



Toward Women Wanting

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Received: 26 October 2018 / Accepted: 2 November 2018 / Published online: 6 December 2018
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In their Target Article, “The Relational and Bodily Experiences Theory of Sexual Desire in Women” (RBET), Cherkasskaya and Rosario (2018) leverage Freud’s much quoted query “What do women want?” to reformulate the question that the field has been exploring: “How women come to want and desire?” Predicated on an insightful critique of the literatures on women’s sexual desire, they offer a theory of internalized representations of relational and bodily experiences. The RBET is a thoughtful step forward in positing feminist analyses and psychological mechanisms to inform and explain women’s sexual desire. We applaud the critiques that underpin how Cherkasskaya and Rosario’s model configures the conceptualization and derivation of women’s sexual desire. We concur strongly that both relational experiences and sense of oneself as a sexual being have been shown to be part and parcel of women’s desire and that emphasizing these factors in the context of the extant models of (women’s) sexual desire they reviewed is overdue.

In this Commentary, we discuss the strengths of the RBET and also raise some questions and concerns about each element of the theory from critical social psychological standpoint(s) that have been fundamental to feminist approaches to desire. We highlight inconsistencies between Cherkasskaya and Rosario’s critique and how desire is conceptualized in the RBET. We raise questions about limiting relational experiences to attachment in infancy, embodiment rendered in what is ultimately a cognitive construct—sexual and bodily self-representations (SBSR), and shortcomings in their explication and application of sociocultural contexts that are fundamental to women’s experience of desire. Finally, we

query the proposed structure of the model of relational experiences, mediated by SBSR, leading to desire experiences. While we appreciate the parsimony of the model, we argue that, even with the caveat that Cherkasskaya and Rosario do not intend to offer a comprehensive model and that their work is meant to add another “layer” to current conceptions of desire, it is overly parsimonious. We conclude that the RBET offers compelling innovations to the sexual desire model literature, but that each of its components can and should be strengthened and justified conceptually. We offer some thoughts and suggestions about how the RBET model might be further developed to account for the important considerations raised for understanding female sexual desire.

(Re)conceiving Desire

In their critical review of the primarily clinical research and theorizing of women’s sexual desire, Cherkasskaya and Rosario offer or emphasize four dimensions of female sexual desire: (1) along a continuum to destabilize how it is pathologized; (2) as multidimensional; (3) situated within sociocultural contexts; and (4) as explicitly embodied (which we address below regarding the SBSR). They join a long history of critical pushing back against a pathologizing view of female sexual desire into low/inhibited desire (as a diagnostic category) and hypersexuality (though not a full blown diagnosis) (e.g., Fahs, 2011; Reid & Kafka, 2014; Spurgas, 2013; Tiefer, 1995). Their mobilization of the feminist literature, mostly outside of the clinical realm, that has troubled these categories as political social control of women’s sexuality (e.g., Hare, 1962; McClelland & Fine, 2008; Wood, Koch, & Mansfield, 2006) is important. We commend the alternative proposition of women’s desire as a normative continuum; in our reading, implicit in this call is that the mostly unmarked vast middle is also expectable or “normal.” While conceiving of desire as a continuum (and as multidimensional, see below) is not new (see Bancroft, Graham, Janssen, & Sanders, 2009; Spector, Carey, & Steinberg, 1996; Toledano & Pfaus, 2006), much of that literature *speaks* primarily to inhibited sexual desire that

This comment refers to the article available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1212-9>.

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is an entirely physiological phenomenon. As Cherkasskaya and Rosario note, only Basson (2000) recognizes relational context and, one might argue, though not explicitly, embodied experience; thus, their infusing relational experience and feminist-driven sexual body self-image is a major step forward. We are very interested in knowing more about this continuum. In the RBET, desire is operationalized such that intensity/frequency appears to constitute the continuum, which normalizes all experiences of desire (unless women themselves are concerned about their own desire, a now recognized dimension of sexual arousal/desire diagnoses). Are there other dimensions along which desire can be understood as a continuum? Is the “work” of the continuum solely to displace the polar pathologization? What of the vicissitudes of desire—how might the model account for a girl or woman who sometimes feels desire and sometimes does not? Is asexuality recognized as a normative absence of sexual desire (Brotto, Yule, & Gorzalka, 2015) on the continuum?

