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SANTA CRUZ

**CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND SEXUAL PLEASURE:  
EVIDENCE FOR A SEXUAL EMPOWERMENT PROCESS FOR  
HETEROSEXUAL AND SEXUAL MINORITY WOMEN**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

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with an emphasis in FEMINIST STUDIES

by

**Rose Grace Grose**

June 2016

The Dissertation of Rose Grace Grose is approved:

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Professor Shelly Grabe, chair

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Professor Marcia Ochoa

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Professor Phillip Hammack

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Professor Eileen Zurbriggen

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Tyrus Miller  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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## Abstract

Rose Grace Grose

### Critical Consciousness and Sexual Pleasure: Evidence for a Sexual Empowerment Process for Heterosexual and Sexual Minority Women

It has long been argued that gender-based inequalities within patriarchy create barriers to women's sexual well-being, in particular to sexual pleasure. This study integrated Empowerment Theory with research on women's sexuality to examine multiple factors related to women's sexual pleasure and satisfaction. An empowerment process is one social psychological mechanism through which less powerful individuals gain influence and power that results in increased opportunities to control decisions that affect their lives. In the present study, 271 heterosexual and 159 sexual minority undergraduate women completed a questionnaire assessing dimensions of sexual empowerment processes, including critical consciousness about gender and sexuality (e.g., feminist identity, conformity to feminine norms), sexual subjectivity (e.g., entitlement to pleasure, self-efficacy, body image self-consciousness), actions (e.g., sexual assertiveness), and sexual pleasure (e.g., sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience). Data were analyzed with structural equation modeling and support was found for sexual empowerment processes in which critical consciousness about gender was indirectly related to sexual pleasure through relationships with two mediators, sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness, in line with the hypotheses. While sexual empowerment processes were largely similar for sexual minority and heterosexual women, the groups differed in baseline levels of

critical consciousness, some aspects of sexual subjectivity, and sexual assertiveness.

Implications for sexual education, clinical practice, and future research are discussed.

For Dran -- No regrets!

“A factor akin to hardiness may explain why many women, despite dismal cultural messages objectifying and demeaning women’s sexuality, are able to express their own sexual interests, bargain effectively with partner for what they want sexually, and feel satisfied with their sexual expression.”

(Patricia Morokoff, 2000, p. 312).

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## **Introduction**

Sexuality is a fundamental part of human development (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Hensel & Fortenberry, 2012) and sexual pleasure is beneficial to psychological and physical well-being (Coleman, 2002; Holmberg, Blair, & Phillips, 2010; Knerr & Philpott, 2006; Levin, 2007). In fact, some policymakers and advocates have argued that the opportunity to pursue sexual satisfaction and pleasure should be considered a basic sexual right granted to all people regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, geographic location, or other characteristics (Dixon-Mueller, Germain, Fredrick, & Bourne, 2009; International Planned Parenthood Federation [IPPF], 2008; World Association for Sexual Health [WAS], 2014). Yet, scholars have long maintained that conditions of gender inequality infringe on women's opportunities to actualize their sexual rights (Acosta-Belén & Bose, 1990; Blanc, 2001; Oriel, 2005; Parker, 2007; Plummer, 2010; Vance, 1992). In particular, it has been suggested that men's disproportionate structural and ideological power limits the possibilities for women's sexual pleasure on a global scale (Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Swank, 2011; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Higgins, 2007; Higgins & Hirsch, 2007; Rich, 1980). In a patriarchal context of unequal power relations, women's sexuality is a social justice issue. As such, it is necessary to include analyses of power in social science research on sexuality in order to understand and alleviate threats to women's sexual and psychological well-being. Thus, for my dissertation I used psychological Empowerment Theory (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Rappaport, 1981, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995) to explore how challenging patriarchal ideologies

about gender and sexuality was related to sexual pleasure for both heterosexual and sexual minority women (lesbian, bisexual, queer, and questioning, i.e., non-heterosexual women) from the United States (US). This study also examined the potential mediating role of sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness in the relationship between patriarchal ideologies and female sexual pleasure.

I adopted Empowerment Theory from within psychology because it utilizes political and structural frameworks for understanding psychological phenomena (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Moane, 2011; Mosedale, 2005; Rappaport, 1981). Empowerment Theory is based in liberation and community psychologies in which, since the 1970s, theorists have analyzed how mechanisms of power infringe on the rights of marginalized groups (Apfelbaum, 1979; Freire, 1970/2012; Prilleltensky, 2012). Over time, empowerment theorists have articulated psychosocial processes through which less powerful individuals can gain influence and power and have increased opportunities to control decisions that affect their lives (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013; Cattaneo, Calton, & Brodsky, 2014; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Moane, 2011; Rappaport, 1981, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). Generally, empowerment processes entail 1) critical knowledge about power dynamics in the social context, 2) a sense of subjectivity, agency, and ability to make change, and 3) proactive behavioral choices and actions (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Freire, 1970/2012; Menon, 2002; Rappaport, 1981, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995).

Although psychologists have been studying empowerment for decades, the potential for Empowerment Theory to aid empirical research and activism advocating

for *sexual* empowerment and justice has been under-explored. Recently, however, theoretical discussions of sexual empowerment for women and girls have been increasing, with an entire issue of the journal *Sex Roles* dedicated to the topic in 2012. Although many scholars, politicians, and activists see empowerment as a desirable and important construct for understanding women's well-being across disciplines (Grabe, 2010, 2012; Menon, 2002; Narayan, 2005; Perkins, 1995), others argue that sexual empowerment has become an empty buzzword used to describe an individual, subjective feeling of confidence and autonomy (e.g., Gavey, 2012; Gill, 2008, 2012). Yet, missing from many of these critiques is a nuanced conceptualization of sexual empowerment in line with current theoretical definitions of empowerment as a dynamic, contextual, power-oriented process (i.e., Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Menon, 2002; Zimmerman, 1995). Testing a model of sexual empowerment based on Empowerment Theory would further our understanding of how power relations and gender inequality create barriers to sexual pleasure for women and how psychological research may best be used to advocate for sexual justice for all.

### **Gender, Power, and Pleasure**

In order to understand women's sexual empowerment and well-being, it is first necessary to fully situate sexual satisfaction and pleasure within the sociopolitical context of gendered power (Fahs & Swank, 2011; Henderson, Lehavot, & Simoni, 2009). Gender and sexuality are both historically and culturally shaped by institutional practices, discourses, and inequalities within patriarchy--an unjust social

system based in gender imbalances (Altman, 2001; Bartky, 1990; Bay-Cheng, 2012; Collins, 2004; Connell, 1987, 2009; Foucault 1978/1990; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Parker, 2007, 2010; Rich, 1980; Tolman, 2006). According to the theory of gender and power, gender-based inequalities are pervasive societal characteristics that result in men's disproportionate power and control over a number of areas, including education, medicine, transnational politics, world media, globalized business, and heterosexuality (Connell, 1987, 2009; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hunnicutt, 2009). Men's structural and institutional power and status in these domains is reinforced through diffuse ideological mechanisms, including hegemonic discourses, norms, and beliefs about gender and sexuality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Foucault, 1978/1990; Hunnicutt, 2009; Rubin, 1992; Tolman, 2006). In particular, compulsory heterosexuality, the sexual objectification of women and girls, and sexual scripts that eroticize gender inequality and privilege male pleasure, all shape the context of gender and power in which women's experiences of sexual pleasure are situated (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Rich, 1980; Tolman, 2002, 2006).

Within patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality has been a primary ideological and institutional mechanism that reinforces gender inequality by prescribing only one form of romantic and sexual relationship as natural, normal, and socially desirable (Collins, 2004; DeLamater, 1981; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991; Rich, 1980; Tolman, 2006). Heterosexuality is therefore a political institution and a cultural imperative (Rich, 1980), in that the only acceptable romantic and sexual partnerships are opposite-sex in which hierarchical gendered norms are

maintained. Within the institution of heterosexuality, men are encouraged to exchange financial and physical protection for physical, economic and emotional access to women, and women are urged to demonstrate dependency, relinquish agency, and maintain maternal and caretaker roles (Collins, 2004; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Rubin, 1992). This prescribed relationship is complementary in that the powerful group (i.e., men) and their privileges cannot exist without the subordinate group (i.e., women) as a point of reference (Apfelbaum, 1979; Bartky, 1990; Collins, 2004; Connell, 2009; Rich, 1980; Tolman, 2006). Thus, under these arrangements, rights, entitlements, and privileges are structurally available to men as a group, whereas women may experience constraints, limits, and dependency on men for economic stability, societal value, and sexual intimacy (Apfelbaum, 1979; Blanc, 2001; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hayward, 1998; Hunnicutt, 2009; Rich, 1980).

Within compulsory heterosexuality, sex itself is defined as heterosexual intercourse that culminates in a man's orgasm (Frith, 2013a, 2013b; Opperman, Braun, Clarke, & Rogers, 2014; Rich, 1980; Ussher, 2005). Women's sexual desire is therefore socially constructed as *heterosexual* desire and as a response to men's sexual initiations. As a result, women's sexuality is seen as non-existent without men and sexual activity women partake in by themselves or with other women is made invisible (Brown, 2000; Hayfield, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014). One way this invisibility manifests is the social assumption that when two women are sexual together it is for the benefit of male desire (Fahs, 2011; Hyde, 2007).

This socio-political context of compulsory heterosexuality shapes sexual orientations and identities by providing available possibilities, and creating a climate of prejudice for those who stray (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). It has been demonstrated that some women who reject sexual dependency on men, or who refuse to be defined in relationship to men, are overtly stigmatized and experience violence and discrimination (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2004; Gill, 2012; Hayward, 1998; Hunnicutt, 2009; Hurtado, 2009; Mosedale, 2005; Rich, 1980; Rubin, 1992; Ussher, 2005). Historically, society has denounced lesbian women by portraying their gender itself as damaged, failed, and abnormal (Collins, 2004; Hammack, Mayers, & Windell, 2013; Herek et al., 1991; Rich, 1980; Rudman & Fairchild, 2007; Vance, 1992). While lesbians have been constructed as unattractive and masculine, bisexual women have been portrayed as confused, unable to commit, and sexually promiscuous (Eliason, 1997; Hayfield et al., 2014; Rust, 2002). Women of color and poor women have been further marginalized because their sexuality has often been constructed as a deviant violation of hegemonic standards of gender, regardless of their actual behavior (Collins, 2004; Creed, 1999; Fahs, 2011; Fausto-Sterling, 2001; Fine, 1988, Fine & McClelland, 2006; Gill, 2012). To avoid a stigmatizing label and negative backlash, heterosexual women may conform to hegemonic gender roles and women who are uncertain about their sexual identities may avoid exploring alternatives (Brown, 2000; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). In this way, compulsory heterosexuality reinforces men's power and ultimately restricts the sexuality of all women.

Gender inequality is also perpetuated through the pervasive, every day sexual objectification of women and girls across social categories of difference (American Psychological Association, 2007; Bartky, 1990; Collins, 2004; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Grabe, 2013; Murnen & Smolak, 2009; Roberts & Zurbriggen, 2013; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). More often than men, women are sexually objectified through media representations and interpersonal relationships, and are equated with their bodies and physical appearance. By being reduced to their bodies, or parts of their bodies, women are treated as passive, powerless, interchangeable sexual objects that are less than human (Bartky, 1990; Calogero, 2013; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). Importantly, sexual objects' social value is based on their physical attractiveness and utility to men as things to be used for sexual pleasure. In this context, women are encouraged to present themselves as attractive and sexually available, because their access to material and social resources, including to intimate relationships, hinges on their physical attractiveness (APA, 2007; Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Collins, 2004; Connell, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006; Wolf, 1991).

The sexual objectification of women and girls interacts with compulsory heterosexuality within patriarchy. That is to say, sexual minority women have increasingly been sexualized as women and additionally as sexual minorities (Gill, 2008; Thompson, 2013). There is evidence that bisexual women have become overtly sexualized in the media as hyper-feminine, adventurous women who have same-sex interactions for the benefit of men's fantasies and desires (Diamond, 2005b). Such



portrayals of same-sex experimentation have become so common that interviews with heterosexual women have suggested that they are perceived as the norm. In fact, there is evidence that same-sex interactions have become constructed as a way to express heterosexual femininity (Fahs, 2011; Thompson, 2013). As a result, in surveys and semi-structured interviews heterosexual women have reported feeling pressure to perform sexually objectified bisexuality in order to appear sexy and to accommodate men's fantasies about same-sex interactions, both within their intimate relationships and in public (Fahs, 2011; Yost & McCarthy, 2012). Lesbian and bisexual women have also reported that fetishization and objectification of their same-sex desires was a regular occurrence from strangers (Fahs, 2011; Chmielewski & Yost, 2013).

According to Objectification Theory, in order to meet rigid, unattainable social standards of feminine appearance and cope with regular dehumanization and objectification, women may adopt a (male) outsider's perspective and *self*-objectify (Bartky, 1990; Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1999). Self-objectification occurs when women and girls internalize their oppression and treat themselves as objects in anticipation of being evaluated by others. Self-objectification involves a prioritization of hyper-vigilance and surveillance of the physical body over a focus on one's skills, intelligence, or personality (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1999). As a result, an objectified perspective on the body can lead to feelings of shame, alienation, and estrangement from one's sensations, strengths, and self-interests (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1999).

Indeed, much research has demonstrated that self-objectification is related to a range of negative consequences that threaten women's liberty and self-determination (for reviews see Grabe, 2013; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011). In particular, self-objectification and preoccupation with appearance have been shown to have negative repercussions for women's sexuality (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Objects do not have the agency to act on their own volition, so viewing oneself as an object may prohibit one's ability to see oneself as an agent who can make decisions and assert oneself sexually. In addition, to the extent that viewing oneself from the outside results in feelings of appearance anxiety and self-consciousness, self-objectification can be distracting and alienating from one's bodily cues and sensations and interfere with sexual functioning (Calogero, 2012; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Meana & Nunnink, 2006; Steer & Tiggemann, 2008; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Ultimately, when self-objectifying, women may prioritize looking a certain way over developing an awareness of their desires or advocating for their wants and needs.

Both compulsory heterosexuality and sexual objectification further reinforce gendered power disparities when they are enacted through sexual scripts. Sexual scripts are normative, cultural guides that lay out a limited range of appropriate sexual goals, contexts, and behaviors for men and women (Fine, 1988; Simon & Gagnon, 1984; Tolman, 2006). Importantly, dominant sexual scripts are gendered and eroticize inequality (Byers, 1996; Impett et al., 2006; Mahalik et al., 2005; Morokoff, 2000; Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012; Simon & Gagnon, 1984; Tolman, 2002, 2006;

Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003; Wiederman, 2005). In particular, men are assumed to have a natural drive and insatiable desire for sex, and are expected to take sexual initiative to pursue their own desires (Byers, 1996; Cheng, 1999; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 1997; Levant, Hirsch, Celentano, & Cozza, 1992; Tolman, 2006; Tolman, Spencer et al., 2003). In contrast, women are assumed to have little desire or agency, and are expected to take a passive-recipient, gatekeeper role (Collins, 2004; Connell, 2009, 2012; Impett et al., 2006; Mahalik et al., 2005; Morokoff, 2000; Tolman, 2002, 2006; Tolman & Porche, 2000; Wiederman, 2005). Moreover, women are socialized into being sexual caretakers who focus on relationship maintenance and men's pleasure at the cost of being inauthentic about their own needs (Rudman & Glick, 2008; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2012; Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, & Izarry, 2010). In addition, in the context of women's sexual objectification, feminine sexual scripts presume women should attempt to embody oppressive beauty standards and present themselves as passive and sexually available objects (Bartky, 1990; Collins, 2004; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Impett et al., 2006). These sexual double-standards allow men to engage in sexual activities without reproach, whereas women who actively partake in sex outside of the confines of committed, romantic relationships are stigmatized for similar conduct (Rudman & Glick, 2008).

