physiological

> benefits of sexual arousal and orgasm, which boost the immune system, release endorphins, relieve tension and stress, serve as a mild cardiovascular workout, and promote general well-being. We're talking about the emotional and psychological benefits of acknowledging yourself as a sexual human being.

The "sex for health" discourse is also taken up in religious manuals; for example, Wheat and Wheat (2010: 146) write, "Prolonged kissing is healthy as well as pleasurable, unleashing chemicals that ease stress hormones and also transferring benign bacteria that keep each other healthy."[8]

Just do it: The importance of sex work

Given their presentation of sex as highly significant, it is not surprising that almost all of the manuals encourage their readers to devote time and energy to improving their sex lives. Some scholars analyzing the contemporary "sexualization of culture" have called attention to the work that middle-class, heterosexual women are called upon to do as they are "incited to be compulsorily sexy and always 'up for it'" (Harvey and Gill, 2011: 56); scholars have described this work as "the Taylorisation of sex" (Jackson and Scott, 1997), "sexual subjectification" (Gill, 2003), "sex work" (Cacchioni, 2007), "technologies of sexiness" (Evans et al., 2010), and "sexual entrepreneurship" (Harvey and Gill, 2011). While critics call attention to some of the regulatory aspects of this work, qualitative studies by Cacchioni (2007) and Cacchioni and Wolkowitz (2011) highlight how women may perceive this work as a chore or as enjoyable depending on several material factors. Either way, sex work tends to be mainly aimed at the achievement of sexual "normalcy," typically meaning penetrative sex in the context of heterosexual monogamy.

Almost all of the sex manuals we analyzed (and not just those addressed to heterosexual women) suggest that although sex is "natural," "great sex" does not come naturally. As Kevin Leman (2003: 13) writes in *Sheet Music*, "Sex is one of the most amazing things God ever thought up – but sex this good doesn't come naturally to any one of us." Sex is compared to gourmet cooking (Comfort and Quilliam, 2009; Leman, 2003), art and music (Comfort and Quilliam, 2009; Newman 2004), sports (Newman, 2004; Paget, 2000), and investing (Paget, 2000), all require training, practice, and dedication. Leman (2003: 13) proclaims: "We have to become willing to practice how to be a better lover." Addressing her male readers, Paget (2000: 17) writes, "Like any kind of project or endeavor, the more you put into sex, the more you and your lover will get out of it." According to most authors, sex must be made a priority. For example, Chia et al. (2002: 25) write, "Like anything truly worthwhile, sexuality requires that we prioritize it and make time for it . . . we need to dedicate time each week away from phones, children, or other demands in order to nurture our sexual self." And this work is never-ending: according to most authors, maintaining a satisfying sex life throughout the life course is both possible and desirable. For example, Comfort and Quilliam (2009: 77) write, "don't buy into the myth of age-limited performance . . . The

most important thing is never to drop sex for any long period – if you do, you may have trouble restarting.''

Most sex manuals encourage first and foremost what Cacchioni (2007: 307) refers to as ''Discipline Work,'' which is defined as ''sex work aimed at changing one's mental and physical response to standard heterosexual practices,'' although in the case of contemporary sex manuals, discipline work was asked not only of women and was not limited to preparing for heterosexual sex. The following statement by Davis (2003: 102) in *The Sex Starved Marriage* relays the urgency with which discipline work is called for: ''Do whatever you need to do to figure out what turns you on. Read romance novels, masturbate, watch sexy movies or videos, use sex toys like vibrators, buy sexy lingerie, use lotions . . . if you're not feeling turned on, it's your responsibility to figure out what might feel more exciting. You're in charge of you.'' As this quote suggests, responsibility for ''sex work'' is placed on the shoulders of the individual, echoing a neoliberal commitment to personal choice and responsibility. In a similar vein, in *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book*, Newman (2004: 124) writes:

> Real life need not doom us to a sexless existence. We can have thriving sex lives . . . So, if it's possible to maintain a vibrant partnered sex life, how do you do it? You make it happen. You bring intention (followed by action) to your sex life. You replace resignation . . . with curiosity . . . You prioritize your shared erotic life with your partner - with each of your partners, if you have more than one . . . That means doing some work.

Most contemporary manuals call for an almost endless variety of disciplinary work. Women are instructed to prepare their bodies for sex through ''Kegel exercises'' (pelvic muscle exercises) and are encouraged to practice masturbating in order to overcome the ''problem'' of orgasmic dysfunction. Men dealing with premature ejaculation are instructed to use the ''start and stop technique.'' Readers are given detailed instructions for improving their sexual skills and are encouraged to get their partner ''in the mood'' through various forms of ''foreplay,'' ranging from doing the dishes to sending a partner an erotic text message.