We appreciate Cherkasskaya and Rosario’s (2018) recognition of the multidimensionality of desire and shortcomings in other models on this front. Yet we are puzzled by the model’s limited operationalization of desire to three components— affective/cognitive, frequency, and intensity of solitary and partnered desire—which does not reflect this multidimensionality. What is the justification for including those three features of the many they articulated? How is affective/cognitive situated along a continuum of desire? Are they suggesting that the plethora of other dimensions that they mentioned, as well as some that they did not, are lower on a hierarchy of dimensions? One of several sources of desire as multidimensional is feminist research on adolescent sexuality, and we are impressed by their inclusion of this research into an arena primarily defined diagnostically and in essence salient for adults. Since adolescent girls neither seek nor get referred for clinical intervention due to “desire disorders” (Tolman, 2002), this body of work enables and demands inclusion of key dimensions outside of the dysfunction frame. We were glad to see that they utilized this literature for a toehold and in making a case for the necessity of considering sociocultural contexts and embodiment as critical dimensions of desire. For instance, Cherkasskaya and Rosario reference the finding in Tolman’s (2002) research with adolescent girls that some girls indicated an absence of embodied desire to destabilize low/inhibited desire as a diagnosis, thereby leveraging this conception of female sexual desire as a profoundly political experience in/of female adolescent bodies. We suggest that they could have also mobilized the findings that most of the girls in the study did, in fact, experience desire and dealt with it outside of the binary categories, including psychological resistance to the feelings in their bodies and a politics of refusal to demonize or dissociate from their sexual desire. Another dimension that Cherkasskaya and Rosario introduce indirectly is the development of desire. The model begins at infancy with parent–child

relations and leaps straight to adult women, suggesting though not articulating a developmental perspective on desire, in particular the relational and sexuality developmental milestones of adolescence (Tolman & McClelland, 2011).

We agree that sociocultural contexts are vital for how women’s sexual desire develops and is experienced. Cherkasskaya and Rosario offer substantive explanations of how two aspects of sociocultural context, gendered sexual scripts and homophobia, are imbricated in desire. Overall, however, we are perplexed that the rich body of research that documents women’s navigation of their desire, which carries specific meanings within the sociocultural landscapes of racism, classism, and ableism, is absent from their review. For instance, the history of Black women’s sexuality construed through controlling images of asexuality or hypersexuality due to the history of slavery (e.g., Collins, 1991) has ongoing impact on Black women’s sexual desire (e.g., Burns & Torre, 2005; Collins, 2004; hooks, 1981; Wyatt, 1982). This oversight is highlighted by how an intersectional perspective reveals other wrinkles in marginalized girls’ and young women’s experience of sexual desire, i.e., urban queer girls of color’s same-sex desire being policed in schools as hypersexual and contaminating by both peers and institutionalized discipline practices (Chmielewski, 2017).

Research on adolescence and emerging adulthood in particular illuminates that there have been substantive shifts in “the” heterosexual sexual script. The gendered scripts ascribing desire for relationships to girls and for sex to boys have become muddled (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Fahs, 2011; Phillips, 2000; Tolman, Anderson, & Belmonte, 2015). We have yet to determine the psychological impact of this new landscape, what Tolman and Chmielewski (2018) call a “renovated” sexual double standard that obscures yet also holds gender inequities along with mandates for “sexual empowerment” for (some) young women. For instance, the current literature reflects how neoliberalism has led to a racialized and classed “subjectification” (Gill, 2003; McRobbie, 2004) of (primarily White, privileged) young women, demanding an expectation of an “up for it” sexually savvy girl who knows what she wants sexually and takes it (“masculine style”), thus imposing a new form of regulation of girls’ desire or at least their performance of it (Diamond, 2005). If sexual scripts proffer at best a contradictory set of demands on female sexual subjectivity and complicate self-objectification (including objectification of desire itself), how might SBSR require modification? Does the proposed mechanism hold when meanings different from the ones offered for the “inputs” change so substantially? We wholeheartedly agree with their insistence on recognizing and incorporating lesbian and queer desires into their model of women’s desire overall (see also Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2002). The review of the literature on lesbian sexuality articulates how cultural assumptions of low desire among lesbians have been demonstrated to be

problematic and erroneous in research (e.g., Cohen & Byers, 2014), although the notion that lesbians are “hypersexual” is not addressed (Chmielewski, 2017). This focus seems to occlude the ways that homophobia as a sociocultural context for lesbian desire has been demonstrated to impact queer women’s experiences and navigation of sexual desire outside of questions about frequency or intensity (e.g., Diamond, 2008; Payne, 2010).