Even newer, "postfeminist" sexual scripts that allow for some female sexual agency continue to perpetuate gender inequality (Frith, 2013a, 2013b). For example, sexual scripts now include the expectation that both men and women will orgasm

through heterosexual intercourse (Fahs, 2011; Frith, 2013a, 2013b; Potts, 2000). While men's orgasms continue to be constructed as more or less inevitable in heterosexual relationships, women's orgasms have become viewed as the product of men's work, and thus men's responsibility (Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2000; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). Because men were expected "give" orgasms to women, women's orgasms are seen as a confirmation of men's abilities and masculinity (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Fahs, 2011; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). As a result, some findings suggest that heterosexual women have reported not requesting clitoral stimulation or partaking in self-stimulation during vaginal intercourse out of concern for men's feelings and judgments (Salisbury & Fisher, 2014). Interview studies have suggested that this "orgasm imperative" may extend beyond heterosexual relationships, in that both heterosexual and sexual minority women reported feeling pressure to climax during their sexual encounters (Fahs, 2011). For instance, both heterosexual and sexual minority women have reported that they have faked orgasm to ensure that their partner did not feel inadequate, embarrassed, or disappointed when the expected orgasm was unlikely to occur (Fahs, 2011). Even though these more contemporary sexual scripts view women as sexual beings whose pleasure is important, they continue to reinforce women's role as sexual caretakers within hegemonic femininity.

When societal-level norms and scripts about sexuality become internalized as natural and normal, women may adhere to them at the expense of their own genuine interests and sexual rights (Collins, 2004; Grabe, 2013; Rudman & Glick, 2008;

Simon & Gagnon, 1984). Although social identities like race, ethnicity, age, class, and ability simultaneously influence how women make meaning of oppressive norms and sexual scripts (Cole, 2009; Hurtado, 2009; McClelland, 2014; Shields, 2008), it has been theorized that all women are encouraged to internalize cultural messages and discipline their sexualities by monitoring and controlling their own bodies and behavior (Bartky, 1990; Collins, 2004; Foucault, 1978/1990). At the individual and interpersonal levels, self-disciplining manifests when people construct and replicate masculinity and femininity consciously and unconsciously through embodied practices in face-to-face interactions and relationships (Connell, 2009, 2012; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hunnicutt, 2009; Griscom, 1992; Kimmel, 1997; Simon & Gagnon, 1984; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon, 2003). Such processes of self-discipline keep structural and ideological power operating through consent, conformity, and complicity without the need of force or coercion (Apfelbaum, 1979; Bartky, 1990; Connell, 2012; DeLamater, 1981; Foucault, 1978/1990; Griscom, 1992; Hunnicutt, 2009; Moane, 2011; Kimmel, 1997). Importantly, however, because patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, sexual objectification, and hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality are actively constructed and dynamic, they can be resisted (Connell, 1987, 2009; Gagnon & Simon, 1987; Kimmel, 1997; Simon & Gagnon, 1984; Tolman, 2006; Ussher, 2005).

### **A Sexual Empowerment Process for Young Adult Women**

In the current study I employed Empowerment Theory as a framework to explore how disagreement with patriarchal ideologies about gender and sexuality was

related to women's sexual pleasure in a sexual empowerment process. Specifically, I proposed a sexual empowerment process for women in which having critical consciousness of gendered power dynamics would be related to higher levels of sexual subjectivity (i.e., a sense of one's self as a sexual agent). Having a sense of sexual subjectivity and agency would, in turn, be related to more proactive behaviors and sexual actions (i.e., sexual assertiveness) that would ultimately predict higher levels of sexual pleasure and well-being.

### **Defining Empowerment Components**

In the following section, I define components of the proposed sexual empowerment process, including critical consciousness of gendered power dynamics, sexual subjectivity and agency, proactive behaviors and actions, and sexual pleasure as a power-related goal (see Figure 1). I also review theory and research about similarities and differences between sexual minority and heterosexual women on empowerment components to shed light on the role of compulsory heterosexuality in shaping women's sexual experiences.

**Critical consciousness.** According to liberation psychology, a key feature of liberatory processes is undoing psychological oppression through rejecting dominant ideologies (Bartky, 1990; Collins, 2004; Freire, 1970/2012; Prilleltensky, 2012). In particular, by developing critical consciousness marginalized people can begin to recognize oppression and the connections between the political and one's personal well-being (Freire, 1970/2012; Martín-Baró, 1994; Prilleltensky, 2008). Critical consciousness and awareness of power dynamics and structural barriers to well-being

is important in empowerment processes because undoing internalized oppression can help people move from being an object of others' actions toward an identity as a self-determined subject (Freire, 1970/2012). Such knowledge can also lead to awareness of one's options and choices, the resources needed to accomplish one's goal, and ways to obtain those resources (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Zimmerman, 1995).

There has been no systematic definition or measurement of critical consciousness about sexuality to date. Theoretically, developing critical consciousness about gender and sexuality could involve rejecting heterosexist patriarchal gender ideologies that position women and their sexuality as passive and subordinate to men. Alternative perspectives would be adopted to replace hegemonic ideologies of compulsory heterosexuality, objectification of women, or discourses about sexuality that eroticize inequality. For instance, feminism, gay rights activism, and other progressive social movements that reject heteronormativity can provide alternative lenses through which to critically view ideologies surrounding ideal feminine bodies and "appropriate" sexuality, as well as strategies to resist them at personal, interpersonal, and societal levels (hooks, 2000; Hyde, 2007; Rubin, Nemeroff, & Russo, 2004; Tolman, Streipe et al., 2003).

In the current study I utilized a variety of measures to assess critical consciousness about gender and sexuality in order to reflect women's diverse experiences with feminism. Specifically, I assessed feminist identity, awareness of gender discrimination, beliefs about heteronormativity, and personal conformity to

feminine norms related to fidelity and romance. It is possible that identifying as a feminist, in and of itself, could be part of a sexual empowerment process, to the extent that one's feminist identity facilitates the development of critical consciousness about gender, power, and sexuality. At the societal level, feminism challenges the discourses and institutions that prioritize men's interest at the expense of women's sexual health and well-being. At the interpersonal level, feminism encourages relationships in which individuals have room to resist replicating societal level power dynamics that subordinate women and to strive for mutuality and equity. At the individual level, adopting a feminist standpoint could involve shifting one's desires, cognitions, and behaviors in order to undo internalized oppression.

It is important to also capture the critical consciousness of women who reject and resist the subordination of women, but who do not adopt a feminist identity label (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007; Williams & Wittig, 1997; Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2010). Indeed, in the US there have been strong social incentives *not* to identify as a feminist. Historically, the social identity of "feminist" has been stigmatized and negatively associated with being unattractive, unappealing to men, and a lesbian (Haddock & Zanna, 1994; Swim et al., 2001; Rudman & Fairchild, 2007; Twenge & Zucker, 1999; Williams & Wittig, 1997). To illustrate, in one study of ethnically diverse heterosexual undergraduate women, those who saw feminism and civil rights for women as being in conflict with romantic and (hetero)sexual relationships were less likely to identify as feminists or have feminist attitudes (Rudman & Fairchild, 2007). Yet, even without a label, endorsing feminist beliefs has been shown to be



related to women's personal well-being and egalitarianism in relationships (Yoder, Tobias, & Snell, 2011). Thus, I also included a general assessment of women's awareness of gender discrimination and two measures of women's personal conformity to feminine norms. In addition, I assessed participants' beliefs about heteronormativity and gender-normative sexual behavior in order to account for the central role of compulsory heterosexuality in the subordination of women's sexuality. By using a variety of measures of critical consciousness, I hoped to account for women who identified as feminist, women who espoused feminist ideologies, and women who did neither, yet nonetheless demonstrated critical consciousness about sexuality and gender by rejecting norms of femininity in their personal lives.

Little research could be found documenting differences in feminist identity related to sexual orientation or identity, despite the prevailing stereotype that feminists are lesbians. Historically, "lesbian" has been used as an insult to police and regulate women who were seen as too independent or too gender non-conforming. This societal stigma meant that even as feminists in the 1960s and 1970s challenged the sexual oppression of women, heterosexism from the broader culture was often maintained within the feminist movement. In response, lesbians raised important critiques of the overt and internalized homophobia evident within feminist groups and organizations. Further, a lesbian feminist perspective emerged that viewed heterosexuality as the fundamental cause of women's oppression, and same-sex relationships as the epitome of a feminist ideology that rejected male dominance and control (Koedt, 1971; Rich, 1980; see also Simoni, Henley, & Christie, 1999). Of

note, this tradition has not always been equally accessible to all sexual minority women, as evidenced by interviews suggesting bisexual women experienced mistrust and stereotyping within lesbian communities (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013).

Aside from research on feminist identity, there is some evidence that women with same-sex attractions or in same-sex relationships reject heteronormative ideologies of sexuality and gender that eroticize inequality between men and women more often than heterosexual women. In fact, some have suggested that lesbian women are most comparable to feminist heterosexual women because they enact feminism in their relationships (Rose & Eaton, 2013). Specifically, lesbian relationships may be feminist to the degree that lesbian partners value equality in their relationships, are concerned with autonomy, and have more flexible gender roles (Kurdek, 1987; Rose & Eaton, 2013; Rose & Zand, 2000). In support, research with a large sample of older white women ( $M_{age} = 45$ ) found that sexual minority women reported less agreement with heteronormative beliefs than heterosexual women, with no differences between lesbians and bisexuals (Habarth, 2008).

**Sexual subjectivity/agency.** The next component of the proposed sexual empowerment process was a sense of oneself as a sexual subject or agent. Having a sense of agency and subjective well-being has been important to empowerment processes because it may increase the likelihood of taking action (Grabe, 2012; Zimmerman, 1995). In the past, Empowerment Theory has defined agency in terms of feelings of personal control, self-efficacy (the belief that one has the ability to accomplish one's goals), and competence (one's actual abilities; Bay-Cheng, 2012;

Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Kabeer, 1999; Menon, 2002; Peterson, 2010; Prilleltensky, 2012; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). However, multiple aspects of agency beyond self-efficacy have been related to women's sexual well-being in the sexuality literature.

In the current study I assessed women's embodied sexual agency by measuring sexual subjectivity, which involves having an awareness of one's feelings, attitudes, and desires as a sexual person situated within a body (Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2014). Sexual subjectivity included entitlement to sexual pleasure, consciousness about one's sexuality, sexual self-efficacy, body surveillance, and body image self-consciousness (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005, 2006; Lamb, 2010; O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, & McKeague, 2006; Peterson, 2010; Schick, Zucker, & Bay-Cheng, 2008; Snell & Papini, 1989). I assessed entitlement to pleasure because one's self-determination and agency may depend on having the belief that one deserves access to pleasure and to have their desires acknowledge and recognized (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005, 2006; McClelland, 2010). Consciousness and self-reflection about one's sexuality is also an important element of sexual subjectivity because it involves an awareness of one's preferences, desires, and ethics (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005, 2006). In line with Empowerment Theory, sexual self-efficacy was also part of this conceptualization of sexual subjectivity. In particular, I was interested in how positive aspects of sexual self-efficacy, such as confidence in one's ability to say "yes" to

wanted experiences or to ask for pleasure, would be related to experiencing positive outcomes.

I also assessed positive embodiment as part of sexual subjectivity in the current study. By positive embodiment I mean one's positive feelings and cognitions about the body as well as an internal awareness of sensations and competence (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hirschman, Impett, & Schooler, 2006; Robinson, Bockting, Rosser, Miner, & Coleman, 2002; Schick, Calabrese, Rima, & Zucker, 2010). Positive embodiment can be considered in opposition to an objectified and appearance-focused perspective on the body, and is particularly important for women in the context of the sexual objectification of women and girls (Bartky, 1990; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hirschman et al., 2006; Schick et al., 2010). Researchers exploring the relationship between the body and sexuality have used a variety of assessments, including body dissatisfaction, body surveillance, body shame, self-objectification, body image self-consciousness during sexual activity, and genital appearance dissatisfaction (see Tolman et al., 2014, for a review of embodiment theories in psychology). To assess embodiment, I utilized both a general measure of body surveillance to tap into women's focus on their external appearance and a domain-specific measure of body image self-consciousness during sexual activity.

Although limited, research has suggested that sexual minority women may experience more positive sexual subjectivity than heterosexual women. For instance, in one study, adolescent girls with same-sex experience had more positive sexual

subjectivity in terms of both entitlement and body esteem (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). In another study with a sample of Caucasian Australian university students, same-sex experience was related to positive sexual subjectivity in terms of entitlement to pleasure from oneself and one's partner, sexual self-reflection, and sexual self-efficacy (Boislard & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2011). Thus, research tends to support the proposition that living outside of the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality may make it possible for women to enact sexual agency by voicing their preferences and opinions (Diamond, 2008; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Rose & Zand, 2000; Ussher, 2005).

In addition, research with predominantly white women from a range of incomes and education backgrounds in the US, Canada, and Australia has largely suggested that lesbian women report less appearance concern, body dissatisfaction, and body surveillance than heterosexual women (Alvy, 2013; Bergeron & Senn, 1998; Hill & Fischer, 2008; Polimeni, Austin, & Kavanagh, 2009; Strong, Williamson, Netemeyer, & Geer, 2000). In a recent study with lesbians and other sexual minority women, as a group, sexual minority women reported more appreciation of their bodies than heterosexual women (Ramseyer Winter, Satinsky, & Jozkowski, 2015). Researchers have posited that sexual minority women, especially lesbian women, may not internalize cultural standards of sexual objectification to the same extent as heterosexual women and may therefore find it easier to reject beauty standards. In support of this idea, when interviewed about body image, bisexual women suggested that contact with bisexual and lesbian communities helped them

feel more freedom and acceptance to be themselves regardless of how they looked, and to be less concerned with societal appearance norms more generally (Taub, 2003). Moreover, bisexual women reported feeling more comfortable with their appearance when dating women as opposed to men, because men objectified them more in interpersonal relationships (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013). Yet, women may self-objectify and focus on their external appearance regardless of their sexual orientation because they share the experience of living in a sexually objectifying culture that expects all women to adhere to pervasive norms of idealized femininity (Calogero, 2012; Thompson, 2013). Indeed, some studies have shown that lesbian and heterosexual women reported similar levels of self-objectification and genital self-image satisfaction (Herbenick et al., 2011; Hill & Fischer, 2008), and a meta-analysis suggested that they reported similar levels of body satisfaction (Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004).

Bisexual women's experience with positive embodiment has only recently begun to be studied, and has illuminated the possibility that they experience unique body image concerns. For instance, studies have shown that bisexual women experience more body dissatisfaction than both lesbian and heterosexual women (Polimeni et al., 2009). Interviews with educated, white, feminist bisexual women helped explain this finding because, although they were aware of oppressive appearance standards, they expressed a tension between that knowledge and their desire to attract men (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013). In addition, they experienced overt objectification from men due directly to their status as bisexual women. Although

lesbian communities were described as an important source of acceptance for diverse bodies, bisexual women also reported frustration at the perceived pressure to adhere to lesbian standards of appearance or risk invisibility when they were seen as too feminine and thus heterosexual (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Taub, 2003). However, in a large quantitative study, bisexual women's appreciation of their bodies was not significantly different than other sexual minority women's (Ramseyer Winter et al., 2015). Keeping in mind possible differences among sexual minority women, the literature generally suggests that sexual minority women may have more opportunity and/or ability than heterosexual women to be sexual subjects with embodied agency, despite having a sexual identity that is stigmatized and marginalized in mainstream US culture.

**Proactive behaviors and actions.** According to Empowerment Theory, proactive behaviors and actions are also essential to the realization of one's power-oriented goals. Especially when based on critical consciousness about the social context and done in solidarity with others, critical behaviors and actions can further one's power-oriented goal by challenging inequalities and, ultimately, transforming social conditions to better meet one's needs (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Gavey, 2012; Prilleltensky, 2008, 2012; Zimmerman, 1995). The actions incorporated into empowering processes depend on one's goal and could occur at individual, interpersonal, or sociostructural levels.

In the current study I chose to utilize sexual assertiveness as one proactive behavior that could be relevant to the goal of sexual pleasure for women within the

social context of unequal power relations. Sexual assertiveness involves verbal and non-verbal communication and conflict negotiation skills, which have emerged in the literature as integral to attaining sexual health and rights (Blanc, 2001; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Hensel & Fortenberry, 2012; Hurlbert, 1991; Peterson, 2010; Schick et al., 2008; Tolman, Striepe et al., 2003). Being sexually assertive means attempting to actualize a subjective sense of oneself through an interaction with another person (Morokoff, 2000). A person who is sexually assertive will directly talk about satisfying sexual behaviors, initiate wanted behaviors, and refuse or negotiate unwanted behaviors.