As sex manuals are intended as a form of self-help, most focus mainly on disciplinary strategies that can be used at home. However, as discussed above, reflecting an increasingly medicalized view of sex, a majority of the manuals also encourage their readers to seek ''professional'' help when they cannot resolve problems on their own. Again, as noted above, a majority of the manuals specifically encourage readers to seek medical help and to consider pharmaceutical ''solutions'' to sexual problems.

A second type of sex work as described by Cacchioni (2007) is Performance Work, which is defined as pretending to conform to a standard heterosexual role through acting, including faking the enjoyment of heterosex. In the case of contemporary sex manuals, again, Performance Work is asked not just of women and is recommended not just in the context of heterosexual relationships. As part of Performance Work, a significant minority of manuals encourages their readers (both men and women) to have sex for the sake of a partner even if they themselves

do not want sex. For example, Leman (2003: 203) writes, ''This means there may be times when you have sex out of mercy, obligation, or commitment and without any real desire. Yes, it may feel forced . . . But the root issue is this: You're acting out of love.'' Similarly, Chia et al. (2002: 180) write, ''if you or your partner is not interested in sex: 'Err in the direction of sex.''' In *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book,* Newman (2004: 136) writes approvingly of a woman who adopted a ''no decline rule'' in the context of a long-term relationship. When the manuals encourage Performance Work, they may undermine a reader's conviction that he or she has the right to say no to sexual activity. They may also encourage the desiring partner to place pressure on the non-desiring partner to engage in unwanted sex – the manuals that encourage Performance Work suggest that the non-desiring partner will come to desire sex once they get started.

Although sex work is asked of both men and women in contemporary sex manuals, the call for sex work remains gendered. Even when Performance Work is presented in gender-neutral terms, sometimes the manuals reveal the gendered nature of this recommendation. For example, Davis (2003) is a strong proponent of what she calls ''Nike Sex,'' or ''just doing it,'' and she encourages partners to accept sex when it is offered as a gift. Her advice is ostensibly ''gender neutral''; sometimes the wife is the ''low desire spouse'' and the husband is the ''high desire spouse,'' sometimes this pattern is reversed. However, in talking about ''Nike Sex,'' she also references Basson's (2000) model of ''responsive sexual desire.'' Basson's model (in which women may develop feelings of ''responsive'' desire after deciding to engage in sex without ''spontaneous'' desire) is a gender-specific model. By referencing Basson's work, Davis at least implicitly suggests that it is mostly women who will be ''just doing it.''

In the religious manuals, the belief that women should accommodate their husband's ''needs'' is explicitly stated, continuing what Gavey (2005) identifies as a long-standing trend in sexual advice literature of encouraging women to engage in unwanted sex for the sake of their male partners. For example, Gayle Wheat (2010: 156–157) addresses her female readers as follows, ''Sometimes you will be very tired and feeling as sexy as an old sock, but your husband will approach you with desire . . . My own opinion as a Christian wife is that we can depend on the Lord to give us the strength and ability to be as warm and responsive as our husband desires . . . .''

More generally speaking, because a majority of the manuals continue to present male and female sexuality as different, sex work may be more easily rationalized for women. In the context of heterosexuality, these manuals argue that men's need for sex is constant, thus suggesting that it will be women who will need to engage in Performance Work to satisfy male sexual needs. In the context of both heterosexual and lesbian relationships, because these manuals suggest that women's sexuality can be more ''difficult'' (for example, it takes longer to ignite and it is more tied into emotional processes), these manuals suggest that a woman's sexuality may require more work on her part (although also, in some cases, on the part of her male or female lover). Importantly, *The Joy of Gay Sex* (2006) does not enjoin much in the way of sex work, perhaps because the authors do not view male sexuality (in the absence of women) as particularly difficult to arouse or satisfy.

Conclusions

Our discussion of contemporary sex manuals demonstrates some clear links between these manuals and their predecessors, as well as some key departures. There is no one way but rather several ways of constructing sexuality and its importance in the contemporary manuals we analyzed. Although a number of the manuals maintain a binary view of gender differences in sexual capacities and tastes (often rooted in essentialism), some of the manuals depart from this message, emphasizing the social construction of gender, the continuum of gender and sexual expression, and the negative influence of gender role socialization on female and gender queer sexuality. However, the majority of manuals continue to position sexual pleasure as an essential human need required for a successful relationship. Some of the manuals fuse sexual essentialism with a ''feminist'' rhetoric of sex as a path to women's empowerment.

