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Talking Masturbation:
Men, Women, and Sexuality Through Playful Discourse¹

A recent study by the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (Herbenick 2010) found that 94 percent of men and 84 percent of women between the ages of 25 to 29 reported masturbating solo (as differentiated between mutual masturbation, a category that sees higher numbers of participants). While this may not be so surprising, it was also reported that 80 percent of men and 58 percent of women over the age of 70 reported masturbating solo. This study affirms what many people may speculate: people like to “get off” and they don’t always need someone else to help them. As widespread as masturbation is in American society, there is a strong social stigma attached to it. Young men and women do not commonly share masturbation stories, as is often done between friends when discussing sexual encounters. Talking and teasing about masturbation is a discourse often shrouded in metaphorical phrases that displace personal stories.

This essay is about masturbation talk, or more precisely, the varieties of slang speech practices that characterize how men and women, particularly young men and women, talk, tease, and joke about masturbation. As well as being a researcher of this masturbation talk, I am a twenty-one year old college student who has grown up around, and participated in, this discourse that includes slang phrases such as, “jacking off,” “beating off, and “getting off.” I am familiar with the playful contexts in which these terms and phrases are most often used and continue to see their use among my peers today. This project, then, represents my attempt to make sense of this discourse, which I

argue in the first instance is a gendered talk, employed differently by boys and girls and men and women, and which opens a window into the everyday dynamics of gendered identities in the United States.

This study seeks to understand the relationship between talking about masturbation and masturbation as an everyday practice in the United States. This essay is arranged in terms of a number of overlapping sections that converge to offer a clearer interpretive context for a discussion of the results of the questionnaire and interview data. The first part of my essay is an attempt to make sense of the cultural history and to situate conceptions about masturbation and attempts to regulate it up to present day. Then, as a gendered talk, it is necessary to engage in a theoretical discussion of gender and gendered knowledge, which integrate all of the arguments in the paper. Before finally discussing my own data, I will review the work of other scholars that have studied masturbation and sex talk in the U.S.

This project has faced a number of constraints, from time limitations to difficulties accessing a more diverse array of respondents. As such, I have been unable to address how racial identity or socioeconomic class, to cite but a few important variables, impact these forms of talk. In my efforts to produce a comparative study on this topic, an approach I have yet to find in published works, I attempted to contact Mexican style Spanish speakers within my community. While there are many such folks in this community, the majority grew up here in America without a strong grasp for popular Mexican slang. Nevertheless, further below, I will briefly examine some of the materials gathered from languages besides English.

The Social History of Masturbation

This examination of masturbation slang terminology assumes that there must be some particular reason for these slang terms to exist. That is, masturbation, as a social topic, has necessitated these terms and phrases in order to create a public discourse where ideas of gender and sexuality are dominant players. One question that begs to be asked is why has this slang terminology developed so prominently? Addressing this question requires a consideration of masturbation as a cultural practice that is often the cause of great social angst. Thomas Laqueur's (2003) text *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* tracks masturbation's social life through mostly Western history. His detailed examination helps explain, historically, both the taboo perception of masturbation and the associated speech genres that emerged to communicate about masturbation. For our purposes², the discussion begins when masturbation makes its transformation from being viewed "with the most serene indifference" before the early 1700s to being a central topic during the Enlightenment period.

Masturbation's initial move from a trivial matter of sex and pleasure to the forefront of Enlightenment medicine is a story of marketing genius. Laqueur even provides us with a date that began the transformation: 1712. It was in this year that John Marten published the first edition of *Onania; or, The Heinous Sin of Self Pollution, and all its Frightful Consequences, in both SEXES Considered, with Spiritual and Physical Advise to those who have already injured themselves by this abominable practice...* (to be henceforth referred to as *Onania*). This text's success is truly the story of a perfect storm. As Laqueur says, "Without a booming commerce in books and medicines, and without the profit motive, onanism, as we know it, would not exist" (25). The term "*Onania*" was

derived from the Genesis story of Onan, who spilled his seed on the ground rather than into a woman and was struck down.

The emerging spirit of capitalism enabled the medicalization of Onanism. With Marten's book came the recommended medication that could help cure one of the sinful self-polluting act. Luckily enough for the reader, this medicine could also be bought wholesale from the same vendor who carried the book. The idea, then, was to teach people about a disease they didn't know they had and offer an option for a cure at the same. However, in the context of so many questionable diagnoses and frivolous medicines at this time, how did masturbation garner the attention of some of the most important scholars of the Enlightenment period? The Enlightenment was really a time of liberation for the individual. As Peter Gay (1966) says,

The men of the Enlightenment united on a vastly ambitious program...freedom, in a word, of a moral man to make his own way in the world...take the risk of discovery, exercise the right of unfettered criticism, accept the loneliness of autonomy. (3)

This era according to Gay created an individual now guided by an internal moral compass. What were the new moral, or otherwise pervasive issues that one must deal with in this new "loneliness of autonomy"? In the realm of sex and pleasure, masturbation is as autonomous as one can get.