Few studies have explicitly examined differences and similarities between sexual minority and heterosexual women on sexual assertiveness. In interviews with ethnically diverse adult heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual women, participants *in general* revealed great ambivalence about asserting their sexual needs (Fahs, 2011). Yet, there has been some research on conflict-resolution that implies that women in same-sex partnerships could be more sexually assertive than women in mixed-sex partnerships. For instance, lesbian couples were more likely than heterosexual couples to have positive communication when discussing non-sexual areas of conflict, and were generally more effective at resolving conflict (Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2004). The authors attributed this difference to same-sex couples' egalitarianism. Another study suggested that lesbians in relationships showed more instrumentality on a measure that included questions about being assertive and acting



as a leader (Kurdek, 1987). Thus, what little research exists generally has supported the idea that sexual assertiveness may differ by sexual identity.

**Sexual pleasure as a power-oriented goal.** According to empowerment theorists, empowering processes involve having a goal that motivates a person toward gaining power or agency (Cattaneo et al., 2014; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Menon, 2002). The specific nature of empowerment goals, and the strategies for achieving them, will necessarily be influenced by one's cultural values and the social conditions in one's context. In addition, the goals for empowerment may not always be explicit or concrete and they can change over time. Ultimately, it is most important that research on empowerment be grounded in the objectives of the disenfranchised (Cattaneo et al., 2014).

In the current study, I investigated sexual pleasure as one possible goal of the proposed sexual empowerment process. Sexual pleasure has generally been defined as the physical and psychological satisfaction from, and enjoyment of, erotic activities, including, but not limited to, experiencing orgasm (Fahs, 2011; Philpott et al., 2006; Rye & Meaney, 2007). I used two different measures of sexual pleasure in the present study: general sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience with one's partner(s) in the last year. The first measure reflected the fact that one's sexual satisfaction can be independent of their sexual experiences with a partner. A general assessment of satisfaction was also important because a lack of orgasm does not always indicate an absence of sexual enjoyment (see Armstrong et al., 2012). Still, I considered orgasm experience to be a central component of sexual pleasure, due to

evidence that college-aged heterosexual women who orgasmed reported five- to six-times greater enjoyment of sexual activity than those who did not orgasm (Armstrong et al., 2012). This conceptualization of sexual pleasure is from a Western perspective because my study of sexual empowerment was grounded in literature predominantly from the US, United Kingdom (UK), Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, with a sample from the US.

An empowerment goal must be both “power-oriented” and personally meaningful in order to be connected to social justice for marginalized groups (Cattaneo et al., 2014; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). I argue that sexual pleasure for women meets the criteria of being a “power-oriented” goal in a patriarchal culture such as the US. Although gaining pleasure is not inherently transgressive (Collins, 2004), enhancing women’s sexual pleasure is about power and intimate justice in the context of gender inequality, compulsory heterosexuality, and sexual objectification described above (McClelland, 2010, 2014). In this context, women of all sexual orientations are exposed to heterosexist socialization that suggests that women’s subjective sexual feelings and desires are unimportant at best and perverse at worst (Brown, 2000; Ussher, 2005). Individuals enact the power dynamics that exist in their social world (Foucault, 1978/1990), which means that gender-biased social contexts may shape individuals’ expectations about and embodied experience of sexual pleasure (Frith 2013b; Henderson et al., 2009).

Indeed, in interviews with ethnically diverse adult heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual women, participants revealed great ambivalence about asserting their sexual

needs and claiming pleasure for themselves, regardless of the gender of their partner (Fahs, 2011). In addition, interviews with heterosexual adolescent and adult women have suggested that they are generally not taught or encouraged to feel entitled to experience sexual pleasure on their own terms or to recognize and act on their embodied sexual desires as self-determined subjects (Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002; Fine, 1988; Hollibaugh, 1992; Tolman, 2002). Moreover, many women disclosed that they often saw their desires as secondary to their partner's (Fahs, 2011; Nicolson & Burr, 2003). This finding has also been supported by a community survey of 904 sexually active white, Black, and Latina adolescence and young adults, in which only about half believed they had a right to stop foreplay when they wanted, to communicate to a partner that he was being too rough, or to tell a partner they wanted to have sex differently (Rickert, Sanghvi, & Wiemann, 2002).

Although some research has suggested that similar proportions of women in lesbian and heterosexual relationships experience sexual satisfaction and orgasm (e.g., Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003), it is likely that additional contextual factors related to power, such as heterosexism, homophobia, stigma, and differential access to basic sexual rights, further restrict the sexual satisfaction of lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer identified people (McClelland, 2014). In particular, the invisibility of lesbian and bisexual desire (Barker, 2007; Brown, 2000; Rose & Eaton, 2013) and the social construction of homosexuality as diseased, sinful, and abnormal (Hammack et al., 2013; Herek et al., 1991) may undermine sexual minority women's possibilities for sexual pleasure. For instance, interviews with young lesbians in the UK suggested

that sexual minority girls experienced difficulty recognizing their sexual feelings because there was no language or imagery in the broader culture to guide them (Ussher, 2005). Still, though different, this difficulty may not be much worse than for heterosexual women, as evidenced by one study showing no difference between sexual minority and heterosexual women in their sexual satisfaction or orgasm experience (see Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012).

In contrast, some researchers have argued that, to extent that sexual minority women are less invested in heterosexual ideals of normative femininity, they may have an easier time defining their sexuality in opposition to hegemonic norms that subordinate women's pleasure (Bergeron & Senn, 1998; Polimeni et al., 2009; Strong et al., 2000; Ussher, 2005). For example, there is some evidence that sexual minority women have more flexible gender roles and greater equality within their relationships (Coleman, Hoon, & Hoon, 1983; Kurdek, 1987), have more freedom to take on active or passive, desirable or desiring, and object or subject roles (Ussher, 2005), and are less focused on performance and more focused on mutual pleasure (Rose & Eaton, 2013). Indeed, other research has demonstrated that sexual minority women actually tend to report more sexual satisfaction and pleasure than heterosexual women. Specifically, lesbians were less likely to have *never* had an orgasm (Coleman et al., 1983), lesbian and bisexual women (as a group) scored higher on desire, arousal, frequency and pleasure from orgasm, and sexual satisfaction (Henderson et al., 2009), and women in same-sex relationships reported more sexual satisfaction (Holmberg et al., 2010). Moreover, in a national sample from the US (74% white), lesbian women

had a higher probability of orgasm with a familiar partner than both heterosexual and bisexual women (Garcia, Lloyd, Wallen, & Fisher, 2014).

Sexual pleasure also meets the criteria of being personally relevant to many women. Although there are a variety of reasons why people may engage in sexual activity, research has shown that sexual pleasure is a primary motivator for both men and women in the US (Meston & Buss, 2007; Rye & Meaney, 2007). For example, in a study of people's motivations for sex, "I wanted to experience the physical pleasure" and "It feels good" were the second and third reasons given by a large sample of undergraduate women ( $N = 1,046$ , 62% white, no sexual orientation information provided; Meston & Buss, 2007). In fact, pleasure tends to be seen as the purpose of sexual activity (Opperman et al., 2014), to the point that people are less likely to define a particular behavior *as sex* if an orgasm did not occur (Sewell & Strassberg, 2015).

Moreover, sexual pleasure and satisfaction may be personally meaningful to women because of their connection to overall well-being. In particular, research has shown that sexual well-being is beneficial to relationship, psychological, and physical well-being (Coleman, 2002; Holmberg et al., 2010; Knerr & Philpott, 2006; Levin, 2007; Vance, 1992). For example, in one study of sexually active adults across 29 countries, those who were the most satisfied with their sex lives reported the most overall happiness (Laumann et al., 2006). The connection between sexual well-being and physical and mental health has been found for both women in same-sex and mixed-sex relationships (e.g., Holmberg et al., 2010; Tracy & Junginger, 2007).

Indeed, the importance of sexual pleasure and satisfaction has increasingly been acknowledged as central to sexual health and sexual rights (Barroso, 2010; National Commission on Adolescent Sexual Health, 1995; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Contemporary declarations of sexual health and rights have included the possibility of pleasurable, satisfying and safe sexual experiences as part of guaranteeing the highest standard of sexual health and well-being for all (Dixon-Mueller et al., 2009; IPPF, 2008; WAS, 2014; World Health Organization, 2006).

### **Documented Relationships Among Empowerment Components**

Next, I turn to a review of the interrelationships among components of the proposed sexual empowerment process (see Figure 1). First, I discuss the direct relationships between critical consciousness and sexual pleasure. Then, I explore the relationships between critical consciousness and the two proposed mediators, sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness. I also examine the evidence showing the first mediator, sexual subjectivity, has been related to the second mediator, sexual assertiveness. After, I review research connecting the two proposed mediators with sexual pleasure. Finally, I provide evidence that sexual empowerment variables may be related to each other in a process involving mediation.

**Critical consciousness and sexual pleasure.** Researchers have suggested that direct connections exist between having critical consciousness about gender and sexuality and experiencing more sexual pleasure and well-being. A recent review of the literature documented the negative consequences of adhering to patriarchal gender roles of female passivity for women's sexual satisfaction (Sanchez, Fetterolf, et al.,

2012). In terms of critical consciousness, a number of quantitative and qualitative studies from Australia, Norway, and the US provided evidence that adult heterosexual women who held more progressive perspectives about femininity and sexuality reported more sexual arousal and satisfaction than women with more patriarchal beliefs (Crawford, Kippax, & Waldby, 1994; Pedersen & Blekesaune, 2003; Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005; Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006). Women with more patriarchal beliefs in these studies tended to ignore and minimize their own desires, explaining that men's needs came first and overshadowed their own.

Some research has distinguished between having feminist attitudes and having a feminist identity, and the results raise the possibility that *identifying* as a feminist may be differentially related to some sexual outcomes than other aspects of critical consciousness about gender and sexuality (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007; Eisele & Stake, 2008; Zucker, 2004). For example, one study with university women (75% white, 97% heterosexual) differentiated between self-identified feminists, egalitarians that endorsed feminist beliefs, and non-feminists (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007). They found that self-identified feminists reported less support for the sexual double standard than egalitarians, but the two groups did not differ on measures of sexual assertiveness or satisfaction (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007). Compared to non-feminists, however, those who identified as feminists reported more positive affective and evaluative responses to sexual cues ("erotophilia"; Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007).

It remains an open question as to whether the documented relationship between heterosexual women's critical consciousness about gender and sexuality and

their sexual pleasure extends to sexual minority women. Existing work is limited and has tended to focus on heterosexual men and women. In one exception, researchers did not ask about sexual orientation (and therefore may have included non-heterosexual individuals) in a nationally representative sample from Finland that found less endorsement of traditional ideology was related to more sexual satisfaction (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). It seems likely that sexual minority women vary in the extent to which they reject patriarchal ideologies and adopt a feminist identity or feminist attitudes. It is plausible that, like heterosexual women, those sexual minority women with more critical consciousness may experience more sexual pleasure and satisfaction.

**Critical consciousness and sexual subjectivity.** There is also a growing literature that connects having critical consciousness about gender and sexuality with greater sexual subjectivity among women. For instance, in a sample of predominantly white late-adolescent Australian women (15% of whom identified as non-heterosexual), those who rejected sexual double standards and self-silencing also reported more sexual subjectivity, including entitlement to sexual pleasure, sexual self-reflection, sexual body-esteem, and pleasure self-efficacy (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). For adolescent girls in the Netherlands, less endorsement of the sexual double standard was related to more entitlement to sexual pleasure from oneself but was unrelated to entitlement to pleasure from one's partner (Emmerink, Vanwesenbeeck, van den Eijnden, & ter Bogt, 2016). In another study, white heterosexual undergraduate women from the US who endorsed more feminist beliefs



also reported more sexual subjectivity (measured as a combination of sexual awareness and self-efficacy; Schick et al., 2008). Furthermore, qualitative interviews with young women from the US (77% heterosexual) and New Zealand (all heterosexual) has indicated that less endorsement of dominant femininity ideologies was related to having higher levels of sexual self-efficacy (Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002; Gavey & McPhillips, 1999). The connection between rejecting dominant norms of femininity and sexual self-efficacy has also been supported in quantitative research in the US a sample composed of 96% heterosexual women (Curtin, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2011) and a sample of women whose sexual identity was not reported (Impett et al., 2006). For undergraduate students in the US, the literature has also shown a relationship between both gender-egalitarian and feminist attitudes and greater condom use self-efficacy (for a sample of 97% heterosexual women; Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007) and self-efficacy in general (for a sample whose sexual identity was not reported; Eisele & Stake, 2008).

Moreover, additional research suggests that endorsing feminism or progressive gender ideologies was connected to positive embodiment for heterosexual women and for women in samples in which orientation was not reported (Dionne, Davis, Fox, & Gurevich, 1995; Hurt et al., 2007; Murnen & Smolak, 2009). Among educated, relatively affluent, adult lesbian women in the US, those who internalized higher levels of heterosexism reported more body dissatisfaction (Haines et al., 2008), while participation in feminist activities was related to self-acceptance more generally for lesbians (Leavy & Adams, 1986). Interviews with adult bisexual women have

suggested that feminism positively affected their body image by helping to recognize the socially constructed and oppressive nature of beauty ideals, serving as a catalyst to making more conscious and personal choices, and allowing them to simply care less about appearance standards (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Taub, 2003). Thus, there was preliminary evidence that critical consciousness about gender and sexuality (i.e., feminist identity, feminist attitudes, and progressive gender ideology) was related to several of the interrelated dimensions of sexual subjectivity assessed in this dissertation. While these connections likely hold for both heterosexual and sexual minority women, research is limited and the links have not yet been demonstrated within multivariate sexual empowerment processes.

**Critical consciousness and action.** Empowerment Theory has suggested that having critical consciousness about power in the social context can translate into action and proactive behavioral choices aimed at addressing injustices within social relationships (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Mosedale, 2005; Prilleltensky, 2008, 2012; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Indeed, there has been research demonstrating a relationship between critical consciousness about gender and sexuality and sexual assertiveness. For example, less endorsement of feminist ideology and less expectation for egalitarian long-term relationships were both related to less sexual assertiveness in a sample of undergraduate women (84% exclusively heterosexual; Yoder, Perry, & Saal, 2007). In addition, a number of studies with college-aged and older adult women conducted in Egypt, New Zealand, and the US have found that those who endorsed more progressive gender ideologies

also reported increased comfort asserting sexual desires, more assertive sexual talk, and more assertiveness in initiating and refusing sexual activities (Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007; Curtin et al., 2011; Gavey & McPhillips, 1999; Shearer, Hosterman, Gillen, & Lefkowitz, 2005; Waszak, Severy, Kafafi, & Badawi, 2001). These samples from the US included only 3% to 7% sexual minority women, whereas the international samples did not report sexual orientation information.

Other research has explored the connection between critical consciousness and sexual communication more generally. In particular, evidence suggested that endorsing more progressive gender role beliefs was related to more comfort discussing safe sex for heterosexual students and college-aged non-students (MacCorquodale, 1984) and more sexual self-disclosure and dyadic communication for a community sample of white heterosexual adults (Greene & Faulkner, 2005). Moreover, in-depth interviews with Latinas (77% heterosexual) suggested that explicit communication about desires and boundaries required them to reject the notion that women are sexually passive (Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002). Overall, these findings provided support for the proposal that critical consciousness about gender and sexuality may promote women's comfort with and ability to be assertive. However, we do not know how fully these conclusions may generalize to sexual minority women or whether the relationship between critical consciousness and sexual assertiveness may be mediated by sexual subjectivity.