Queries About Relational Experiences

Extending life history back into infancy to explore female sexual desire is intriguing. We were surprised that “relational experience,” which we concur is vital to understanding female sexual desire, is limited to attachment in infancy. From a multiplicity of perspectives—psychological, sociocultural, and embodied—relational experience is constituted powerfully beyond infancy. Are Cherkasskaya and Rosario suggesting that attachment in infancy overwhelms or over-determines any other relational experiences? We are curious about the focus on attachment anxiety and avoidance in a normative approach to desire. What about secure attachment? Although it is briefly mentioned in the text as supporting more positive SBSR and therefore desire, only attachment anxiety and avoidance are explicitly included in their explanation of the model. From negative or traumatic relational experiences, extending from sexual and relationship violence to being labeled a slut, to positive ones, such as wonderful experiences of love to skilled lovers, multiple bodies of research have demonstrated and documented how relational histories and contexts shape desire for women (e.g., Diamond, 2008; Logan & Buchanan, 2008; Phillips, 2000). For instance, heterosexual relational experiences organized through the sociocultural context of ongoing gender inequity—a privileging of male desire even as female desire is now more fully recognized or even expected, but still not valued equally or valued only insofar as it contributes to male pleasure and satisfaction—inform desire (Fahs, 2011; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2004). Relational experiences understood as intrapsychic (i.e., a history of anorexia in response to cultural norms or trauma) or interpersonal history—including but not limited to the sexual—or as informed by everyday violence and/or threat of sexual violence or even the criminal justice system (Chmielewski, 2017; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Spurgas, 2013) seem critical to include in a relational experience construct in a theory of female sexual desire.

Pressure Testing Sexual Bodily Self-Representations

Introducing a feminist-driven concept of aspects of women’s social experiences into a desire model is a substantive innovation. We find the incorporation of objectification and sexual subjectivity into a model of women’s sexual desire compelling.

We agree wholeheartedly with Cherkasskaya and Rosario’s (2018) assertion that “women’s feelings about their bodies and their sense of embodiment” are vital to understanding women’s sexuality. We question though, whether the concept of SBSR actually encompasses embodiment and its proposed elements (sexual subjectivity, self-objectification, and genital self-image). Self-representation is a purely cognitive construct, conceptualized as a schema or knowledge structure (Baumeister, 1998). Their brief definition of sexual subjectivity combines Martin’s (1996) and Tolman’s early conceptualization, “the sense of ‘living in and through the body,’ staying connected to and tuned into the body, and experiencing sexual and pleasurable sensations *in the body*” (italics ours). A clearer conception of embodiment might be of use. Embodiment can and should be defined in two distinct ways: lived embodiment and perceived embodiment (see Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2014). Tolman’s conception incorporates both of these conceptions. The lived body—“living in and through the body”—draws on embodiment as sociocultural context becoming the body (Braidotti, 1994; Young, 2005). That is, this definition of embodiment reflects the idea that the sociocultural context gets “into” the body itself. Bodies themselves hold and are made from personal and social histories. One’s sexual and bodily self-representations are certainly *part* of one’s experience of embodiment and sexuality—perceived embodiment—but, despite Cherkasskaya and Rosario’s recognition of bodily sensations, the SBSR neither holds a critical dimension of embodiment (Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005) nor moves cognition into the body: the material body itself seems to be missing from the SBSR. We understand that the RBET postulates psychological mechanisms, but it also proposes the inclusion of embodiment. Although SBSR seems to be standing in for embodiment, it leaves out key dimensions of this construct. As with desire itself, the question of which women’s bodies matter and how is not incorporated into the SBSR or the model. The intersectional interplay between the social and the body is vital for sexual body self-representation that takes sociocultural context seriously. It has been widely argued that there is no monolithic “girl’s” or “woman’s” body (e.g., Fine, 1988). We wonder whether the SBSR can incorporate the ways in which the social is not just context outside of the body but is also imbricated in desire itself, and is fundamentally intersectional, i.e., racialization of desire (Fahs, 2011; hooks, 1981).

As with desire, we are puzzled by the particular constructs chosen to constitute SBSR. We wonder what the justification is for how and why these constitute SBSR—are there other constructs that were considered? In particular, we question the privileging of the genitals in SBSR. What makes genital shame (or confidence) different from feelings about other (sexual and nonsexual) body parts? Is genital self-image completely different than the body image constructs that fall within the definitions and measures of self-objectification? Could or should genital self-image, in fact, be encompassed within self-objectification as well? We also wonder how these

constructs themselves are actually operationalized—having poor body esteem may be an effect of self-objectification but is not a feature of it.