A more unique feature of contemporary sex manuals is that fact that some of these books are written by doctors and sex therapists (e.g. Jennifer and Laura Berman) who are actively involved in the sexual pharmaceutical industry. These experts use this forum of ''self-help'' to promote sexual pharmaceuticals whether approved for a given use or not. Even more prominent in this body of manuals overall is the way authors from various backgrounds tie sexual activity to the maintenance of health and wellness. Some scholars have noted the ''sex for health'' discourse within sexual advice offered in women's magazines pre-Viagra (Jackson and Scott, 1997); however, as argued by Gupta (2011), it seems that this discourse has gained further purchase in this current climate of (re)medicalization wherein sexual medicine experts have made an effort to elevate the health-giving status of sexual activity. As sex is afforded particularly crucial significance through the lexicon of health and illness (see also Marshall, 2012; Segal, 2012), working on and improving sexual capacity, pleasure, and frequency is given new significance.

In these texts, readers are encouraged to engage in an almost endless variety of self-improvement and relationship-improvement oriented sex work. The work recommended primarily focuses on disciplining bodies and minds to enjoy sexual activity and includes the promotion of engaging in unwanted sex as a performance of committed partnership. Both men and women are called on to perform sex work, and, ironically, as some sex manuals have embraced audiences that were formerly stigmatized or even desexualized by mainstream society (particularly, gays and lesbians, trans* and intersex people, seniors, and people with disabilities), they may also increase pressure on more populations to engage in sex work.

Yet, while wider audiences are encouraged to engage in sex work, some of the sex manuals explicitly or implicitly encourage men and women to perform different types of sex work. And because a number of the manuals present women's sexuality as inherently more problematic (for example, difficult to ignite and more tied to cognitive and emotional process), yet the key to her empowerment, the work of sexual improvement may be more easily rationalized for women. The one lesbian sex manual we analyzed is filled with advice regarding the importance of working on sex, whereas the one gay male sex manual we examined is lacking in this

discourse. Even when the manuals offer a "gender neutral" message, ostensibly encouraging an equal division of labor, because women are the primary consumers of sexual advice literature, women may be more likely to receive these messages (Blakeley, 2009; Duncombe and Marsden, 1996; Evans et al., 2010; Gill, 2009; Jackson and Scott, 1997; Simonds, 1992). Thus, as argued by Cacchioni (2007), whether or not a "pink" Viagra is discovered and successfully marketed, women will be continually called upon to master, improve, and rationalize sex through various forms of interpersonal "sex work." Sexual improvement is imbued with new urgency as sexual pleasure is constructed as if her humanity, empowerment, and now, even health depends on it.

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Notes

1. Scholars have attributed these changes in messages about heterosex to the influence of various social and political forces including Christianity, eugenic ideologies, the rise of feminism, new research on sexuality, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the sexualization of society (Hawkes, 1996; Tiefer, 2012; Weinberg et al., 1983). It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the social, political, and economic factors that have shaped sex manuals historically.
2. We included editions of books published since 2000 even if the original addition was published before 2000.
3. Available at: http://www.abebooks.com/docs/Community/Featured/sex-manuals.shtml (accessed 7 November 2012).
4. Of the manuals we selected, most were authored by relationship or sex therapists or sex educators; a few were authored by medical doctors or religious thinkers; and a few were collaborations between writers from different fields.
5. All of the manuals informed by feminist and queer perspectives challenged the privileging of coitus. For an example of a not explicitly feminist or queer manual that sets out to challenge the privileging of coitus, see Ian Kerner's *She Comes First* (2004). Kerner argues that penetrative intercourse is not as consistently pleasurable for many women as other forms of sexual activity, and he urges his male readers to embrace oral sex in order to create a shared experience of pleasure.
6. The only exception was *The Guide to Getting It On* (2009).
7. The only exceptions were *The Guide to Getting It On* (2009) and *The Joy of Gay Sex* (2006), as will be discussed later.
8. Neither *The Joy of Gay Sex* (2006) nor *The Whole Lesbian Sex Book* (2004) takes on the "sex for health" discourse, perhaps because, as Gupta (2011) argues, this discourse is often used in the service of compulsory heterosexuality.

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Appendix A

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