**Sexual subjectivity and action.** Empowerment Theory also posits that one must develop an agentic subjectivity in order to take liberatory, proactive action

within social relationships (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Gavey, 2012; Mosedale, 2005; Peterson, 2010; Prilleltensky, 2008, 2012; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). In the sexual realm, the ability to be sexually assertive may depend on having a subjective, internalized sense of their sexuality (Morokoff, 2000). Indeed, there was preliminary evidence demonstrating a relationship between sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness. For example, it was found that sexual self-acceptance (positive attitudes toward one's sexuality) predicted assertiveness in initiating wanted sexual behaviors for both university and community-based adult samples from the US (no sexual identity information was reported; Morokoff et al., 1997). In terms of self-efficacy, in the same study, sexual self-efficacy for using condoms predicted sexual assertiveness (Morokoff et al., 1997). Sexual self-efficacy research has tended to focus on the ability to say "no" to unwanted or risky sexual activity or to negotiate condom use, but it is possible the connection could exist for sexual self-efficacy related to pleasure. Furthermore, a growing literature has documented how various assessments of positive embodiment were related to sexual assertiveness, initiation of sex, and comfort communicating about sex (Ackard, Kearney-Cooke, & Peterson, 2000; Hirschman et al., 2006; Impett et al. 2006; Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015; Schooler, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2005; Wiederman, 2000; Yamamiya, Cash, & Thompson, 2006). Of note, these studies either excluded sexual minority women (Ramsey & Hoyt, 2015; Wiederman, 2000; Yamamiya et al., 2006), had less than 5% sexual minority respondents (Ackard et al., 2000; Schooler et al., 2005) or did not report sexual identity information

(Hirschman et al., 2006; Impett et al. 2006). Thus, while this review documents several dimensions of sexual subjectivity related to heterosexual women's ability to assert their sexual desires and needs, it remains an open question as to whether these findings are replicable with sexual minority participants.

**Sexual subjectivity and pleasure.** The direct relationship between having more positive sexual subjectivity and sexual pleasure has also received some attention in the literature, in particular sexual self-efficacy and positive embodiment. In terms of self-efficacy, heterosexual women in the US from a range of ethnicities, ages, education levels, and socioeconomic situations who reported more contraceptive self-efficacy also reported more contraceptive use, consistently demonstrating a link between self-efficacy and achieving one's goals (Cecil & Pinkerton, 1998; Gómez & Marín, 1996; Levinson, Wan, & Beamer, 1998; Soler et al., 2000). Although most research utilized risk-focused measures of sexual self-efficacy, these results suggested a relationship could also exist between self-efficacy and experiencing more pleasure. For example, among a large sample of white lesbian women ( $M_{age} = 41$ ), mastery (possessing the capacity to use one's surroundings to maximize one's needs) was related to sexual satisfaction (Biss & Horne, 2005). In another study, sexual autonomy (i.e., sexual authenticity and freedom) was related to sexual satisfaction for both lesbian and heterosexual women (Sanchez, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Crocker, 2011).

Furthermore, quantitative and qualitative evidence from several samples of heterosexual women of high school age and older in the US and Australia has shown

relationships between having sexual subjectivity, sexual autonomy, or positive sexual self-concept, and having more sexual arousal, desire, excitement, orgasm, and satisfaction (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006; Impett & Tolman, 2006; Kelly, Strassberg, & Kircher, 1990; Sanchez et al., 2006; Schick et al., 2008; Schick et al., 2010). In addition, research with predominantly white, heterosexual, adolescent and adult women of a range of education and income levels from the US, the Netherlands, Australia, and Canada has generally found that those who report more positive embodiment also tend to report more sexual arousal, lubrication, pleasure, satisfaction, and orgasm than those with more negative and objectified feelings and cognitions about their bodies (Ackard et al., 2000; Berman, Berman, Miles, Pollets, & Powell, 2003; Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Herbenick et al., 2011; Herbenick & Reece, 2010; Hirschman et al., 2006; Morrison, Bearden, Ellis, & Harriman, 2005; Pujols, Meston, & Seal, 2009; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007; Steer & Tiggemann, 2008; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012; van den Brink, Smeets, Hessen, Talens & Woertman, 2013; Wiederman, 2000; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). This finding was supported in a sample that included 47% sexual minority women, in that appreciation of one's body predicted sexual arousal, satisfaction, and orgasm (Satinsky et al., 2012). Moreover, when asked whether feelings about the body impacted their sex lives, 48% of heterosexual women and 47% of lesbian women reported that body image had a positive effect (Peplau et al., 2009). In-depth interviews with a diverse sample of heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual women suggested that comfort with their bodies allowed them to focus on being in the

moment which helped them experience more pleasure (Fahs, 2011). This literature has highlighted the importance of sexual subjectivity in explorations of sexual pleasure for both heterosexual and sexual minority women.

**Action and pleasure.** According to Empowerment Theory, proactive behaviors and actions are essential to the realization of one's power-relevant goals. Indeed, evidence has suggested that sexual assertiveness is related to sexual satisfaction, according to a nationally representative sample of adults in Finland and university samples of white heterosexual women in the US (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Hurlbert, Apt, & Rabehl, 1993; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2006). Similarly, according to a study of young adult heterosexual couples, when women engaged in submissive rather than assertive behaviors with little desire to do so, both they and their partners reported less sexual satisfaction (Sanchez, Phelen, Moss-Racusin, & Good, 2012). In addition, in university, community, and nationally representative samples of predominantly white, heterosexual adult women in the US and Canada, those who reported better communication, more self-disclosure, and more discussion with partners about what brings them pleasure also reported more orgasms and more sexual and relational satisfaction (Bridges, Lease, & Ellison, 2004; Byers & Demmons, 1999; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Greene & Faulkner, 2005; Kelly et al., 1990; MacNeil & Byers, 2005). Although this research focused on heterosexual women, it seems plausible that one's ability to assert one's needs and communicate one's desire would relate to increased pleasure for women, regardless of the gender of their partner.

## **Sexual Empowerment as a Process**

The literature reviewed documenting direct relationships among empowerment components (i.e., between critical consciousness and subjectivity, critical consciousness and action, critical consciousness and pleasure, subjectivity and action, subjectivity and pleasure, and action and sexual pleasure) gives support to the hypothesis that subjectivity and action could be mediators in sexual empowerment processes. In a mediated sexual empowerment process, having critical consciousness about gender and sexuality may be related to women's sexual pleasure and well-being because more progressive ideas about gender are related to sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness, which are, in turn, related to sexual pleasure. Although several potential mediating factors have been identified, little empirical work has tested the specific role these factors may play. In one notable exception, research with white, heterosexual undergraduate women found that sexual subjectivity and sexual motivation mediated the relationship between endorsing feminist beliefs and sexual satisfaction (Schick et al., 2008). Needed is a more thorough examination of the mediated processes through which critical consciousness about gender and sexuality may be related to sexual well-being for heterosexual and sexual minority women. An exploration of sexual empowerment processes fully grounded in Empowerment Theory would be an important contribution to debates about the usefulness of sexual empowerment in promoting women's and girls' sexual pleasure within patriarchy.



## The Current Study

The current study applied Empowerment Theory to the sexual domain to test a sexual empowerment process for both heterosexual and sexual minority women. This study was designed to make a contribution to the literature by filling gaps in our understanding of the connections between critical consciousness, sexual subjectivity, sexual assertiveness, and sexual pleasure. I used structural equation modeling (SEM) with quantitative data to facilitate the investigation of the mediating roles of subjectivity and action in the sexual empowerment process. That is, I was able to examine whether there would be an indirect relationship between critical consciousness about gendered power and increased sexual pleasure for women, *through* a process involving links between critical consciousness and sexual subjectivity, sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness, and sexual assertiveness and sexual well-being. SEM allowed me to examine these multiple relationships among variables simultaneously. Testing such a model aligns with the feminist scholars' recommendations to move beyond examinations of group differences to examinations of the *processes* involved in the psychological experiences surrounding gender and power (Grabe, in preparation).

I choose to study sexual pleasure as a goal of the proposed sexual empowerment process, in part, because positive aspects of sexuality like pleasure and desire have historically been neglected in psychology and public health in favor of a focus on risk, deviance, and danger (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Higgins, 2007; Higgins & Hirsch, 2007; Impett, Muise, & Breines, 2013; Knerr & Philpott,

2006). Moreover, studies of sexual minority women's sexual satisfaction are particularly slim (McClelland, 2010, 2014). These gaps are perhaps unsurprising, given the Judeo-Christian tradition of glorifying sex for procreation within the context of legal marriage and of viewing pleasure for its own sake as sinful (Altman, 2001; DeLamater, 1981). In addition, within the patriarchal context of unequal gender relations and sexual objectification, prioritizing women's safety from sexual violence and harassment has, understandably, been of utmost importance to feminist scholars. Yet, both safety and satisfaction are important for women's sexual well-being (Hollibaugh, 1992) and there is increasing recognition that safety and pleasure are interconnected and that pleasure may be an essential avenue for promoting safer sex behaviors (Higgins, 2007; Knerr & Philpott, 2006; Philpott et al., 2006; Scott-Sheldon & Johnson, 2006). Thus, this dissertation aimed to heed the call of sexuality researchers to move beyond a historical focus on sexual risk and danger to adopt more pleasure-focused goals when addressing women's sexual health and rights.

I also aimed to fill gaps in our understanding of both commonalities and variations in how components of a sexual empowerment process related to one another and to sexual pleasure for both heterosexual and sexual minority women within the patriarchal context of unequal gender relations in the US. As seen above, much of the research in this area has been conducted with white, middle-class heterosexual young adult women, in large part because much psychological research has either ignored sexual orientation or adopted prejudiced views about gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals (Barker, 2007; Hammack et al., 2013; Herek et al., 1991).

Moreover, the vast majority of the research with sexual minority women reviewed here focused on the experience of openly identified lesbians. As such, our understanding of how a process of sexual empowerment may vary depending on factors such as sexual orientation/identity is quite limited to date.

By exploring both similarities and differences between heterosexual and sexual minority women in a sexual empowerment process, I hoped to decenter heterosexuality as the ideal, normal, or most healthy sexual identity. As others have argued, it is also important to focus on similarities among women, such as shared gender socialization, because heterosexuality itself requires examination and explanation (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Due to the social construction of both gender and sexuality, differences between heterosexual and sexual minority women may likely be a “matter of degree rather than kind” (Diamond, 2005a, p. 119), and those differences should not be assumed to suggest deviance or deficit (Herek et al., 1991).

## **Method**

### **Hypotheses**

I proposed a sexual empowerment process for heterosexual and sexual minority women (see Figure 2) in which indicators of critical consciousness were hypothesized to directly predict sexual subjectivity measures, which were, in turn, hypothesized to predict sexual assertiveness. Sexual assertiveness, in turn, was hypothesized to predict sexual pleasure outcomes. In addition, I proposed that critical consciousness about gender would be indirectly related to sexual pleasure through relationships with two mediators, sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness. It was

expected that the hypothesized psychosocial process of sexual empowerment would function similarly for heterosexual and sexual minority women due to the structural and ideological subordination of women in general within patriarchal contexts. Such a similarity would also support the generalizability of Empowerment Theory. In addition, the little research that could be found on the interrelationships between empowerment components supported similarities between women, rather than differences.

Despite predicted similarities in the process of sexual empowerment, mean group differences for sexual minority and heterosexual women were expected on several study variables based on the research described above. Sexual minority women were expected to report higher levels of critical consciousness about gendered power. Specifically, sexual minority women were expected to identify as feminists at a higher rate than heterosexual women and to have more awareness of gender discrimination (Rose & Eaton, 2013). In addition, sexual minority women were expected to report less endorsement of heteronormativity than heterosexual women (Habarth, 2008). Furthermore, sexual minority women were expected to conform less to feminine norms of fidelity and romantic relationships, based on evidence that they may have greater role flexibility and equality within their relationships (e.g., Kurdek, 1987).

Next, sexual minority women were expected to report more positive sexual subjectivity, more sexual assertiveness, and more sexual pleasure than heterosexual women. In particular, in line with prior research, I thought sexual minority women

would express more entitlement to sexual pleasure, more sexual consciousness, and more sexual self-efficacy (Boislard & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2011; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). I also anticipated sexual minority women would report lower levels of body image self-consciousness and body surveillance than heterosexual women, due to some evidence that sexual minority women were less concerned with societal appearance norms and more accepting of their bodies (e.g., Hill & Fischer, 2008; Polimeni et al., 2009; Taub, 2003). Moreover, sexual minority women were expected to report higher levels of sexual assertiveness than heterosexual women, because they may have more agency and more ability to communicate effectively (e.g., Gottman et al., 2003; Ussher, 2005). Finally, sexual minority women were also expected to report more sexual pleasure than heterosexual women on both measures, in line with prior research (e.g., Garcia et al. 2014).

### **Participants**

A total of 571 undergraduate women completed a survey measuring the hypothesized sexual empowerment components. Women who reported having had a sexual partner in the last year were included in this analysis ( $n = 437$ ). Participants who selected “prefer not to identify” ( $n = 4$ ) when asked about their sexual orientation were dropped from further analysis. Three women over age 30 were excluded (1 bisexual, 1 mostly gay/lesbian, and 1 heterosexual) in order to restrict the sample to typically college-aged women.

The final sample included 430<sup>1</sup> women enrolled in psychology courses at a large public university from March 2014 to March 2015. Participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.89$ )

were diverse in terms of ethnicity (38% White), socio-economic status (50% first-generation college students), and religious affiliation (49% no affiliation). There were 271 participants who identified as heterosexual. In the sexual minority group there were a total of 159 participants who identified as lesbian (4.4%;  $n = 7$ ), mostly lesbian (3.7%;  $n = 6$ ), bisexual (20.8%;  $n = 33$ ), mostly straight (54.7%;  $n = 87$ ), “other” (i.e., pansexual, queer; 9.4%;  $n = 15$ ), or unsure (6.9%;  $n = 11$ ). “Mostly straight” women were included in the sexual minority group because they reported an identity that was not exclusively heterosexual, and past research has suggested that mostly straight women’s sexual identity processes were similar to other sexual-minority populations (Thompson & Morgan, 2008).

### **Procedure**

Participants signed up for one-hour time slots to come into the laboratory for a survey called “Gender and Society” in individual sessions. A female undergraduate research assistant instructed them to open the survey on a computer and read an on-screen consent form. Full informed consent was obtained by disclosing that the survey would include questions of a personal nature about dating and sexuality. After participants completed the survey they were informed about the purpose of the study and provided an opportunity to ask questions and discuss their experience.

Participants were given a handout with contact information for the researchers, on-campus counseling and sexual health promotion services, and sexual health related websites.

A central aim of my dissertation was to recruit a large enough group of sexual minority women for valid statistical tests in order to combat historical heterosexual research bias. Eligibility was based on answers to gender and sexual identity questions provided on the psychology participant pool pre-screening survey, which was completed by students who were at least 18-years-old. The study recruitment took place over several school terms. In the first, all self-identified female students in the psychology department participant pool were eligible to participate. In the second and third phases, the study was opened first to women who did not identify as heterosexual. Eligibility was opened to heterosexual women only when it appeared that all interested sexual minority women had made appointments.

## **Measures**

**Background characteristics.** Background information was collected from all participants in order to assess the representativeness of the sample. Participants reported their age in years and wrote-in their ethnic identities which were then coded into categories: White/European American, Asian American, Hispanic/Latina, Multi-Ethnic (they wrote-in two or more), Other, and No Answer. Political affiliation data were collected by having participants select from the following options: very liberal/far left, liberal, moderate, conservative, and very conservative/far right. In addition, they selected their religious affiliation from a closed-ended list and answered the question “how religious are you?” on a scale from 1 (*not at all religious*) to 4 (*very religious*). Finally, participants reported their mother’s and father’s highest level of education. Participants with same-sex parents were given

instructions so they could provide education data for two parents. Parents' education levels were then combined to create a dichotomous variable for first-generation college student status. Participants were coded as 0 (*first-generation college student*) if neither parent had a college degree, and as 1 (*at least one parent has a college degree*) if at least one parent had completed a college degree.

**Relationship and sexual experience.** In this study participants were asked about their experience with sexual activities, which was defined as any kind of sex even if intercourse or orgasm did not occur. Participants first reported how many sexual partners, if any, they have ever had in the past and if they had been involved in any sexual activity with a partner in the last year. Participants also indicated if their past partners had been all men, all women, or both men and women, whether or not they had ever had penile-vaginal intercourse, and whether or not they had ever had an orgasm (yes, no, or I don't know). Data were also collected for participant's current relationship status (not currently dating, dating more than one person, dating one person, living together/cohabitating, engaged/married, divorced/legally separated/widowed, or other) and were recoded into 1 (*currently in a relationship*) or 0 (*not in a relationship*).