We agree that sexual subjectivity is an essential construct to include in understanding women’s sexual desire. We are curious about Cherkasskaya and Rosario’s (2018) definition and operationalization of sexual subjectivity, which seems to be both underutilized and mischaracterized. Cherkasskaya and Rosario’s use of the concept of sexual subjectivity seems limited to the positive: agency to be sexual, having a sense of sexual ownership and entitlement, and having bodily confidence. Sexual subjectivities have been defined as young women’s feelings of and about sexual pleasure, sexual desire, and a sense of oneself as a sexual being, as well as making decisions or simply acting in ways that include or consider one’s own embodied feelings (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Phillips, 2000), including not to act on them (Tolman et al., 2015, p. 304). Sexual subjectivity is not a static state of being a positively agentic person, but is ever-shifting across explicitly sexual as well as nonsexual situations, and relational, social, and temporal contexts (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; McClelland & Frost, 2014). In addition, only sexual body esteem operationalizes sexual subjectivity, leaving out the agency and entitlement that is discussed as central in the text (and measured in the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory, upon which they rely; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). If sexual subjectivity is indeed conceptualized as power/agency/entitlement as indicated in text, this concept should not be subsumed under self-representations, as sexual subjectivity is a larger concept that, in fact, includes but is not limited to one’s sexual and bodily self-representations, that includes one’s embodied feelings, and desire itself (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Tolman et al., 2015). It would appear that Cherkasskaya and Rosario may have it backwards.

Questions About Construction of the Model

We find the RBET as a positive move toward positing the psychological mechanisms that inform women’s sexual desire, incorporating intrapsychic processes and feminist analyses. We are left with several questions about its structure. We wonder how the linear relations in this proposed mediation were conceived. Why is SBSR (or perhaps alternatively, sexual subjectivity or embodiment) a mediator between attachment style and sexual desire? Although the literature to suggest links between attachment and sexual desire is discussed, as are the links between components of SBSR (self-objectification and genital self-image) and aspects of sexual functioning, the causal link between relational experiences and SBSR is not spelled out. Is the model positing or relying on a set of processes that are inherently linear—the intrapsychic becomes the cognitive (emotional?) becomes desire experience (Nobre, 2009, cited

in Brotto & Smith, 2015)? If so, how is the affective/cognitive part of desire itself distinct from SBSR? Cherkasskaya and Rosario point out that attachment experiences are physical and embodied and thus postulate that sexual embodiment is influenced by one’s early experiences of nurturance from one’s caregivers. SBSR represents part of the mechanism—the cognitive one—that points toward embodiment but, as we argue, not embodiment itself. Further, based on our own work and that of other feminist sexuality scholars, it is likely that the relationship between SBSR and sexual desire is not linear, particularly given understandings of sexual desire as part of rather than as a consequence of sexual subjectivity. One’s sense of oneself as a sexual person, sexual agency, and sexual embodiment likely do influence one’s experience and perhaps levels of sexual desire, but sexual desire can be an antecedent to one’s sexual agency or other components of sexual subjectivity (Chmielewski, Tolman, & Bowman, 2018; Holland et al., 2004; Tolman, 2002). We would postulate that SBSR and sexual desire are likely to have a circular relationship, and we wonder how addressing this circularity in the model might allow for a more full and complex understanding of women’s sexual desire.

Conclusion

Cherkasskaya and Rosario’s RBET is an exciting step forward in a feminist understanding of the psychological mechanisms underpinning women’s sexual desire. We have suggestions for how the model could be more fully developed to answer the question of how women come to want and desire. We think that some of the important model constructs (subjectivity, agency, embodiment, multidimensional desire) and their possibly more complex relationships to one another could be further developed and clarified. Explicating, justifying, and possibly constructing SBSR from sexual subjectivity (more clearly defined), objectification, and genital self-image would add clarity. In particular, we feel that this cognitive model is missing the “body” that Cherkasskaya and Rosario reference, rightfully in our opinion, as fundamental to a model of women’s sexuality. We suggest actually adding embodiment itself as a construct into the model, perhaps mediating SBSR and desire. How cognitive “sexual bodily self-representations” work as a pathway to desire is a distinct process that can accommodate both perceived embodiment and lived embodiment (see also Piran, 2017)—the body as both a feeling body and “imbricated” within multiple shifting, intersectional social contexts, and institutions (i.e., not just a patriarchy). Piran’s (2017) measure of embodiment assesses experiences of bodily *feelings* (not just sexual ones) in girls and women across the lifespan and could perhaps be a useful way for Cherkasskaya and Rosario to explore how this factor adds to their model of desire. We also question the linear mediating pathways

proposed; the circular relationships we see suggested by the feminist literature examining desire as key to sexual subjectivity, rather than the other way around, stand in contrast with the linearity of the proposed model. We appreciate their work to incorporate embodiment and sociocultural contexts into the clinical literature in particular that is overwhelmingly focused with a limited lens on biology and dysfunction. We understand that the RBET is not meant to usurp other models of desire or be the one and only pathway to sexual desire. We are hopeful that elaborating this model will yield a highly necessary more psychological and feminist contribution to the array of models of sexual desire, in particular women's sexual desire, that have such critical implications for clinical interventions and research on women's sexuality.

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