Morality is central to this idea of self-governance and as such the Enlightenment underscored a newfound responsibility to make morally appropriate decisions concerning one's self³ (a sort of honor system of accountability). In this context, masturbation became a symbol for the ultimate withdrawal from society into self, almost a betrayal to this sense of self-accountability. Masturbation was the mind turning to fantasy as guide

for personal pleasure. In the minds of Enlightenment thinkers, this slip into fantasy to supplement the real was a rejection of humanity. Indeed, for Kant, to masturbate was to embrace animality (Kant 1971). Where the capacity for reason is uniquely human, in Kant's mind masturbation is a carnal lust representing an absence of ethical agency on the part of the individual. In addition, another important enlightenment philosopher, David Hume, saw discipline of sexuality as an agent of moral control. In his book, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume (2000) stated that it was necessary to, "impose a due restraint on the female sex, we must attach a particular degree of shame to their infidelity...and must bestow proportionable praises on their chastity" (571). Hume's cautions, along with those of the other scholars discussed here, indicate that the female body has long been feared by western society for its sexuality, in a way without any similar or parallel preoccupation with the male body (see, for example, Lorber and Moore (2007), Fingerson (2006), and Brumberg (1997) for more). The increasingly gendered medicalization of masturbation emerged as yet another way in which this need to "tame" women's bodies, which were so often viewed as the site of out-of-control libido and the source of pollution.

During the Enlightenment science emerged as the dominant rationale of the period. Under the umbrella of science, Enlightenment medicine began to speak directly to the issue of morality.

If norms were to be grounded not in divine revelation but in an understanding of what nature demanded, and if violations of such norms were made evident through pathology, then doctors were both guides to what was right and diagnosticians of what was wrong (Laqueur 41)

Thus, medicine was granted power and authority over morality through its ability to identify (and treat) manifestations of moral violations. *Onanism* represented a

particularly dire threat to this concept of self-responsibility. Onanism was dangerous, especially because it opened the doors to fantasy and art. One's imagination was required in the realm of self-pleasure drawing the masturbator farther into him/herself and away from society and science. *Onania* was a guide for doctors and patients to help remedy this self-polluting disease and ensure a course of life in line with the rational ideals of that time.

The text, *Onania*, became increasingly popular among Europeans, earning an entry Diderot's "epoch defining *Encyclopedie*" (37). Some sources estimated, by this point (1765) *Onania* had as many as 80 different editions published in England and had spread to France, Germany, Russia and even Japan (Laqueur 2003). As a topic that spoke directly to issues surrounding the new thought of the Enlightenment, masturbation and *onanism*, along with their cure⁴, found a receptive forum throughout the period.

The extreme practice of clitoridectomy during the 19th century was one manifestation of these cultural attitudes towards masturbation. John Duffy (2003) portrays this practice and similar practices for males in his article, "Clitoridectomy: A Nineteenth Century Answer to Masturbation." Although not frequently a mainstream practice, physicians of the late 19th century wrote of clitoridectomy as a successful practice as a cure for masturbation and its side effects. In one instance Dr. A.J. Bloch described how he had cured a schoolgirl who suffered from "nervousness and pallor" by "liberating the clitoris from its adhesions and by lecturing the patient on the dangers of masturbation" (2). This type of physical discipline over the body was not limited to women during this period either. Duffy cites cases where men who confessed to masturbating were, "treated with blistering agents, mild acidic solutions, or leeches

applied to the genitals” (1). He also discussed one recorded case where a man who was afraid for his own sanity as a result of his masturbation actually had a doctor castrate him. Clearly with *Onania* and the prevailing medical knowledge of the Enlightenment, cultural attitudes of disgust towards masturbation became fairly widespread in the west. However, as science advanced and some of the imaginary physical “side effects” of masturbation were debunked, another thinker re-invigorated some of the Kantian foundations on which the Enlightenment sought to tarnish masturbation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the voice of Sigmund Freud was added to the chorus of many scientists proclaiming the dangers of masturbation in the 20th century. Freud, who drew distinct psychoanalytic boundaries between childhood, adolescence and adulthood,⁵ advanced the popular notion that masturbation represented a form of child’s play. While such behavior was “the enemy of adult sexuality” (71), Freud actually saw no harm in childhood masturbation, as a sort of practice for the necessary act of sex to come. Yet he saw little need for female masturbation since adult sex involved vaginal, not clitoral, stimulation. For an adult, masturbation was, “now a symptom of abjection, a sign of failure, a font of guilt, and a token of inadequacy” (73). Freud had successfully manifested the Kantian idea of masturbation as a sign of failed moral self into a psychological condition. A condition that could still be cured, but now through the process of normative psychogenesis. The concept that one needed to go through a normalization process to aid in ceasing masturbation overtly labels the act of masturbation as abnormal, or taboo.

The feminist campaign of the 1960s and 70s saw a backlash against Freudian ideas about masturbation. Numerous books were published for women to reclaim

masturbation and the female orgasm such as, *Women Discover Orgasm* and *For Yourself*, by Lonnie Barbach, *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies*, by Nancy Friday. These types of books along with the rhetoric of the sex-positive feminist movement “hailed masturbation as the safest, most pleasurable path to self-discovery and fulfillment” (Laqueur 80) for women. However, men were largely unaffected by this movement. For them, the next major impact came in the 80s with the association between masturbation and homosexuality. The HIV/AIDS outbreak saw the gay community shutting down bathhouses and relying heavily on masturbation as an alternative form of pleasure, bringing masturbation away from privacy and into a more social atmosphere. Heterosexual men were still mostly of the belief that, “it was a silly thing to do; real men who could get girls did not need it” (80).