**Sexual identity.** Participants were asked to select their sexual orientation or identity from a list of options: Straight (heterosexual), Bisexual, Mostly gay or mostly lesbian, Gay or lesbian (homosexual), Unsure, Prefer not to identify, or Other. Write-in responses for the Other category included "queer," "pansexual," "bi/panromantic," and "demisexual."



### **Critical consciousness about gender and sexuality.**

***Feminist identity.*** Participants were asked if they identify as a feminist and answered yes or no.

***Awareness of gender discrimination.*** The Discrimination and Subordination subscale of the Liberal Feminism Attitudes and Ideology Scale (Morgan, 1996) was used to assess participants' perceptions of gendered power dynamics and the existence of injustice and inequality in the sociocultural context. The scale reflects participant's belief that women have been or are currently treated unfairly in society. Participants rated their agreement with 10 statements (e.g., "women have fewer choices available to them as compared to men") on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Several items were reverse-coded and higher mean scores indicated a stronger feminist position with more awareness of the discrimination against and subordination of women. Reliability was very good for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .84$ ), and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .83$ ) separately.

***Heteronormativity beliefs.*** The Gender Normative Sexual Behavior subscale of the Heteronormative Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (Habarth, 2008) was used to assess the extent to which participants believe it is acceptable for people to pursue sexual behaviors outside of an established gender binary. Participants rated their agreement with eight questions like "Women and men need not fall into stereotypical gender roles when in intimate relationships" on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher agreement on this measure suggested less tolerance of fluid

sexual roles and more endorsement of heteronormativity. Reliability was acceptable for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .76$ ), and for heterosexual women ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .60$ ) separately.

***Conformity to feminine norms.*** Two subscales of the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory-45 (Parent & Moradi, 2010, 2011) reflecting dimensions of a feminine gender role most relevant to the sexual realm were used to measure gender role conformity: Sexual Fidelity and Romantic Relationship. Participants answered five items about fidelity such as “I would feel guilty if I had a one-night stand” and five items about romantic relationships such as “Having a romantic relationship is essential in life” on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Several items were reverse coded and mean subscale scores were computed with higher scores indicating more conformity to feminine norms. Subscale reliability was acceptable for the sample as a whole (Sexual Fidelity  $\alpha = .83$ , and Romantic Relationship  $\alpha = .64$ ), as well as for heterosexual (Sexual Fidelity  $\alpha = .84$ , and Romantic Relationship  $\alpha = .62$ ) and sexual minority women (Sexual Fidelity  $\alpha = .75$ , and Romantic Relationship  $\alpha = .66$ ) separately.

### **Sexual subjectivity.**

***Entitlement to sexual pleasure.*** Two subscales of the Female Sexual Subjectivity Inventory (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006) were used to assess participants’ entitlement to sexual pleasure from the self and from a partner. For the self-focused scale, participants reported whether three statements (e.g., “It is okay for me to meet my own sexual needs through self-masturbation”) were true for them on a

Likert scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*). For the partner-focused scale, participants answered four statements (e.g., “It would bother me if a sexual partner neglected my sexual needs and desires”) with the same answer options. The original answer options were re-worded to match the other measures of sexual subjectivity (e.g., from “very true for me” to “very characteristic of me”) and the questions were presented in combination with the other sexual subjectivity scales. Several items were reverse-coded and a mean for each subscale was computed so higher scores reflected more entitlement. The current study reliability was good for the sample as a whole (self-focused  $\alpha = .84$ , partner-focused  $\alpha = .84$ ), and for heterosexual (self-focused  $\alpha = .84$ , partner-focused  $\alpha = .85$ ) and sexual minority women (self-focused  $\alpha = .76$ , partner-focused  $\alpha = .81$ ).

***Sexual consciousness.*** The Sexual Consciousness subscale of the Multidimensional Sexual Self-Concept Questionnaire (MSSCQ; Snell, 1998; Snell, Fisher, & Walters, 1993) was used to assess how much participants tend to think and reflect about the nature of their own sexuality. Participants reported whether each of five statements (e.g., “I tend to think about my own sexual beliefs and attitudes”) was true for them on a Likert scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*). A mean was computed so higher scores reflect more sexual consciousness. Scale reliability in the current study was good for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .82$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .79$ ) separately.

**Sexual self-efficacy.** The Self-Efficacy subscale of the MSSCQ (Snell, 1998; Snell et al., 1993) was used to assess participants' perceived ability to deal effectively with their sexuality. Participants reported whether each of five statements (e.g., "I have the ability to take care of any sexual needs and desire that I may have") was true for them on a Likert scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*). A mean was computed so higher scores reflect more self-efficacy. The self-efficacy scale's reliability was very good for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .85$ ) separately.

**Body image self-consciousness.** The Body Image Self-Consciousness Scale (Wiederman, 2000) was used to assess participants' body image self-consciousness during physical intimacy with a partner. Participants answered 15 items (e.g., "I would feel nervous if a partner were to explore my body before or after having sex") on a Likert scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). Scores were summed and high scores indicated more self-consciousness. Scale reliability was excellent for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .94$ ), and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .93$ ) separately.

**Body surveillance.** The Body Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996) was used to assess the extent to which participants scrutinize and monitor their own bodies. Participants answered eight items (e.g., "During the day, I think about how I look many times") on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Several items were reverse

coded so that higher average scores indicated that a woman more frequently watches her body and thinks about it in terms of how it looks, rather than how it feels. The scale had acceptable internal reliability for the entire sample ( $\alpha = .66$ ), and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .67$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .65$ ) separately, but was much improved with the deletion of one item: “I think more about how my body feels than how my body looks.” The reliability of the revised body surveillance scale was very good for the entire sample ( $\alpha = .83$ ), and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .83$ ) separately.

#### **Action.**

*Sexual assertiveness.* To measure critical actions I used the Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness (Hurlbert, 1991, 2011). The 25-item scale measured the behaviors, cognitions, and emotions related to how comfortable and communicative a woman is with sexuality in an intimate relationship. Participants rated their agreement with statements like “I feel comfortable initiating sex with my partner” on a Likert scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all of the time*). Several items were reverse coded and mean scores computed so higher scores indicated greater sexual assertiveness. Reliability was excellent for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .90$ ), and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .91$ ) separately.

#### **Pleasure outcomes.**

*Sexual satisfaction.* General sexual satisfaction was assessed using the Sexual Satisfaction subscale of the MSSCQ (Snell, 1998; Snell et al., 1993). Participants reported whether each of five statements (e.g., “I am satisfied with the way my sexual

needs are currently being met”) was true for them on a Likert scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*). These statements were not partner-specific and could have been answered by any participants regardless of whether they were currently in a relationship. A mean score was computed so that higher scores indicated greater sexual satisfaction. Reliability was very good for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .84$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .90$ ) separately.

***Orgasm experience with a partner in the last year.*** Participants were asked about their orgasm experience (frequency, difficulty, and satisfaction) when they had sexual stimulation or intercourse with a partner in the last year using an adapted version of the orgasm domain of the Female Sexual Function Index (Rosen et al., 2000). The timeframe was adapted to reflect orgasm experience in the last year as opposed to the last four weeks in order to allow women who were not sexual in the last month to complete the scale. Each question was answered on a 6-point scale. Scores were summed and higher scores indicated more positive orgasm experience with a partner in the last year (higher frequency, lower difficulty, higher satisfaction). Reliability was excellent for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .92$ ), and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and sexual minority ( $\alpha = .91$ ) separately.

## **Results**

### **Dimension Reduction**

In this study I used established, validated measures of critical consciousness, sexual subjectivity, sexual assertiveness, and sexual pleasure. In order to confirm that

the internal structure and underlying meaning of the measures was maintained in the current sample, I ran an exploratory factor analysis for all variables. Because psychometric scales and measurements are often created and validated with heterosexual samples, it was important to see if their meaning was similar across sexual identity groups. As such, I ran the factor analysis for heterosexual and sexual minority women separately, and constrained each scale to load on one factor. Similar factor loadings between the two groups would signify that the measure meant roughly the same thing, conceptually, for each group. If item loadings differed too greatly, it would suggest that the scale might not be measuring the same underlying construct for all women. To determine when to drop an item from a scale I used the following criteria: the difference between the two groups' item loadings needed to be greater than .20 (D. Bonett, personal communication, January 5, 2016), or an item needed to load lower than .32 for both groups (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The ultimate goal was to determine which, if any, subset of items on each measure could be interpreted similarly and thus used for both groups.

Overall, the scales had the same underlying structure for both sexual minority and heterosexual women. However, there were a few adjustments made to measures of critical consciousness and to the sexual assertiveness scale. On the awareness of gender discrimination scale, one item (“Women are already given equal opportunities with men in all important sectors of their lives”) was dropped because the factor loadings were substantially different for sexual minority and heterosexual women (.70 versus .46). As a 9-item scale, the reliability for awareness of gender

discrimination was still very good for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .83$ ), and for sexual minority ( $\alpha = .80$ ) and heterosexual women ( $\alpha = .84$ ) separately. On the heteronormativity beliefs scale, two items (“In healthy intimate relationships, women may sometimes take on stereotypical 'male' roles, and men may sometimes take on stereotypical 'female' roles” and “People should partner with whomever they choose, regardless of sex or gender”) were dropped because the factor loadings were substantially different for sexual minority and heterosexual women (.14 versus .38 and .41 versus .73). As a 6-item scale, reliability for heteronormativity beliefs was still acceptable for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .74$ ), and for sexual minority ( $\alpha = .63$ ) and heterosexual women ( $\alpha = .71$ ) separately. For the conformity to feminine norms of fidelity scale, one item (“I would only have sex if I was in a committed relationship like marriage”) was dropped because the factor loadings were substantially different for sexual minority and heterosexual women (.51 versus .73). As a 4-item subscale, reliability for fidelity was still good for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .82$ ) as well as for sexual minority ( $\alpha = .76$ ) and heterosexual women ( $\alpha = .83$ ) separately. Three items on the sexual assertiveness scale were dropped because they had factor loadings below .32 for both heterosexual and sexual minority women (“I enjoy masturbating myself to orgasm,” “I feel uncomfortable talking to my friends about sex” and “Pleasing my partner is more important than my pleasure”). As a 22-item scale, reliability for sexual assertiveness was still excellent for the sample as a whole ( $\alpha = .92$ ), and for heterosexual ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and sexual minority women ( $\alpha = .92$ ) separately.



## **Statistical Assumption Checks**

Before analyses were conducted, statistical assumptions for multivariate statistics were checked using SPSS software. Verification of statistical assumptions was conducted separately for heterosexual and sexual minority women to allow for group comparisons. The following variables violated normality assumptions for one or both groups: entitlement to pleasure from oneself and one's partner, sexual consciousness, sexual self-efficacy, and body image self-consciousness. Examination of bivariate and residual scatterplots also revealed several violations of the equal variance assumption. Transformations for continuous study variables were examined sequentially (square root, logarithmic, and inverse), and the most conservative transformation that corrected for both normality and variance violations was chosen. The following variables were transformed: awareness of gender discrimination (square root), beliefs about heteronormativity (logarithmic), conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships (square root), entitlement to pleasure from a partner (logarithmic), sexual consciousness (logarithmic), sexual self-efficacy (logarithmic), body image self-consciousness (logarithmic), body surveillance (square root), sexual assertiveness (square root), and sexual satisfaction (logarithmic). For entitlement to pleasure from oneself, skew and kurtosis could not be adequately corrected. As a result, this variable was dropped from multivariate models (discussed further in the limitations section). There were also heteroscedasticity problems with the background variables political affiliation, religiosity, and number of lifetime sexual partners, so they were transformed into dichotomous variables. Examinations revealed no

problems with linearity or multicollinearity for any variable. Upon checking for multivariate outliers using leverage and Mahalanobis distance (with Bonferroni corrections for multiple tests) all participants were retained.

### **Missing Data**

Overall, 88% of women had complete data on all variables. Across demographic and sexual experience variables missing data percentages ranged from 0% to 2.8%. Missing data on study variables ranged from 0% to 6%. It was determined that missing data were not Missing Completely at Random according to a statistically significant Little's MCAR test in SPSS and analysis of missing data patterns in MPlus (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). To account for the relationships between missing data and the variables in the dataset, a Multiple Imputation procedure in MPlus was used to replace missing data (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2010; Schafer & Graham, 2002). Multiple Imputation handles missing data using an iterative process in which a series of regression equations are created that predict estimates for the missing data (Enders & Gottschall, 2011). Then, observed data is entered into the regression coefficients to define distributions for the mean vector and covariance matrix and a Monte Carlo simulation is used to create new parameter estimates. These new parameter values are used to construct a new set of regression equations and the cycle continues until the specified number of datasets is generated. The parameter values from all imputed datasets are averaged to get the final results. In the current study, separate group imputation (Enders & Gottschall, 2011) with 20 imputations (Graham, Olchowski, & Gilreath, 2007) was used. Data were imputed

separately for heterosexual and sexual minority women in order to preserve the structure of the data set for subsequent group comparisons. Table 1 shows the variables included in the Multiple Imputation procedure and whether they were included as predictors and also had missing data imputed or whether they were just included as predictors.

### **Group Differences**

Before testing a sexual empowerment process model, I examined group differences and similarities between sexual minority and heterosexual women on background characteristics, relationship and sexual experience, and measures of critical consciousness, sexual subjectivity, action, and pleasure.

**Background characteristics.** Table 2 displays background characteristics for sexual minority and heterosexual women. In addition, the results of Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) difference tests and independent samples *t*-tests conducted in SPSS are shown. As can be seen, sexual minority participants were more likely than heterosexual participants to identify as White/European American, liberal or very liberal, not at all religious, and agnostic/atheist/no religion. On the other hand, sexual minority participants were less likely than heterosexual participants to be first generation college students. The two groups were similar in age. Group difference tests were verified in MPlus with imputed missing data (shown in bold font in Table 2) by regressing each background variable on sexual identity (using Maximum Likelihood estimation with robust standard errors [MLR]). All significant group differences on background variables were confirmed in MPlus.

**Relationship and sexual experience.** Table 3 displays relationship and sexual experience information for sexual minority and heterosexual women. In addition, the results of Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) difference tests and independent samples *t*-tests conducted in SPSS are shown. Participants were asked about their experience with sexual activities, even if intercourse or orgasm did not occur. As expected, heterosexual women were more likely to have only had male sexual partners in the past. However, sexual minority women reported significantly more lifetime sexual partners than heterosexual women. When the number of lifetime partners was treated as a dichotomous variable, sexual minority women were also more likely to have had three or more sexual partners. Women in both groups were similarly likely to have had penile-vaginal sexual intercourse, to have ever had an orgasm, and to currently be in a relationship of some kind. Group difference tests were verified in MPlus with imputed missing data (shown in bold font in Table 3) by regressing each relationship and sexual experience variable on sexual identity (using MLR). All significant group differences on relationship and sexual experience variables were confirmed in MPlus.

**Sexual empowerment variables.** Descriptive statistics on all main study variables are shown in Table 4 in their original form before square-root or logarithmic transformations. Both original data and multiply imputed data (in bold) are displayed. Also shown are independent samples *t*-tests conducted in SPSS with original data using pairwise deletion of missing values and those conducted in MPlus with missing data imputed (shown in bold). As can be seen, significance levels and effect sizes were similar for original data and multiply imputed data.

In both analyses, sexual minority women were significantly more likely to identify as a feminist and reported more awareness of gender discrimination than heterosexual women. Relatedly, they endorsed heteronormativity less than heterosexual women and reported less conformity to feminine norms of sexual fidelity and romantic relationships. Moreover, as a group, sexual minority participants reported higher levels of sexual subjectivity in terms of having more entitlement to pleasure from oneself and one's partner(s), more sexual consciousness, and more sexual self-efficacy. However, the groups were similar in body image self-consciousness and body surveillance. Sexual minority women also reported more proactive behavior than their heterosexual counterparts, as measured by sexual assertiveness. Despite these differences, women in both groups reported similar levels of overall sexual satisfaction as well as orgasm experience with a partner in the past year.

### **Testing a Sexual Empowerment Process Model**

**Model evaluation.** Bivariate correlations among sexual empowerment variables are shown in Table 5. Although these correlations may change in multivariate analyses that account for relationships among variables, the bivariate analysis indicated that measures of critical consciousness were related to sexual subjectivity measures, which were related to sexual assertiveness, which was related to both pleasure outcomes for heterosexual women. For sexual minority women, there were fewer correlations among critical consciousness and sexual subjectivity measures.

