Clitoral Discourse: An Analysis of Pleasure in Contemporary Sex Instruction Manuals
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Research Question:
How do these texts discuss and represent pleasure?

Methods:
• Content analysis of eight sex instruction manuals published within the last decade. Sex instruction manuals are books for adults about sexuality and sexual health. Examples: She Comes First by Ian Kerner & Sex for Dummies by Dr. Ruth
• Coded the texts for:
  Themes relating to pleasure
  Elements that may impact constructions of pleasure itself, i.e.: heteronormativity, transphobia, racism & centering whiteness, ableism, ageism, monogonanormativity, and more.

Approach:
• The use of feminist theory and modes of inquiry to deconstruct and analyze the texts
• The work of Michel Foucault has been my entry point for beginning my critical analysis of these texts.

Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction analyzes the relationship between power and sexual discourse. He calls for scholars to investigate the way in which sex becomes discourse, specifically “to account for the fact that it [sex] is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said.”

While Foucault focused on medical discourse more generally, his ideas are particularly useful for understanding the ways that sex instruction manuals and the authors of them (sex experts) represent the clitoris. By examining the rhetoric associated with the terms defined and explained, I argue that the mechanics of power can be uncovered.

References:

Why this is important:
The full anatomy of the clitoris was unveiled to the world as recently as 2005 via MRI imaging by Helen O’Connell and her team. The imaging that their research produced showed the entire clitoral anatomy which includes both the interior and exterior portion. By showing and describing the clitoris as a multiplanar structure, the full complexity of the organ was finally visible.

Prior to this work, the clitoris was shown mainly via two dimensional planes and was often only represented as solely an exterior part.

• We have a long way to go when it comes to our understanding of the clitoris.
• This body part is still not always included in medical texts and in sex education materials.
• This means that many people still do not learn about the only human body part solely dedicated to pleasure.

My project seeks to unpack and deconstruct cultural values surrounding this body part so that we might be able to positively shift our collective discourse around sexuality to not just include pleasure, but to center it.

Results (in progress):
My area of analysis has shifted from broadly analyzing the discourse of pleasure to focusing on how these texts represent the clitoris.

Some impactful areas of analysis:
• The language used to describe the clitoris le. that it is “too sensitive” and “hidden”
• Analyzing what the clitoris gets compared to Spoiler alert: it’s usually the penis
• The prescribed role and “use” of the clitoris Usually, to produce an orgasm
• The mystification of the clitoris Referred to by one author as “genital confusion”!

“The tale of the clitoris is a parable of culture, of how the body is forged into a shape valuable to civilization despite and not because of itself.”
- Dr. Helen O’Connell