Working our way from the Enlightenment to more modern times, conceptions of masturbation become increasingly more gender related. That is, initially there were prescribed physical ailments associated with masturbation for both sexes (even the title of *Onania* included the phrase “*consequences, in both sexes considered...*”). Freud’s approach focused on female masturbation as clitoral stimulation and thus insignificant since it does not relate to any procreative purpose. For boys, masturbation was preparatory and a sort of means to an end, but must be curtailed in adulthood, for no self-respecting man needed to masturbate, this was literally child’s play. Ultimately, masturbation came to be a strongly gendered symbol. For some women, it represented a path to self-liberation from a social patriarchy. To be in control of one’s own pleasure and free from male conceptions of female sexuality was a strong form of empowerment. This gender asymmetry that still shapes masturbation talk is a central focus of this study,

and the work of feminist historian Joan Scott (1987), in tandem with the scholarship of other feminist theorists such as Robin Lakoff, Candace West, and Don Zimmerman, provides a theoretical framework that have been critical to my understanding of gender in this study. In addition, I turn to philosopher Michel Foucault in order to understand how gender disciplines the body, society, and sexuality.

The Body and Gender: from Philosophy to Feminism

It is important to introduce the work of Michel Foucault and his three-volume treatise “The History of Sexuality” (1978). What is essential in terms of Foucault’s contributions to this essay is his understanding of the dynamics of body, society, and sexuality. In describing Foucault’s philosophy, Johanna Oksala (2007) says, “For Foucault, the aim of philosophy is to question the ways in which we think, live and relate to other people and to ourselves in order to show how that-which-is could be otherwise” (10). Foucault was interested in exposing society to itself and in *The History of Sexuality* he argues how “our conceptions and experiences of sexuality are in fact always the result of specific cultural conventions and technologies of power and could not exist independently of them” (70). These conventions, examined above, and mechanisms of power⁶ discipline the *interaction between* the body, society, and sexuality as well as those entities themselves.

In his discussion of discipline, the body, and society Foucault used an intellectual archeology of the prison system to examine these relationships. Although not all of his studies related to sexuality, the vast sum of his philosophical writings were aimed at developing conceptual tools that could be used in various other explorations of society (Oksala 2007). In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) states the following:

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. (138)

Here, Foucault lays out a specific dynamic where through everyday interactions we form conceptions about our bodies and how they should perform in specific social contexts. Foucault brings together, for our purposes, an understanding that society frames one's relations with one's body and sexuality in terms of gendered structures of power.

While Foucault refers to structures of power and society, rather than gendered structures of power and society we can turn to the work of Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) who present gender and sex category as omnirelevant in our society in their article "Doing Gender." Thus, any social structure or structure of power is inherently one concerned with gender. West and Zimmerman make a pointed distinction between three different categories: sex, sex category, and gender. We can think of sex as a biological typing of persons that initially places them into a sex category (in our case either male or female). As they put it, "sex category is achieved through the application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category" (127). These "gender displays," as they are referred to, are the everyday mostly unconscious instances of doing gender; or, displaying our assumed sex category for others to perceive correctly – cultural work. Furthermore, in our society they posit that, "we operate with a moral certainty of a world of two sexes...we take it for granted

that sex and sex category are congruent” (132; Lorber & Moore 2007, pp. 2-4). How do we decipher sex category in our everyday lives? Gender, then, is not a category that requires membership; rather, gender is “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (127). Gender is something that someone *does* and is an active and dynamic process reflective in almost everything we perform as cultural beings.

Joan Scott is another scholar who views gender as something a social actor does (1987). For her, gender is a dynamic structural system patterning frameworks for social behavior. Indeed, “the production of culturally appropriate forms of male and female behavior is a central function of social authority” (XXII). Social authority, here, refers more to the general knowledge that we hold concerning our conceptions of what it means to be male or to be female. Just as Foucault mentioned that these types of structures explicitly discipline the body, Judith Lorber & Lisa Jean Moore discuss a similar effect in their book, *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives*. Their discussion centers around the idea that human bodies are not natural:

they are socially produced under specific cultural circumstances. They are shaped by sociocultural ideals of what female and males bodies should look like and be capable of. Bodies are socially constructed for dominance and submission and are symbolic in different ways. (4-5).

In this way social knowledge concerning the body is manifest in disciplining the body itself to form these conceptions; thus, the body is not a product of nature, but of social knowledge and gendered structures. What concerns this study is how this knowledge is displayed from one individual to another and, as Scott states, “norms of gender are not always explicitly stated; they are often implicitly conveyed through uses of language and other symbols” (XXIII). Language is a central agent in the cultural work performed to

establish and maintain social structures of gender.

Scott poses questions about gender equality⁷ while asking for exploration into more general cultural attitudes concerning the relationship between men and women. It is in this regard, aiming to provide a further foundation for understanding these cultural attitudes, that this study can prove insightful. Scott's conception of a gender system that is both dynamic and an agent of cultural work is a very ambivalent one. She establishes a tension within gender boundaries where at times of radical social change they can be redrawn, and at other times they are constantly asserting themselves over social systems. Scott (1987: XXVI) embraces the views of French theorist Jacques Lacan (1968) that, "the wholeness of any self is a fiction that must be constantly reasserted and redefined in different contexts." This is particularly potent in the context of our discussion of masturbation slang. As an inventive and playful realm of language, these slang phrases, Lacan might suggest, represent a linguistic attempt to situate oneself and one's sexuality within current gender structures as an affirmation of identity.

Viewing language as a mechanism of identity is not new. However, it is more often that our language identifies us *to* others. That is, certain dialects or styles of speech are perceptibly indicative of social class, regional origin, gender, etc. In her article, "Language and woman's place," Robin Lakoff (1973) discusses the idea of a style or subset of language specific to women. Although some of the specific examples may not hold true today, much of the thought behind Lakoff's paper is still applicable. Her discussion centers around the idea that in a patriarchal/male dominated power structure women are marginal. Women's speech represents expectations of how women should speak as well as the ways in which women are spoken of⁸. More importantly for us, she

raises questions about how this specific subset of language develops.