To test the empowerment process model, I constructed a path diagram in which measures of critical consciousness were hypothesized to directly predict measures of sexual subjectivity, which were, in turn, hypothesized to predict sexual assertiveness, which was expected to predict sexual pleasure outcomes (see Figure 2). I estimated the proposed sexual empowerment model with transformed variables using Maximum Likelihood estimation procedures in MPlus. This was a multi-group model with all paths allowed to vary freely across sexual identity groups. I used multiple fit indices to evaluate whether the data were a good fit: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and  $\chi^2$  goodness-of-fit statistics. A satisfactory fit was indicated by CFI values greater than 0.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), RMSEA values less than 0.08 with a 90% confidence interval (CI) that encompasses 0.05 (Steiger, 1990), and  $\chi^2/df$  values less than 3.0 (Kline, 1998).

To begin, results suggested that the data did not fit the hypothesized model very well (for fit statistics see Table 6, row 1). Modification indices were examined in two stages<sup>2</sup> after which it was determined that two paths should be added to the model: one estimating the direct relationship between sexual self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction, and one estimating the direct relationship between body surveillance and orgasm experience with a partner. The revised model with the two additional paths fit the data well on all indices (see Table 6, row 2). In addition, a  $\chi^2$  difference test indicated that the new revised model with two additional pathways was a better fit than the original hypothesized model ( $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 99.79, p = .000$ ). Many of the

hypothesized relationships were significant for both groups in this revised model. However, awareness of gender discrimination was unrelated to any other variable in the model for both sexual minority and heterosexual women. As such, I ran a trimmed model dropping awareness of gender discrimination. The trimmed model also fit the data well on all indices, although the  $\chi^2/df$  value was not improved (see Table 6, row 3). A  $\chi^2$  difference test between the trimmed model and the revised model was not significant, indicating that this more parsimonious trimmed model fit the data as well as the revised model ( $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 7.81, p = .252$ ).

A central goal of this study was to test whether sexual empowerment processes were similar across sexual identity groups, so I used the multi-group procedure recommended by Holmbeck (1997). In this procedure, I compared the trimmed model in which the predicted pathways between the groups were freely estimated (i.e., there were no constraints and the pathways could vary across sexual identity groups, see Table 6, row 3) to a trimmed model in which the predicted pathways were all constrained to be equal between groups. The constrained model's fit statistics are shown in Table 6, row 4. To test for similarity between sexual minority women and heterosexual women, I then compared the resultant  $\chi^2$  for the freely estimated and constrained models. A significant result indicated that the difference in  $\chi^2$  surpassed the critical value given the change in degrees of freedom ( $\Delta\chi^2(44) = 64.03, p = .026$ ), suggesting that at least one pathway in the model differed across the sexual identity groups.

Therefore, I proceeded to test individual pathways by constraining each one (while allowing the others to be free) and then examining  $\chi^2$  difference tests between the trimmed model with and without each individual constraint. The  $\chi^2$  difference tests indicate whether there was a change in model fit when a path is set to be equal between the two sexual identity groups. These tests revealed that the two groups differed on four unique pathways (described below). To obtain final parameter estimates, a partially constrained model was run allowing the four unique pathways to vary while setting all other parameters to equality. Note that it was the *unstandardized* coefficients that were constrained in the multi-group procedure, so some of the standardized estimates may vary slightly between groups. The final, partially constrained model fit the data very well (see Table 6, row 5). Furthermore, a  $\chi^2$  test comparing the freely estimated trimmed model and the partially constrained model was not significant ( $\Delta\chi^2(40) = 42.73, p = .355$ ), indicating that the more constrained model fit the data better.

Thus, the partially constrained model was deemed the best fit for these data and is described in detail below. Figure 3 depicts the statistically significant standardized parameter estimates in a sexual empowerment process for sexual minority and heterosexual women for the partially constrained model. Table 7 shows both significant and non-significant standardized parameter estimates, 95% CIs, and corresponding *p*-values.

***Critical consciousness and sexual subjectivity.*** Results suggested that some measures of critical consciousness about gender and sexuality predicted sexual



subjectivity for both sexual minority and heterosexual women (see Figure 3). Specifically, the data revealed that having a feminist identity predicted more positive sexual subjectivity on two indicators, but only very weakly. First, identifying as a feminist significantly predicted higher levels entitlement to pleasure from one's partner(s) for sexual minority ( $B = .11[.02, .19]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $B = .11[.02, .21]$ ). Second, identifying as a feminist predicted more sexual consciousness for sexual minority ( $B = .09[.00, .17]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $B = .10[.00, .20]$ ). That is, feminist women were more likely than their non-feminist counterparts to believe they should have their needs and desires considered by a partner and were more likely to reflect on their own sexual attitudes and behaviors. However, the parameter estimates for these relationships were very small and the 95% CIs either included zero or nearly included zero for both sexual minority and heterosexual women. As such, the data suggest that, although statistically significant, these relationships could be negligible for both groups. Altogether, it appeared that feminist identity was not a strong predictor of sexual subjectivity because it was also unrelated to sexual self-efficacy, body image self-consciousness, and body surveillance.

The next measure of critical consciousness, heteronormativity beliefs, was related to one indicator of sexual subjectivity. Specifically, there was a small, significant negative relationship in which less endorsement of heteronormativity predicted more sexual self-efficacy for sexual minority ( $B = -.13[-.22, -.04]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $B = -.15[-.25, -.05]$ ). Put another way, the less women endorsed gender-based norms in relationships, the more they believed they had the ability and

skills to get their sexual needs met. However, the results indicated that heteronormativity beliefs did not predict entitlement to sexual pleasure, sexual consciousness, body image self-consciousness, or body surveillance for either group. Thus, endorsement of heteronormativity was not a robust predictor of sexual subjectivity in this sample.

Additionally, less conformity to feminine norms of fidelity (i.e., more critical consciousness about and rejection of those norms) significantly predicted more positive sexual subjectivity on several indicators. In particular, there was a small, negative relationship in which those who reported less conformity to fidelity norms reported more entitlement to sexual pleasure from one's partner(s) (sexual minority  $B = -.18[-.28, -.08]$ ; heterosexual  $B = -.17[-.26, -.08]$ ). Moreover, there was a small to moderate negative relationship in which less conformity to feminine norms of fidelity significantly predicted more sexual consciousness for both sexual minority ( $B = -.26[-.35, -.17]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $B = -.26[-.35, -.17]$ ). Similarly, there was a small, negative relationship in which less conformity to fidelity norms significantly predicted more sexual self-efficacy for women in the sexual minority ( $B = -.20[-.30, -.10]$ ) and heterosexual groups ( $B = -.13[-.21, -.11]$ ). Although it was the most consistent predictor of sexual subjectivity in the current study, conformity to feminine norms of fidelity was not related to body image self-consciousness or body surveillance. Overall, these findings indicated that women who reported less personal conformity to feminine norms surrounding fidelity and casual sex also reported more belief that their partner(s) should consider their sexual desires, more awareness of

their own sexual motivations and desires, and more ability to have those desires taken into account.

For both sexual minority and heterosexual women, the data suggested that less conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships significantly predicted more positive sexual subjectivity on one indicator, but more negative sexual subjectivity on another. On one hand, the more women in either group conformed to feminine norms of romance, the more body surveillance they reported, suggesting less sexual subjectivity (sexual minority  $B = .22[.11, .32]$ ; heterosexual  $B = .20[.11, .29]$ ). On the other hand, the more women in either group conformed to feminine norms of romance, the *more* entitlement they felt to sexual pleasure from their partner(s), suggesting more positive sexual subjectivity (sexual minority  $B = .17[.07, .27]$ ; heterosexual  $B = .15[.06, .24]$ ). Thus, although more personal conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships meant more belief that one's sexual needs should be considered and accommodated by one's partner, it also meant more hypervigilance and monitoring of one's body. Conformity to romance norms did not, however, significantly predict sexual consciousness, sexual self-efficacy, or body image self-consciousness for either group. Therefore, there was some conflicting evidence for the role of conformity to romantic relationship norms in a sexual empowerment process across sexual identities.

Ultimately, only some measures of critical consciousness utilized in the current study consistently predicted sexual subjectivity. Feminist identity was only very weakly related to two subjectivity measures and endorsement of

heteronormativity beliefs were related to only one. Further, awareness of gender discrimination was unrelated to all other variables (and thus dropped from the final model). As such, this study provided evidence that indicators of critical consciousness measuring personal conformity to gendered norms about sexuality were related to elements of sexual subjectivity for both sexual minority and heterosexual women.

***Sexual subjectivity.*** In the current study the interrelationships *among* sexual subjectivity measures were also examined. To begin, entitlement to pleasure from one's partner(s) was unrelated to body image self-consciousness and very weakly related to body surveillance for both sexual minority and heterosexual participants. Although the relationship between entitlement to pleasure and body surveillance was statistically significant for sexual minority ( $r = .10[.01, .20]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $r = .10[.01, .19]$ ), the 95% CIs suggest the relationship could be non-existent.

There was some evidence that entitlement to sexual pleasure from one's partner(s) might play a different role in the sexual subjectivity of heterosexual versus sexual minority women. For example, the relationship between having more entitlement to pleasure from one's partner(s) and having more sexual consciousness was moderate and significant for heterosexual women ( $r = .39[.30, .49]$ ), but small and non-significant for sexual minority women ( $r = .15[-.01, .30]$ ). The correlation between entitlement to pleasure and sexual consciousness had been allowed to vary in the final model due to a  $\chi^2$  test suggesting a difference between the two groups ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 6.79, p = .009$ ). The fact that there was essentially no overlap in the 95% CIs for sexual minority and heterosexual women reaffirmed that the relationship was

different across groups. Thus, the more heterosexual women reflected on and thought about their own sexual motivations, behaviors, and attitudes, the more they believed they were entitled to have their partner consider their sexual desires. In addition, there was a significant, moderate relationship between more entitlement to pleasure from one's partner(s) and more sexual self-efficacy for heterosexual women ( $r = .33[.22, .43]$ ), but a non-significant, small relationship for sexual minority women ( $r = .06[-.10, .21]$ ). That is to say, for heterosexual women, feeling entitled to have a male partner consider one's sexual desires was related to the belief that one has the ability and skills to take care of one's sexual needs. Again, this relationship had been allowed to vary in the final model because it was different across sexual identity groups according to the  $\chi^2$  difference test ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 8.71, p = .003$ ). This variation was reaffirmed by the fact that there was no overlap in the 95% CIs for sexual minority and heterosexual women.

Aside from its relationship to entitlement, sexual consciousness operated similarly across sexual identity categories. There was a significant moderate to large correlation between more sexual consciousness and more sexual self-efficacy for both sexual minority ( $r = .49[.41, .57]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $r = .52[.45, .60]$ ). Moreover, the small, negative correlation between higher sexual consciousness and lower body image self-consciousness was significant for sexual minority ( $r = -.17[-.26, -.08]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $r = -.17[-.26, -.07]$ ). Lastly, sexual consciousness was unrelated to body surveillance for either group. Thus, the more women reflected on their sexuality the more they reported being able to handle and cope with their

sexual needs and wants and the less concerned they were about their physical appearance during sexual activities.

Generally, the evidence suggested that sexual self-efficacy was also similarly related to the other sexual subjectivity variables for sexual minority and heterosexual women. Although sexual self-efficacy was differentially related to entitlement to sexual pleasure from one's partner(s) depending on one's sexual identity, it was similarly related to sexual consciousness for both groups (as described previously). Furthermore, across sexual identity categories, sexual self-efficacy did not vary with levels of body image self-consciousness or body surveillance. Put another way, a woman's perception of her ability to get her sexual needs met was not related to the amount of concern she expressed about her body, in general or during intimate encounters.

Overall, these data also suggested that the two body image variables played a similar role in the sexual subjectivity of sexual minority and heterosexual women. As described above, more body image self-consciousness was related to more sexual consciousness, but was unrelated to entitlement to pleasure from one's partner(s) and sexual self-efficacy. Similarly, body surveillance was very weakly related to entitlement to pleasure from one's partner(s) and was unrelated to sexual consciousness and sexual self-efficacy. Moreover, lower levels of body image self-consciousness were significantly and moderately related to lower levels of body surveillance for sexual minority ( $r = .41[.32, .51]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $r = .40[.32, .48]$ ). As expected, the more a woman monitored her body and thought about

it in terms of how it looks as opposed to what it does, the more she experienced anxiety and concern about her appearance while participating in sexual activities.

***Sexual subjectivity and action.*** Generally, the final model supported the hypothesis that measures of sexual subjectivity would significantly predict more sexual assertiveness in sexual empowerment processes. For both sexual minority ( $B = .21[.12, .30]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $B = .22[.13, .31]$ ), there was a small, positive relationship in which higher levels of sexual consciousness significantly predicted higher levels of sexual assertiveness. In addition, there was a small, positive relationship in which higher levels of sexual self-efficacy significantly predicted higher levels of sexual assertiveness for sexual minority ( $B = .23[.14, .32]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $B = .24[.14, .33]$ ). Put another way, regardless of sexual identity, women asserted their sexual preferences and desires more when they thought more about their sexual motivations and desires and expressed more belief in their ability to get their sexual needs met. Similarly, there was a moderate, negative relationship in which women who reported less body image self-consciousness in intimate situations also reported significantly more sexual assertiveness (sexual minority  $B = -.35[-.44, -.27]$ ; heterosexual  $B = -.39[-.48, -.30]$ ). That is, women were more assertiveness when they were less concerned about how their bodies looked while being intimate with a partner. However, regardless of sexual identity, women's entitlement to sexual pleasure from one's partner(s) was unrelated to their sexual assertiveness in this sample.

Results suggested there was only one difference between groups in the relationship between sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness. Because the  $\chi^2$  test was marginally significant ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.24, p = .072$ ) during model evaluation, the relationship between body surveillance and sexual assertiveness had been allowed to vary in the final model. For sexual minority women, there was a small, negative relationship between body surveillance and more sexual assertiveness ( $B = -.18[-.30, -.05]$ ), but this relationship was non-significant and virtually non-existent for heterosexual women ( $B = .00[-.10, .10]$ ). This group difference was reaffirmed by an examination of the 95% CIs, which only slightly overlapped. Thus, sexual minority women were more sexually assertive when they thought less about their appearance.

***Action and sexual pleasure.*** Also as expected, sexual assertiveness significantly predicted both pleasure outcomes, regardless of sexual identity. The more sexually assertive a woman reported being, the more overall sexual satisfaction she experienced (sexual minority  $B = .33[.25, .41]$ ; heterosexual  $B = .36[.28, .44]$ ). In addition, more sexual assertiveness also predicted better orgasm experience with a partner in the last year for both sexual minority ( $B = .31[.22, .40]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $B = .30[.21, .38]$ ). These were both small to moderate positive relationships. Thus, women experienced more sexual satisfaction and more positive orgasm experiences with their partner(s) when they advocated for themselves and actively communicated about the kinds of sexual experiences that did and did not feel good.

***Subjectivity and sexual pleasure.*** The first added pathway to improve model fit, between sexual self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction, was allowed to vary across



sexual identity groups in the final model due to a significant  $\chi^2$  test ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 5.62, p = .018$ ). The results indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between sexual self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction for both sexual minority ( $B = .47[.37, .57]$ ) and heterosexual women ( $B = .33[.24, .42]$ ). Because the  $\chi^2$  test was significant and the 95% CIs only slightly overlapped when allowed to vary freely, the results suggested that the effect was stronger for sexual minority women. Specifically, the relationship was moderate for sexual minority women but small to moderate for heterosexual women.

The second added direct path was between body surveillance and orgasm experience with a partner. For both groups, there was a small but significant negative relationship between body surveillance and positive orgasm experience with a partner (sexual minority  $B = -.16[-.25, -.08]$ ; heterosexual  $B = -.16[-.25, -.08]$ ). Thus, across sexual identity groups, women experienced easier, more frequent, and more satisfying orgasms when they spent less time and effort monitoring and surveying their physical appearance.

**Indirect effects.** A central contribution of this work was the examination of sexual empowerment *processes* in which critical consciousness about gender and sexuality was expected to relate to sexual pleasure through the mediators sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness. There were three conditions that must have been met to establish a significant indirect relation: 1) the independent variable must have been significantly related to the process variable; 2) the hypothesized process variable must have directly predicted the pleasure outcome; and 3) a product of

coefficients test, in which a calculated estimate for an indirect effect was divided by a calculated standard error must have been significant (MacKinnon, 2000; Sobel, 1990). Significant  $t$ -values from these formulas would indicate that the indirect effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable was significant. For the indirect effects involving pathways that were allowed to vary across groups in the partially constrained model, I also explored whether the indirect effects differed by sexual identity. To do so, I calculated the difference between each indirect effect that may have varied between groups and then tested the significance of that difference using  $z$ -scores in MPlus.

Findings revealed substantial evidence for sexual empowerment processes. First, less endorsement of heteronormativity beliefs was indirectly related to sexual satisfaction ( $t = 2.30, p = .021$ ) and orgasm experience with a partner ( $t = 2.25, p = .024$ ) through a process involving both sexual self-efficacy and sexual assertiveness. That is to say, women who expressed less endorsement of distinct gender roles within sexual relationships also experienced more pleasure, in part because less endorsement of heteronormativity was related to them being more efficacious, which was then related to them being more assertive.

In addition, less endorsement of heteronormativity predicted more sexual satisfaction directly through sexual self-efficacy as a mediator for both sexual minority ( $t = 2.64, p = .008$ ) and heterosexual women ( $t = 2.58, p = .010$ ). As such, these data suggested that sexual assertiveness was not essential to a sexual empowerment process that involved disagreement with heteronormativity and general

sexual satisfaction. Participants who rejected the idea that women and men must adopt certain roles in their relationships also expressed more ability to have their sexual needs met and, in turn, were more satisfied with their sexual lives overall. Because the relationship between sexual self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction varied between groups these two indirect effects were also allowed to vary. However, when these two indirect effects were compared, only a marginally significant difference between the two was found ( $z = 1.90, p = .057$ ). Thus, it is possible that the indirect effect involving heteronormativity beliefs, sexual self-efficacy, and sexual satisfaction was different for sexual minority women, but it was likely similar regardless of sexual identity.

Next, through a process involving both sexual consciousness and sexual assertiveness, conformity to feminine norms of fidelity was significantly, indirectly related to overall sexual satisfaction ( $t = 3.35, p = .001$ ) and orgasm experience with a partner ( $t = 3.20, p = .001$ ). Similarly, through both sexual self-efficacy and sexual assertiveness, conformity to feminine norms of fidelity was significantly, indirectly related to overall sexual satisfaction ( $t = 2.89, p = .004$ ) and orgasm experience with a partner ( $t = 2.79, p = .005$ ). These indirect effects suggested that women who conformed less to feminine norms about sex also experienced more pleasure because less personal investment in fidelity was related to being more aware of their own sexual needs and desires and more efficacious, and, thus, more assertive. Because the relationships among these variables were constrained to equality in the final model,

these indirect effects apply to sexual minority and heterosexual women in this sample.

In addition, less conformity to fidelity norms predicted more sexual satisfaction directly through more sexual self-efficacy for sexual minority ( $t = 3.66, p = .000$ ) and heterosexual ( $t = 3.50, p = .000$ ) women. Participants who were more open to sex outside of a committed relationship also expressed more ability to have their sexual needs met and, in turn, were more satisfied with their sexual lives overall. Again, these two indirect effects were tested separately because the relationship between sexual self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction varied between groups. When the two indirect effects were compared, there was a significant difference ( $z = 2.19, p = .028$ ). Thus, the indirect effect in which conformity to feminine norms fidelity was related to sexual satisfaction directly through a relationship with sexual self-efficacy appeared to vary depending on one's sexual identity, despite reaching statistical significance for both sexual minority and heterosexual women.

There was also a significant indirect effect involving conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships. Specifically, less conformity to romance norms was related to more positive experiences of orgasm indirectly through its relationship to less body surveillance ( $t = 2.78, p = .005$ ). The addition of the direct effect from body surveillance to orgasm experience with a partner during model evaluation presented an opportunity to test this mediated relationship, although it was not originally predicted. The data suggested that, to the extent that women rejected the feminine norm that they be invested in romantic relationships, they also monitored and

surveyed their bodies less diligently and, in turn, experienced easier, more frequent, and more satisfying orgasm with their partners. Because  $\chi^2$  difference tests indicated these relationships should be constrained to equality, this sexual empowerment process was similar for both sexual minority and heterosexual participants.

For both sexual identity groups there was a significant correlation between the two sexual subjectivity measures related to positive embodiment, yet only one (body surveillance) was predicted by a critical consciousness variable. Thus, I conducted an exploratory test of the indirect effects of conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships on sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience with a partner through body surveillance, body image self-consciousness, and sexual assertiveness as mediating variables (in that order). Results indicated that conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships was significantly and indirectly related to sexual satisfaction ( $t = 3.12, p = .002$ ) and orgasm experience ( $t = 3.00, p = .003$ ) through a process in which body surveillance was related to body image self-consciousness, which then predicted sexual assertiveness. Put another way, to the extent that women rejected the feminine norm of investment in romantic relationships, they also surveyed their bodies less diligently in general, which translated into more comfort and less anxiety about their bodies during sexual intimacy. Subsequently, women's comfort with how they look when being sexual with a partner was related to how assertive and communicative they were with that partner, which, in turn was related to their overall satisfaction and orgasm experiences.

There was evidence for one additional sexual empowerment process for sexual minority women. For sexual minority women only, less conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships was indirectly related to sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience through the mediating variables body surveillance and sexual assertiveness. Specifically, less conformity to romance norms predicted less body surveillance, which predicted more sexual assertiveness, which predicted more sexual satisfaction for sexual minority women ( $t = 2.21, p = .027$ ), but not for heterosexual women ( $t = .021, p = .983$ ). Sexual minority women who reported less investment in romantic relationships were less inclined to monitor their body's appearance, and, in turn, were more assertive about their sexual needs and desires. This assertiveness and communication predicted more experiences of sexual pleasure. Recall that the relationship between body surveillance and sexual assertiveness had been allowed to vary freely and so these indirect effects were estimated separately. When compared, a significant difference was found between the two groups for this indirect effect ( $z = 1.97, p = .049$ ). Similarly, less conformity to romance norms predicted less body surveillance, which predicted more sexual assertiveness, which predicted more positive orgasm experience with a partner for sexual minority women ( $t = 2.16, p = .030$ ), but not for heterosexual women ( $t = .021, p = .983$ ). A marginally significant difference was found between the two groups for this indirect effect ( $z = 1.94, p = .053$ ). Thus, evidence suggested there was a sexual empowerment process in which less conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships was related to enhanced pleasure, but it varied across sexual identity categories.

In sum, the overall findings from the SEM analysis suggested support for several pathways leading to sexual empowerment. There was evidence that these processes generally operated similarly for sexual minority and heterosexual women. Women's critical consciousness was indirectly related to sexual pleasure through several mediated processes involving both sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness, or just sexual subjectivity. Beyond the indirect effects, support was found for the relationship between critical consciousness and sexual subjectivity for both groups of women. Results also suggested that there was more support for the relationship between sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness for sexual minority women, in that one additional pathway was significant for them compared to their heterosexual counterparts. In addition, across sexual identity, sexual assertiveness was a robust predictor of sexual pleasure outcomes.

Still, there was a significant  $\chi^2$  difference test between the freely estimated and constrained models, and an examination of individual pathways revealed four differences. The differences between the two groups were found in the relationships among sexual subjectivity variables, in the relationship between body surveillance and sexual assertiveness, and in the direct relationship between self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction. Overall, despite small differences, there was strong support for sexual empowerment processes that were similar for sexual minority and heterosexual women.

**Alternative model.** In theory, empowerment processes are iterative and dynamic, so it is possible that the proposed sexual empowerment processes actually

operated in a different order than in the hypothesized models. For example, it could be that women's sexual subjectivity predicts their critical consciousness about gender and sexuality, rather than the other way around. To test this possibility, I estimated an alternative partially constrained model in which sexual subjectivity measures predicted critical consciousness measures (excluding awareness of gender discrimination), which, in turn, predicted sexual assertiveness, which then predicted the two sexual pleasure outcomes. This alternative model was a very poor fit to the data (see Table 6, row 6) and a  $\chi^2$  difference test indicated that this alternative model was a significantly worse fit than the final partially constrained model ( $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 206.79, p = .000$ ).

## **Discussion**

### **Evidence for Sexual Empowerment Processes**

Overall, this work reinforced the utility of Empowerment Theory for understanding women's sexuality across sexual identity. Although sexual empowerment has been widely discussed at the theoretical level, it was an open empirical question as to whether sexual empowerment processes grounded in Empowerment Theory were applicable to women's sexual pleasure and well-being. This research was the first to empirically examine multidimensional sexual empowerment processes and a core contribution of this study is increased understanding of sexual empowerment for a diverse sample of sexual minority women.



In particular, the results substantiated the hypothesis that having critical consciousness about gender and sexuality would be related to women's sexual pleasure by showing that more progressive beliefs about gender and sexuality were related to sexual subjectivity, which was related to sexual assertiveness, which was related to sexual pleasure. In doing so, the current study documented sexual empowerment processes based on Empowerment Theory that included critical knowledge about power dynamics in the social context, a sense of subjectivity, and proactive behavioral choices (Cattaneo et al., 2014; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Menon, 2002; Rappaport, 1981, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995). These demonstrated processes predicted the power-related outcome of sexual pleasure.

This study infers that it is important to include analyses of power in social science research on sexuality. Critical sexuality studies scholars have called for academics and practitioners alike to move beyond individual-level analyses of sexual health and well-being to focus on structural power and social norms (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Fahs & Swank, 2011; Gill, 2012; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Peterson, 2010). These scholars have argued that attention to social structures and ideologies is essential in sexuality research because sociostructural critiques and actions are key to shifting contextual power dynamics that subordinate and disadvantage women and girls. Within the context of men's ideological and structural power, compulsory heterosexuality, the sexual objectification of women and girls, and dominant sexual scripts that eroticize inequality, women's sexual pleasure is a social justice issue. By documenting sexual empowerment processes, the current

study provided additional evidence that dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality may ultimately limit possibilities for women's sexual pleasure (Fahs, 2011; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Higgins & Hirsch, 2007; Rich, 1980).

More specifically, the sexual empowerment processes documented here supported prior research that examined sexual subjectivity as a mediator in the relationship between endorsing feminist beliefs and sexual satisfaction (Schick et al., 2008). In particular, both endorsement of heteronormativity and conformity to fidelity norms were indirectly related to sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience through processes involving sexual self-efficacy and sexual assertiveness. Across sexual identity categories, women who rejected, to some extent, the social expectation that men and woman must only have intimate relationships with opposite-sex partners and adhere to stereotypical gender roles within those relationships were more confident about their sexuality. Similarly, the more women were willing to consider casual sexual encounters in violation of feminine norms of sexual fidelity, the more they believed in their skills and abilities to take care of their sexual needs and wants.

Furthermore, personal conformity to feminine norms of sexual fidelity was indirectly related to sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience through processes involving sexual consciousness and sexual assertiveness. Across sexual identity categories, women's rejection of the social expectations that they should be only sexual within a committed relationship was associated with more reflection and consciousness about one's sexual attitudes and desires. It appears that women who acknowledge their personal willingness to have casual sexual encounters, despite

dominant sexual scripts that discourage them, reflect and think more about their sexuality. Collectively, these findings reinforce the argument that resistance to internalized oppression is a key feature of liberatory processes like sexual empowerment (Bartky, 1990; Bowman, 2014; Collins, 2004; Freire, 1970/2012; Prilleltensky, 2012).

In these sexual empowerment processes both sexual consciousness and sexual self-efficacy, in turn, predicted higher levels of sexual assertiveness in line with Empowerment Theory. It can be inferred from these sexual empowerment processes involving sexual assertiveness that intrapersonal capacities support critical actions at the interpersonal level. Reflecting on one's sexual attitudes and desires appears to facilitate asserting and advocating for those same beliefs and needs within intimate relationships, in support of past research (Morokoff et al., 1997). In addition, the current study supported the limited prior research documenting a connection between condom-use self-efficacy and sexual assertiveness for adults in the US (Morokoff et al., 1997) and extended this literature by showing that sexual self-efficacy about pleasure was also related to sexual assertiveness. Sexual self-efficacy research has tended to focus on the ability to say "no" to unwanted or risky sexual activity or to negotiate condom use, and this study was one of the first to assess sexual self-efficacy about pleasure in connection to women's sexual well-being. Moreover, past research has not always assessed or reported sexual identity information, so this is some of the first to document relationships between sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness for sexual minority women. Overall, these findings support the idea that, in order to

facilitate women's sexual assertiveness, women need increased opportunities to reflect on and become aware of their desires and to develop the skills that support feelings of self-efficacy surrounding sexual pleasure. More research is needed to understand the interpersonal contexts that best promote women's sexual consciousness and self-efficacy, and thus their ability to be assertive about their sexual desires.

Next in these sexual empowerment processes, women who reported better communication, more self-disclosure, and more discussion about what brings them pleasure (as measured by sexual assertiveness) also reported better orgasms and more sexual satisfaction. By being sexually assertive, participants rejected and dis-identified with norms of gender and sexuality instead of replicating them and repeatedly performing them within their intimate relationships. Such enactments of gender could be considered a form of micro-politics, or daily resistance in thoughts and action, which Collins (2004) suggests are especially important for women who may lack mainstream political options. Overall, this finding provided support for Empowerment Theory, which posits that proactive behaviors and actions are essential to the realization of one's power-relevant goals. Future research could explore what other kinds of critical actions are integral to sexual empowerment processes that have increased sexual pleasure as their goal.

Interestingly, this study also demonstrated additional sexual empowerment processes in which proactive behavior as measured by sexual assertiveness was bypassed by a direct relationship between sexual self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction.

That is, both heteronormativity beliefs and conformity to feminine norms of fidelity were related to sexual satisfaction through sexual self-efficacy as the only mediator. The measure of sexual satisfaction used in the current study assessed satisfaction in general, independent of partnered activities. Thus, the demonstrated direct relationship between women's perceived ability to take care of their sexual needs and their overall sexual satisfaction reinforces the reality that women's sexual satisfaction is not always tied to activities involving another person. This finding extends past research showing self-efficacy is directly related to well-being outcomes (e.g., Soler et al., 2000) to the domain of sexual pleasure for both heterosexual and sexual minority women. Not only that, but there was evidence that the direct relationship between sexual self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction was stronger for sexual minority women. Although research with sexual minority women in this area is limited, some studies have shown that both environmental mastery (Biss & Horne, 2005) and sexual autonomy (Sanchez et al., 2011) were related to sexual satisfaction for sexual minority women. Women whose desires fall outside of dominant norms of compulsory heterosexuality may face additional stigma and discrimination beyond the objectification and sexism experienced by straight women, which may explain why confidence in the ability to have one's sexual needs met may be more important to the sexual satisfaction sexual minority women.

What is more, this analysis revealed sexual empowerment processes in which personal conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships was indirectly related to sexual pleasure through the positive embodiment aspects of sexual

subjectivity. I found key differences between sexual minority and heterosexual women in these processes. First, the sexual empowerment process through which conformity to feminine norms of romance indirectly predicted sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience through body surveillance and sexual assertiveness was demonstrated only for sexual minority women. This difference was found because the relationship between body surveillance and sexual assertiveness was not significant for heterosexual women. Yet, in an exploratory analysis I discovered that conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships indirectly predicted both sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience for sexual minority and heterosexual women through a process involving three mediators: body surveillance, body image self-consciousness, and sexual assertiveness. For some participants, heterosexual women in particular, the sexual empowerment process needed to include the connection between general appearance concerns and contextual body image. In addition, there was evidence for a sexual empowerment process for both sexual minority and heterosexual in which conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships predicted body surveillance, which served as a mediator that predicted orgasm experience directly by bypassing sexual assertiveness.