Lakoff posits that both young boys and young girls initially learn women's language. However, at a certain point children (boys especially) begin to experiment with rough talk. Social environment seems to dictate much of what happens next, but in young girls it is more likely that this rough speech will be seen as amusing and will be discouraged more than for young boys. Eventually, it seems that, "boys have unlearned their original form of expression, and adopted new forms of expression, while the girls retain their old ways of speech" (47-48). In developing this new form of expression, Lakoff notes, it is often suggested that boys innovate in language use more often than girls (since girls have a pre-established "women's language" to grow into). This idea of innovation and language play is strongly correlative to this study's data that has produced a significantly larger quantity of slang terms for males than for females.

Playing with language: reviews, results and discussion

The majority of the scholarship that exists on masturbation is highly survey based with little attempt to go beyond the collection and discussion of raw data. The majority of the knowledge about masturbation concerns frequency differentiated between males and females as well as among age groups - that being said, there is not a wealth of knowledge concerning even these aspects. As Atwood & Gagnon (1987) put it, "masturbation is among the least studied aspects of sexuality" (35). Furthermore, the majority of the work that exists, Arafat (1974), Atwood (1987), Gordon (1993), still cites the very old Kinsey study of the 50s as a main body of knowledge concerning sexual practices. The new study by The National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior, mentioned in the opening

of this essay, is a great step towards a modern and cumulative understanding of sexual habits. However, scholarship on masturbation in particular, especially as it relates to the normal⁹ socialization of youth, is quite scarce.

Three main works pertain directly to the study of masturbation practices among college youth, “Sexual slang and gender,” by Michael Gordon (1993), “Masturbation Practices of Males and Females,” by Arafat & Cotton (1974), and “Masturbatory behavior in college youth,” by Atwood & Gagnon (1987). The Gordon article provides an array of data concerning slang terminology for masturbation (and other areas of sexuality) but leaves most questions of context unanswered. He recognizes this and at the end of his article poses a number of context-oriented questions that would provide, “a more complete picture of how sexual slang articulates with gender” (20). These questions include knowing how this type of talk is learned, in what contexts it is deemed appropriate and how it varies among different ethnicities and ages.

Atwood & Gagnon (1987) examine frequency of masturbation as well as the question of age: when males vs. females first masturbated and when they stopped, if they did. They also describe their article as the first attempt at examining the relationship between their data and socialization of sexuality. That being said, they rely heavily on their sampling data for discussion. The interviewing they carried out was done by all females and had a structured set of questions to pose that seemed to prime respondents. For example, one question posed to males was, “Masturbation is very common in our society. How old were you the first time you were able to make yourself climax by masturbating yourself?” (36). The same question for females omits the first sentence and adds the restriction of “after you began to menstruate” (36-37). In their discussion they

do not overtly include any quotes or citing of interviews. However, they do make good use of their data in relation to conceptions of sexuality in youth.

In a purely sample-based study, Arafat & Cotton (1974) build upon the Kinsey findings of the late 40s/early 50s. Beyond some discussion of cultural attitudes concerning masturbation, their brief analysis serves mainly as a summation of the data collected. It is my intention to try to answer some of the questions posed by Gordon and left unanswered by other studies. While I have surveyed mainly white middle-aged private college students, my discussion will seek to integrate interviews with these students concerning these contextual and socializing questions that have been posed.

Two studies on slang terms for female and male genitalia are significant, Deborah Cameron's (1992) and Braun & Kitzinger's (2001). In Cameron's (1992) article we see the terms analyzed for their metaphorical content. She identifies the metaphorical categories that are used to represent the penis: as animal, as tool, as a weapon, as food, as phonaesthetic terms, and a small number were miscellaneous. Cameron employs the work of conceptual metaphor scholar George Lakoff in understanding these terms. Lakoff, here, describes how lust and anger are both "understood in terms of the metaphorical categories "heat," "hunger," "wild animals," "war"" (378). Lakoff suggests that this conceptual connection between lust and anger in some cases is used to justify rape in the minds of men. Cameron goes on to conclude that in her study, the metaphorical categories prevalent for the penis offer, "an experience of masculinity as dominance, femininity as passivity, and sex as conquest" (379).

Braun and Kitzinger's (2001) article examines female genital slang and its relevant semantic categories. They cite that 53% of females are uncomfortable even

using the word ‘vagina.’ They coded female genital slang terms into 17 categories (as relative to their stating that male terms have been coded into 26 different categories): standard slang, euphemism, space, receptacle, abjection, hair, animal, money, personification, gender identity, edibility, danger, nonsense, sex and pleasure, plants, fantasy creatures, and urination. Although they collected 317 different terms for female genitalia, Braun and Kitzinger were struck by the nonspecificity of these slang terms. All of the terms, “appeared simply to refer to the genital area in general, without a clear and specific physical referent (e.g. vagina, clitoris, labia)” (153). Referring to this over-generalization in slang as female genitalia as one entity, they say, “A language that does not enable women to talk about the different parts of the genitalia, or to conceptualize the genitalia as constructed of various parts, might perpetuate the absence of women’s genitalia from their conceptualized body” (155). Thus, we see that this metaphorical discourse, similar to that of masturbation talk, can effectively discipline how members of society perceive their genitalia relative to conceptions of sex and sexuality.

It is in the presence of these metaphorical entailments in masturbation language play that originally motivated me to begin to wonder about the metaphorical content that might (or might not) emerge in similar forms of talk in other languages. Although this comparative perspective is central to the anthropological perspective, no published studies exist that examine this issue. Over the course of the past year I have attempted both formally (interviewing speakers of Spanish) and informally (through conversation and internet surfing) to explore the possible content of Spanish slang for masturbation for both men and women. I have listed the terms that we were able to gather in a table titled,

“Spanish Masturbation Terms.” Although these data were not systematically gathered in terms of gender, speakers of Spanish will recognize them as largely phrases used by males for male masturbation (Arturo Garcia Osorio & Alejandro Enriquez, Personal Communication).

The largest problem with my attempt at incorporating Spanish slang into this study is that all of the Spanish informants I spoke with grew up in the United States. This meant that there was too much English interference in their acquisition of slang terminology. While they spoke conversational Spanish perfectly, their slang discourse was primarily in English. The lack of reliable data do not allow for any conclusive insights regarding Spanish masturbation talk. However, the linguistic samples we gathered do at least suggest, first, that some evidence of a humorous masturbation lexicon in Spanish exists, and second, that the metaphors embodied in these small number of phrases are not inconsistent with those found in the English data set.

Importantly, it seems that speakers in many different language communities have access to some playful masturbation terminology. For example, in everyday Japanese there are only a few of such phrases including, most notably, the expression *onani*. While Japanese users may not realize it, this is a direct descendent of *Onanism*, which was translated into Japanese, according to Laqueur, and apparently the term stuck. *Senzuri*, literally “a thousand strokes” in Japanese, is a term used more often by girls and women (Charles Springwood, personal communication). In Mandarin, although masturbation is not commonly a topic for casual conversation, a number of terms and a genre of discussion exists for both males and females (Yuxina & Ying 2009).

And, in contrast Gilbert Herdt et al. (1990) argues that the Sambia, a Papua New

Guinean society known for ritualized homosexual practices including the fellatio of men by older boys, approach masturbation quite differently than in the West. While Herdt et al. were able to identify at least one slang phrase for self-pleasure *kalu mundereindapinu* (literally to feel excitement), this term is not used in reference to orgasm or sexual intercourse. Semen is considered to be a limited and precious resource, and Sambian boys and men do not, reportedly, masturbate to orgasm. Some Sambian men even deny masturbating at all, suggesting that an elaborate self-pleasure discourse may not exist.

The sampling data of English male and female masturbation slang terms and phrases in this study was obtained during several cued response survey sessions at Illinois Wesleyan University in which all the participants were students of the University. I explained the study to the students and then distributed response sheets that had one side labeled “male” and the other side labeled “female.” Students were told if they were uncomfortable with the subject matter they were free to leave at any time. All of the students volunteered and did not receive any compensation for their participation. The rest of the session was silent as students filled out the surveys which were returned to me and have been in my possession since. Sampling included 31 students, 10 of who were men and 21 of who were women.

The focus groups were organized by soliciting the University population as a whole as well as anthropology classes and among students who attended the cued response sessions. There was a focus group of three women led by a highly qualified female research assistant who is a sociology alum of the University and has experience in interviewing. The male focus group was led by myself and Professor Springwood was also present. Each session lasted about 60-90 minutes. The participants were informed

that they were free to leave at any time for any reason, however, everyone stayed for the duration. Again, all the participants volunteered and did not receive any compensation for their participation. There were three participants in each focus group from the same University pool as the sampling data.

24% of women did not know a single term for female masturbation; they all knew at least one for male masturbation. Women knew on average 5 terms for male masturbation (low 1; high 17) and on average 2.24 terms for female masturbation (low 0; high 6). Men knew on average 10.3 terms for male masturbation (low 4; high 16) and on average 4.3 terms for female masturbation (low 2; high 10). There were twice as many (plus one) women in the sampling study, however, men produced about twice as many terms for both male and female masturbation.

During our interviews, one of the male informants said something that I think captures well the male sentiment toward masturbation: “we wouldn’t be entirely comfortable with either the reality of someone masturbating or the idea of them not masturbating.” It is a part of my aim in this discussion to unpack what is at work in this statement. Within the context of talking about masturbation explicitly, the idea of one getting “caught” masturbating came up more than once. This idea of being caught masturbating implies that the act is a crime. You would never say, “I was in the bathroom and my room mate walked in on me and caught me brushing my teeth.” This idea of wrongdoing or harm associated with masturbation that has been perpetuated since the Enlightenment has been mostly removed from medicine and psychology, but it is still quite present culturally.

We asked members of the male group to consider how they talk about

heterosexual sex among their friends as related to masturbation. One of the men said of sex that, “someone else is acknowledging that, well, they like your body enough that you can put it inside them.” As crude as this sentence may come off, it is very telling of the conceptual difference between sex and masturbation for men. Sexual intercourse is viewed as another’s affirmation of your sexuality for men. Our participants said that this is why men often gloat of their sexual activity with others and will gladly announce sexual encounters. They are asserting that their maleness and sexual prowess has been recognized and affirmed by a woman.

Concerning masturbation, there is a general acknowledgement among men that everybody masturbates (at least that all males do). The male informants discussed how sometimes when one term is thrown out in conversation (usually in an all-male context) this can trigger a sort of competitive response among others where they will all use a different slang expression, at times try to invent new ones. For men, these terms are most often used in a teasing and joking manner. One particular scenario given was when a group of guys is waiting for one or when a group is wondering where another man might be. A common response is, “oh he’s probably beatin it.” In this way, males can recognize the commonality of masturbation. As if to say, when I’m alone I masturbate, so I will just assume that is what he is doing. However, to think about the reality of another man masturbating is almost to insert yourself into his autoerotic fantasy. So this lexicon of terms and phrases exist for men to recognize and discuss the universality of their experience while not having to engage in one another’s personal emotional experiences.

This concept of removing the emotional element from masculine sexuality can

explain the type of slang terms/phrases that male masturbation talk has developed. The terms tend to follow a cadence of “verb(ing) the noun.” The common verbs produced by our sampling data included: jerking, beating, whacking, spanking, choking, and bashing (produced by both men and women, although more by men). Bashing the Bishop has absolutely no literal association to masturbating. Yet, men do not call masturbating something that could be more applicable to the act, such as “acting out the fantasy.” The closest we get to that is “rub one out” or “touching yourself” which is a commentary on the mechanical nature of the act, not the mental or emotional aspects. These terms allow the speaker to remove himself as much as possible from the idea of masturbation as fantasy.¹⁰

This is the same fear that the Enlightenment thinkers had – that one’s fantasies would poison the progress of rationale and science. While we don’t have a fear of physical ailments, and the psychological distresses are being debunked (at least in academia) culture has assumed the role that these other authorities played for so long. Male masturbation talk is an affirmation of a certain conceptualization of male sexuality: that it is almost purely physical and it should be removed from conceptions of emotion. This idea of men as physical over emotional is not new, but what is interesting is the impact this is having on women. In this context, female sexuality is not considered more emotionally centered because women are emotional; it is because men are not, or at least not supposed to be. Lakoff discussed this idea of women as marginal; that women are relegated specific feminine dialog (women’s speech) containing subjects that are of no interest or use to men. In the case of masturbation talk, this theory serves a very important role of providing understanding of conceptions of female sexuality. This

discourse is of use to men, and thus is relegated as marginal for women.

The women recognized the disparity in quantity of terms between men and women as a disparity in the overall discourse about masturbation. They felt that this male dominated talk told males that masturbation was more socially acceptable and the lack of phrases and masturbation talk for females seemed to suggest that masturbation, as a topic of conversation, was irrelevant. As one informant put it, “males are taught that their needs are more important, by having more [slang] words, and that females are taught that sex is more just something you do to make babies or to make the man happy and that actually getting pleasure out of it isn’t important.” Recall Freud’s commentary on female masturbation – that it was irrelevant as practice for sex (as masturbation should be) since sex involved vaginal and not clitoral stimulation. In adopting this belief as a cultural attitude it seems that the early 20th century had disciplined female sexuality for decades to come.

The women also commented that the disparity offered men greater accessibility to a dialog about masturbation, or a greater range of linguistic resources. What is interesting here is that women felt that this multitude of slang phrases allowed men to create an open and direct dialog about their own masturbation. As we have seen, the dialog may be more direct, but it is not exactly open. Men are commenting on the universality of the experience while trying to remove the personal or emotional element. Furthermore, among the male participants, the majority of them cited having their father or brother tease them with these terms when they were younger (elementary school age).

One informant recalled from his childhood, “as I kid I always used to put my hands in my pocket and [my father] would always be like, what are you doing? Playing

pocket pool?” At first he didn’t even know what that meant, but that this was how he was initially exposed to these terms. However, all of the women stated that they never have and probably never will talk to their mothers about masturbation. For women, this talk rarely exists until they are exposed to male terms.

One recurring statement during the male focus group when referring to women who used these slang phrases was that they were, “one of the guys.” The men commented that they would use the terms around women, even if they knew the women would be disgusted, but that they didn’t know many women who used female or male terms at all and the ones who did were one of the guys. So by using these terms the woman actually loses her status as female or at least removes herself from the realm of feminine sexuality in the eyes of her male counterpart. Similarly, a couple of the women recalled that they will sometimes use male terms when talking about females in an all female group. So while male masturbation talk helps give us an idea of how men view and seek to view their own sexuality, what does this absence of female masturbation talk tell us?¹¹

Two particular instances shed light on the idea that for some women masturbation talk is considered strange. Commenting on the terms themselves, one woman said, “I’m familiar with and I get most of these male expressions, but seeing the female phrases really makes me uncomfortable...they’re weird. Even if women discussed this, they wouldn’t really talk like that.” For her, male masturbation was a more comfortable topic than that of her own possible self-pleasure. Female masturbation is “weird” and this type of playful talk would not be, in a sense, appropriate for such an uncomfortable topic. During one focus group, an informant told us a story of a girl at a boarding school who

was “caught” masturbating. She was ostracized by her peers and eventually ended up leaving the school as a result. While specifics are unknown to me, this event seems to reflect that her peers were embarrassed and ashamed to know a masturbator. So much so, that for these women to associate with this one girl was to acknowledge and accept female masturbation that in this particular boarding school environment is clearly a taboo practice. For women, it appears as though they are left to their own devices to formulate ideas about self-pleasure and sexuality.

Women didn’t talk to mothers or sisters about masturbation, but what about friends? When asked this, one of the female respondents said, “until college I really didn’t talk about it with my friends.” For these women, through masturbation, female sexuality was relegated to the realm of private and centered around self-dialog. So women have to develop a sense of their own sexuality among a general talk that is dominated by men – forming conceptions of their own sexuality relative to a male discourse, again marginalized. As the informants commented, they knew and were more aware of male masturbation slang before they had heard any terms for female masturbation. One comment that particularly struck me was when one of the female informants said,

I feel like almost every girl has to overcome this idea that physically her female genitalia is strange, and like what if it’s not normal?...and they create this idea, most of them never having ever seen anybody else’s stuff...why would you automatically assume that it’s bad or its wrong or it’s not normal?

Thus, the absence of this talk for women does not just imply an absence of the act, but more specifically that there must be something wrong or strange about masturbation. Indeed, the women in the session recalled that what limited discussions about

masturbation had occurred between their peers was always shrouded in some sense of shame or embarrassment.

This masturbation talk, on a general level, serves to provide members of our culture with specific and relevant knowledge about sexuality. It is helpful to conceptualize this type of knowledge as an entity itself. Not knowledge in the sense of factual items but in the sense of a shared body of conceptions about a certain culturally relevant topic. For masturbation talk, this main body of knowledge would be that of sexuality. Where does this type of knowledge come from? Simply put, it is derivative of language and discourse. That is, through language we create and mold certain conceptualizations pertaining to these relevant aspects of our lives. However, knowledge is not just created but also propagated through the same means. This I would identify as socialization: the propagation of specific knowledge through language and discourse. Masturbation talk, then, is one discursive form that knowledge takes in its commentary on sexuality.

This general knowledge is mainly concerned with the body as sexual identity. In her book, *Girls in Power*, Laura Fingerson (2006) says that, “Women’s bodies are often culturally portrayed as passive and are devalued” (84). In viewing women this way it becomes almost a responsibility for men to control and direct the female body. In returning to Foucault, Fingerson too recognizes that, “bodies themselves can be used in an agentic manner as they shape the course of social interactions...the body is a location for the negotiation of power” (84). Expression of this agency on the part of the body is performed through language and discourse. It is in this way that men and women *do* gender. Through everyday negotiations a certain form of power, or discipline, is being

manifest and reflected in actions, such as masturbation talk, that constitute performative examples of gender on display for the perception and affirmation (or denial) of others.

For men, this discourse has assumed a playful temper and has made itself quite accessible as a means of socialization. Masturbation talk allows males to comment on the universality of their experience while serving to establish and perpetuate specific conceptions about male sexuality discussed above. While not a complete picture of the knowledge of male sexuality it provides us with a part of the perception that males and females have about male sexuality. However, for women the absence of a lively and accessible discourse is an equally important commentary on the knowledge of female sexuality. As evident by our female informants above, this absence of talk has led to a shroud of uncertainty about how to view sexuality specifically in the realm of self-pleasure. This uncertainty has come to remove the concept of self-pleasure from the discursive knowledge of female sexuality. Perhaps, the relative paucity of women's talk reflects a tradition in which female autoeroticism was highly disciplined, but as we know, young women are creating new, less oppressive practices of pleasure every day.

MALE RESPONDENTS PHRASES

MALE MASTURBATION PHRASES

(9) Jack(ing) off
 (5) Jerk(ing) off
 (5) Beat(ing) the/your meat
 (5) Beat(ing) it
 (4) Rub(ing) one out
 (4) Choke(ing) the Chicken
 (3) Whack(ing) off
 (3) Touching yourself
 (3) Spank(ing) the Monkey
 (3) Jerk(in) it
 (3) Beat(ing) off
 (2) Whack the Weiner/It
 (2) Stroking it
 (2) Playing with yourself
 (2) Fapping
 Baitin
 Blow(ing) a batch
 Blowing a load
 Bopping bologna
 Cranking one out
 Feeling good
 Firing one off
 Fuck yourself
 Getting the easy one out
 Greasing your pole
 Helping the porn industry
 Jack(ing) it
 Jerkin the Gherkin
 Killing swimmers
 Making a deposit
 Milking one out
 Oil pumping
 Pepper grinding
 Pistol pumping
 Play with my Monster
 Play with your monkey
 Playing downstairs
 Pleasuring yourself
 Pocket pool
 Polishing your pole
 Release the Anaconda
 Relieving Pressure
 Rub out the easy one
 Slapping the turkey
 Slinging yogurt

MALE TERMS (CON'T)

solo sex
 Spend time with "Jill"
 Splooge
 Stroke the Salami
 Stroke the Shaft
 Stroke(ing) the dolphin
 Stroking off
 Taking five
 Taming the Dragon
 Tease the Testes
 Tying up the monkey
 Walking the dog
 Wanking
 Wrestling the beast
 Yankin the chain

FEMALE MASTURBATION PHRASES

(5) finger(ing)
 (3) Touching yourself
 (2) Rub(ing) one out
 (2) Pleasuring herself
 (2) Playing with yourself
 (2) Petting the pussy
 Clam digging
 DJ scribbles
 DJ'n the clit
 Double Click(ing) the mouse
 Fiddling the Crab
 Fisting
 Five knuckle shuffle
 Flick the Bean
 Flick the Clit
 Hurtin the Hood
 Jiggling the G
 Massage the Twage
 Muff pillaging
 playing DJ
 Playing the fiddle
 Pleasuring yourself
 Pushing the love button
 Self-pleasuring
 solo sex
 Split the Lips
 Splooge
 Squirting
 Stirring the troff
 Touching pink
 Twat tickle

FEMALE RESPONDENTS PHRASES

MALE MASTURBATION PHRASES

(21) Jack(ing) off
 (12) Jerk(ing) off
 (7) Wank(ing)
 (7) Whack(ing) off
 (4) Spank(ing) the Monkey
 (3) Pleasure(ing) yourself
 (4) Getting off
 (3) Fap(ping)
 (3) Chok(ing) the Chicken
 (3) Beat(ing) it
 (2) Touch(ing) yourself
 (2) Rub one out
 Bash the Bishop
 Batting Practice
 Beat(ing) the meat
 Choke the Bishop
 Choke the Monkey
 Choke the shake
 Dating yourself
 Dressing yourself
 Five finger shuffle
 Five knuckle shuffle
 Fuck yourself
 Get hand
 Go blind
 Going hom with Jill
 Greeting bob
 Hiding the Salami
 Hold and slide
 Little fireman time
 Loving yourself
 Play with yourself
 Ridin' solo
 Shake it
 Showing yourself off
 Spending quality time with yourself
 Squirting
 Take care of business
 Tickle your pickle
 Toss
 Turn Japanese
 Whacking it

FEMALE MASTURBATION PHRASES

(7) Flip(ing) (or flick) the bean
 (4) (Double) clicking the mouse
 (4) Touch(ing) yourself
 (4) Pleasure(ing) yourself
 (3) Jill(ing) off
 (3) Finger(ing)
 (2) Wank
 (2) Getting (yourself) off
 (2) Fap
 Buttering your Muffin
 Feel the heat
 French tickler
 Fuck yourself
 Loving yourself
 Petting the Beaver
 Play with yourself
 Pleasuring fran
 Relaxing your fran
 Rub one out
 Spending quality time with yourself
 Taking it
 Tickle yourself
 Tittling your winkie

Spanish Masturbation Terms

Meterle/meterse dedo	to "come" the finger
revisar los interiores	to service the interior
jugar con la araña	play with the spider
echar un palo	to sex (with another or solo)
hacer puñeta/puñetero	to make a fistful
chaquetear	(seems to be a colloquial onomatopoeia)
pajero	wank(er)
vergallo	chocking your chicken
avergallon	no metaphorical definition given or found, simply
jalandosela	masturbation of the penis
Jalar(se)	pulling it
Jalar el ____ (any cylindrical object)	To pull oneself
Hacer la manuela	To pull ____
Billarse el bolsillo	No
Mas de tres acudidas es chaquetearse	Play pocket pool
	More than 3 shakes (at the toilet) is to masturbate

NOTES

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² For a detailed examination of masturbation and its cultural significance prior to the enlightenment to modern day, read Laqueur's (2003) *Solitary Sex*.

³ Ironically, the moral code applied to this kind of self-governance came from the texts of the major thinkers of that time. Books upon books were written to address the proper way to think about or handle certain behaviors. It is out of this environment that the quack-medical profession became so successful as they offered tonics and cures that would help to set an individual morally right through curing behaviors that were considered otherwise.

⁴ Laqueur chronicles the changes in the "cure" from the initial more costly tonic to cheaper more affordable medicines. As *Onania* rose in popularity and the demand for a medicine increased "doctors" came out with cheaper alternatives to help cure their patients of this disease.

⁵ Freud's works such as *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* originally published in 1905 and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* originally published in 1920 had great influence over prevailing conceptions of sexuality and sex practices at the time.

⁶ Foucault has a somewhat different but extremely particular conception of what power is that I wish to elaborate on briefly. Foucault posits a number of propositions concerning power in his book *The History of Sexuality* (1978). One proposition he advances is, "Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations" (94). For Foucault, here, power does not reside with an individual or an institution, but power lies in simple everyday interactions in (nonegalitarian) society. Masturbation talk can be seen to be an exemplar of this type of everyday social interaction. The specific "type" of power that I discuss in my paper is that of discipline, but Foucault's conception of power as manifest *in* interaction and discourse - rather than interaction being the conduit for an expression of power that comes from an individual or institution - adds to the understanding of discipline here.

⁷ "how should we understand the problem of equality in a world of biological sex differences? How has the principle of equality been defined and implemented in relation to those differences" (XXIV).

⁸ One example Lakoff discusses centers on descriptions of color. She comments on how it is not noteworthy if a woman describes something as 'mauve' but if a man said it, it

would sound strange. In this instance, women are relegated to language that is unimportant, or useless, in a male vocabulary that is more concerned with “important” or worldly matters. If a male speaks in this manner he might be identified as homosexual, even if ‘jokingly’ labeled this treatment is thrusting this type of language outside the realm of the dominant male heterosexual realm.

⁹ Historically, research (concerning masturbation) has been much more concerned with defining and examining the realm of abnormal and more rare types of sexual activity; how these may help us understand psychological problems, or mental illnesses. In contrast, until very recently there was little concern for a dialog of “normal” masturbation in a social context (Gordon, 1993; Atwood & Gagnon 1987).

¹⁰ This may also be the reason that pornography is so widespread and popular amongst youthful men. Pornography allows the man to experience pleasure without having to be disgusted at his own imagination. As if to use this fantasy world is a contradiction of his conception of masculine sexuality; porn allows one to stay within the realm of what is considered a male sexuality and still experience self pleasure.

¹¹ While my project is focused on masturbation talk, late in my research I came across the subject matter of menstruation talk among women. A woman mentioned it briefly as the type of talk that males engage in for masturbation, but for women and centered on menstruation. She said that women have slang terms/phrases for menstruation. While somewhat tangential, this is highly relevant to my discussion of “sexuality talk” on a whole. Do women tease and joke about menstruation like men do with masturbation? Or is it in a different way? In what contexts and situations are these menstruation terms used? What are these terms? These are questions for further research on the topic, but I would like to note that in considering Lakoff’s theory of women as marginal menstruation talk fits well. That is, as an area of discourse that would be irrelevant and of no use to men, menstruation fits perfectly and thus could be deemed a topic relegated to “women’s language.” So women develop a boisterous discourse on this subject matter that is not already dominated by male talk. I have not personally delved into this, but for further reading on the topic of menstruation and menstruation talk see: Laura Fingerson (2006) and Buckley & Gottlieb (1988).

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