The finding that less conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships was related to less body surveillance was expected, given the social context of sexual objectification in which women's romantic and sexual worth is largely based on their physical appearance. In this social milieu, women who find romantic relationships to be essential to their lives may be more likely to survey their own bodies in order to

attract new partners or keep current partners interested. This finding supports prior research that showed women who drew more self-worth from romantic relationships also experienced more body shame (Sanchez & Kwang, 2007). In addition, this particular sexual empowerment process highlights how self-objectification and appearance concern are central to feminine gender roles within patriarchal societies. Women are expected to demonstrate femininity by both focusing on romantic relationships and constantly thinking about their appearance in order to attract partners. In fact, past research has shown single heterosexual women who were primed with romance-related words reported more self-objectification (Sanchez & Broccoli, 2008). The results of the current study suggest that women who are less focused on attaining and keeping romantic relationships may be able to focus less on their physical bodies, in line with research showing that rejection of sexual double standards was related to having more sexual body-esteem for Australian late adolescents (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). Because sexual objectification and appearance-focus are ubiquitous in US culture, it makes sense that this connection held even for women who have, or want to have, relationships with other women.

In this sexual empowerment process for sexual minority women, lower levels of body surveillance in turn predicted higher levels of sexual assertiveness. Sexual minority women who were less focused with their external appearance and engaged in less body comparison with others may have felt more comfortable initiating and discussing sex because they were more focused on what their bodies could do and feel, rather than how they looked. For instance, they might have had more cognitive

capacity to think about their fantasies, new sexual positions they would like to try, emotionally relating to their partner, or even their own physical arousal and pleasure. The connection between less body surveillance and more sexual assertiveness corroborated research in which various assessments of positive embodiment were related to initiating, communicating, and generally being more assertive about sex (Ackard et al., 2000; Hirschman et al., 2006; Impett et al. 2006; Ramsey & Hoyt, 2014; Schooler et al., 2005; Wiederman, 2000; Yamamiya et al., 2006). However, this was not the case for heterosexual women, and the hypothesis that positive embodiment would be related to increased action in sexual empowerment processes was only partially supported. Regardless of how much heterosexual women tended to survey and monitor their appearances, they reported similar levels of sexual assertiveness. Women's appearance-focus, then, may be so integral to heterosexual intimacy that women who are more or less sexually assertive participate in body surveillance to the same extent.

For both sexual minority and heterosexual women, lower levels of body image self-consciousness predicted higher levels of sexual assertiveness in these sexual empowerment processes. These results suggested that women who were less focused on their bodies during intimacy, and less concerned and anxious about how their bodies looked naked, may have had more cognitive capacity to focus on advocating for their desires and needs because they were less distracted by their appearance and feelings of shame (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1999). Having less body concern may allow women to focus more on their sexual self-interests in



the moment and even make it possible for them to choose sexual positions and behaviors that they enjoy, regardless of how they might make the body look. On the other hand, women who reported more body image self-consciousness may have prioritized fulfilling the feminine role of sexual object and meeting feminine appearance ideals in sexual situations over asserting their subjective desires through proactive behaviors. Such proactive behaviors are important, because, as mentioned above, sexual assertiveness was related to increased sexual pleasure for women in this sample. As some of the first research to explore the relationship between embodiment and sexual assertiveness for sexual minority women, this research suggests that, regardless of sexual identity, the internalization of sexual objectification has negative implications for women's sexual well-being because it may inhibit their ability or desire to advocate for their own sexual interests with a partner.

In the exploratory analysis of positive embodiment in sexual empowerment processes, body surveillance predicted body image self-consciousness, which then predicted higher levels of sexual assertiveness for both sexual minority and heterosexual women. This finding supported prior research showing that self-consciousness during sexual activity plays a mediating role in the relationship between surveillance of one's body and sexual functioning, and that contextual body image measures are better than more general assessments at predicting of well-being outcomes (Steer & Tiggemann, 2008). For heterosexual women in the current study, body image self-consciousness totally mediated the relationship between body surveillance and sexual assertiveness, whereas body image self-consciousness

partially mediated the relationship for sexual minority women. That is to say, for sexual minority participants, body surveillance was related to sexual assertiveness both directly and indirectly through body image self-consciousness. It is possible that sexual minority women experience body surveillance differently. For instance, they may be more inclined to monitor their gender performance, compare themselves physically to potential partners, or worry about their appearance out of concern for safety. If so, perhaps these aspects of body surveillance were particularly relevant to sexual assertiveness when it occurs outside of a sexually intimate encounter. Sexual assertiveness can entail initiation and approach behaviors and the discussions of sexual fantasies and preferences that do not necessarily occur in private.

Interestingly, lower levels of body surveillance directly predicted better orgasm experience with a partner for both sexual minority and heterosexual women. Body surveillance, in particular, may be cognitively distracting (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1999), which could explain its direct connection to orgasm in the current study. Indeed, evidence has suggested that sexual arousal and orgasm can be inhibited when a woman is distracted by how she looks because less attention is available to focus on bodily sensations (e.g., Dove & Wiederman, 2000). Thus, this study suggests that the constant sexual objectification of women and girls within patriarchy, and the self-objectification and hypervigilance about the body that can result, may position women to experience less pleasure and orgasm because body-monitoring may distance them from their subjective arousal.

The implications of the current study are manifold. First, this work implies that understanding and promoting women's critical consciousness about gender and sexuality is an important area of research intervention aimed at promoting women's sexual well-being within patriarchy. Importantly, the sexual empowerment processes documented here were the first to explore several measures of critical consciousness simultaneously. The results indicated that the aspects of critical consciousness about gender and sexuality most meaningful to women's sexual well-being were the one's personally relevant to participants' sexual and romantic relationships. Specifically, endorsement of heteronormativity beliefs and personal conformity to feminine norms of sexual fidelity and romantic relationships were involved in the sexual empowerment processes for both sexual minority and heterosexual women.

It was not enough to identify as a feminist or recognize gender discrimination in general, as evidenced by the fact that these variables were not important predictors of sexual subjectivity for sexual minority or heterosexual women. The context of gender and power involving compulsory heterosexuality, the sexual objectification of women and girls, and sexual scripts that eroticize inequality may be so integral to women's socialization within patriarchal societies that having a feminist identity or ideology is not enough to promote women's sexual subjectivity while in college. These findings suggest that broad feminist beliefs did not necessarily lead to feelings of deservingness or competence, and may not be relevant to much one thinks about and reflects on their own sexuality. In terms of the two embodiment-related measures, these findings supported the results of qualitative interviews with heterosexual (Rubin

et al., 2004) and bisexual women (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013) that have suggested some feminists are unable to completely reject oppressive standards and continue to focus on their physical appearance, despite recognizing problems with socially constructed cultural norms. As such, they support the observation that the protective effects of feminist ideology on positive embodiment more generally may not translate into the bedroom.

It is possible that young adult women in this sample have not made the connection between feminism(s) and sexual pleasure. Young women may have associated feminism with other aspects of women's subordination beyond compulsory heterosexuality, sexual objectification, and problematic sexual scripts (see Henley, Meng, O'Brien, McCarthy, & Sockloskie, 1998), which could explain part of the disconnect found here. Still, there are many kinds of feminism, so other feminist ideologies apart from general feminist identity and awareness of discrimination may be relevant to women's sexuality. Further research in this area is needed, because it may be that feminist identity and beliefs facilitate women's confidence and belief in their abilities in some domains but not others. Because this study was conducted with an educated young adult sample, future research should also explore additional dimensions of critical consciousness with older women in order to further understand how contemporary feminist movements may or may not be relevant to women's sexual empowerment.

These findings also imply that critical consciousness may not be the primary or most important predictor of sexual subjectivity for heterosexual or sexual minority

women. Other beliefs and experiences beyond conformity to feminine norms and endorsement of heteronormativity likely facilitate women's agentic sense of self in the sexual domain. Sexual consciousness, in particular, is likely related to many other variables, such as variations in the biological processes of arousal and desire, one's sexual history, current relationship dynamics, or other life stressors, just to name a few. As such, educational experiences such as school-based sexual education or women's, feminist, and gender studies courses, interactions with role models, discussions with peers, or certain kinds of sexual partners or practices may be critical to the development of sexual subjectivity. A non-heterosexual identity itself might promote sexual subjectivity and agency. Further research is needed to better understand the growth of this important psychological component and its role in sexual empowerment processes.

Still, the results of the current study highlight how transformed critical consciousness is related to sexual subjectivity, and that the enactment of subjectivity could ultimately relate to changes within interpersonal and intimate relationships. As Empowerment Theorists have articulated, within oppressive social contexts the ability to be a self-determined subject as opposed to an object is integral to gaining power for marginalized people. Within patriarchy, gaining sexual subjectivity is all about power. Across sexual identity categories, women's sexuality is suppressed and oppressed via mechanisms that prohibit subjectivity, such as limiting women's entitlement to sexual pleasure, sexual consciousness, and self-efficacy, and promoting negativity about and preoccupation with the body. Subjectivity is precisely what is

stripped away from women by compulsory heterosexuality, sexual objectification, and sexual norms that position women as passive-recipients, gatekeepers, and the sexual caretakers of men. This is particularly true for sexual minority women and women of color who are further objectified and marginalized by intersecting systems of heterosexism and racism.

Moreover, the current study underscores the complex role of subjectivity and agency in empowerment processes. For example, for both sexual identity groups, *less* conformity to fidelity norms but *more* conformity to romantic relationship norms predicted more entitlement to sexual pleasure from one's partner(s). It may be that women who believe they should only have sex within a committed relationship do not expect their partner(s) to be responsive to their needs, feelings, and desires because they do not see their own pleasure as a priority, whereas women who are open to more casual relationships may seek them out for the sake of sexual pleasure. However, according to interviews with men and women in the US, more attention is paid to women's orgasm within the context of committed relationships and, as a result, sexual pleasure for women was expected to occur with relationship partners but not with casual partners (Armstrong et al., 2012). Thus, it is possible that participants in the current study who placed importance on romantic relationships may have felt entitled to pleasure because of a sexual landscape in which women can expect to experience orgasm and sexual satisfaction with a longer-term partner. It may also be that both heterosexual and sexual minority women saw sexual pleasure as the primary purpose of being in romantic relationships in college. Although the

expectation for women to prioritize the maintenance of romantic relationships over other ambitions has long been central to traditional gender ideology within patriarchy, conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships appears to be a boon in terms of entitlement to pleasure for this diverse young adult sample.

Highlighting the complexity and importance of sexual subjectivity, the significant overall difference between the heterosexual and sexual minority models was explained, in large part, by differences in the variables utilized to assess sexual subjectivity. Specifically, it appears that entitlement to sexual pleasure might play a different role in the sexual subjectivity of heterosexual versus sexual minority women. The positive relationships between reporting more entitlement to pleasure from one's partner(s) and both more sexual consciousness and more sexual self-efficacy were significant only for heterosexual women. This makes sense considering that, within heterosexual scripts, women are socialized to focus on men's pleasure over their own desires and comfort. These differences draw attention to the need to continue critically examining the concept of sexual subjectivity to explore how diverse women navigate the interconnections social norms, relationships, and their sexual selves (Fahs & McClelland, 2016).

Finally, the current study supported the hypothesis that psychosocial processes of sexual empowerment function similarly regardless of sexual identity. The data supported the idea that heterosexual and sexual minority women may be more similar than different, perhaps due to the social construction of gender and sexuality and to unequal power relations within patriarchy. In the context of gender inequality,

compulsory heterosexuality, sexual objectification, and mainstream sexual scripts that eroticize inequality, young women, in general, have to contend with problematic messages about femininity and women's sexual value as objects for other's pleasure. Across sexual identity categories, to the extent that women can develop a critical consciousness and report less conformity to feminine norms in their own lives, they may be able to realize more sexual subjectivity, assertiveness, and pleasure via a number of pathways.

There are two additional plausible explanations for the similarities found across groups. First, slightly over half of the sexual minority women identified as mostly heterosexual in this sample. Second, many sexual minority women reported only having sexual experience with men in the past. It is possible that the gender of one's partner plays a more important role than sexual identity in the sexual empowerment processes demonstrated here. Furthermore, although some prior research has suggested that a mostly heterosexual identity is distinct from a heterosexual orientation (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013; Thompson & Morgan, 2008), there may be similarities that have not yet been explored in the limited literature to date. For instance, Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013) suggested in their review of the literature that sexual attraction and fantasies were key indicators of a mostly heterosexual identity. That is, mostly heterosexuals may have cognitions and attitudes that distinguish them from heterosexuals, but they could be more similar than different in their behaviors and romantic attractions. If so, a similarity in sexual



behaviors and motivations may explain, in part, why the sexual empowerment processes in the current study operated similarly for women in general.

### **Similarities and Differences by Sexual Identity**

As hypothesized, differences between sexual minority and heterosexual women were not found in the sexual empowerment processes themselves, but rather in the baseline levels of the various empowerment components. Results showed that sexual minority women generally reported more critical consciousness about gender and sexuality, more positive sexual subjectivity, and higher levels of sexual assertiveness than heterosexual women. However, they reported similar levels of sexual pleasure, as measured by general sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience with a partner.

**Critical consciousness.** The hypothesis that sexual minority women would report higher levels of critical consciousness about gendered power was supported for all measures. First, sexual minority women were significantly more likely to identify as feminist than heterosexual women in this sample. This finding is important because there is a dearth of research about sexual minority women's feminist identity and beliefs. The current study disavows the long-running stereotype that all feminists who reject male power and authority are lesbians, because over half of the women in both groups were feminists. The fact that sexual minority women in this study also reported more awareness of gender discrimination than heterosexual women may explain their tendency to overtly identify as feminist at higher rates. It may be that living outside of compulsory heterosexuality within their personal and sexual

relationships contributes to sexual minority women's critical perspectives about gender and sexuality because they have more freedom to express equality and autonomy (Rose & Eaton, 2013; Rose & Zand, 2000; Kurdek, 1987). This outside perspective could also play a role in sexual minority women's willingness to adopt a feminist identity that is stigmatized within patriarchy. Or, perhaps there is something about a feminist identity, such as the critique of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, that allows a woman to be more open to adopting a non-heterosexual identity.

Moreover, sexual minority women endorsed less heteronormativity and reported less conformity to feminine norms of sexual fidelity and romantic relationships than did heterosexual women. This conclusion aligns with prior research that indicated sexual minority women enact feminism in their relationships (Rose & Eaton, 2013) and have more role flexibility and greater equality within their relationships with other women (Kurdek, 1987). In addition, the finding that sexual minority women reported less endorsement of heteronormativity than heterosexual women is logical, and directly supports past research with older, white women (Habarth, 2008). The current study extended this result to an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample of young adult women. Because the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory was designed to tap into norms of White, heterosexual, middle and upper-class femininity in the US (Mahalik et al., 2005), the finding that sexual minority women reported less endorsement was also not surprising. Still, this was some of the first research to directly document such a difference related to sexual

identity. Generally, the results indicated that sexual minority women may have some freedom from gender norms and sexual scripts, in that they felt less obliged to fulfill heteronormative gender roles within their relationships, to place importance on romantic relationships, and to observe norms of sexual fidelity.

**Sexual subjectivity.** The hypothesis that sexual minority women would report higher levels of sexual subjectivity than heterosexual women was partially supported by the current study. Sexual minority women reported more entitlement to pleasure from one's partner(s) than heterosexual women, indicating that they were more likely to report that they deserve access to pleasure and to have their desires acknowledge and recognized. This finding supported prior research with adolescent and college-aged Caucasian women in Australia (Boislard & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2011; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006), and extended the results to an ethnically diverse sample of young adult women in the US. In the current study, sexual minority participants also reported more sexual consciousness and sexual self-efficacy than heterosexual women, in line with prior research conducted with college-aged women in Australia (Boislard & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2011). It appears that, as a group, sexual minority women tended to be more self-reflective about their sexuality and more aware of their preferences and desires. Whereas heterosexual women may take their sexual identity for granted within compulsory heterosexuality and leave it unquestioned, sexual minority women may have more incentive and occasion to reflect on their sexuality because it violates social expectations. Research about identity development in general reinforces this idea, in that heterosexual participants reported more identity

foreclosure, moratorium and diffusion, suggesting less thought and awareness about the self than sexual minority participants (Konik & Stewart, 2004). In support, another study found that mostly heterosexual women reported higher levels of identity exploration and uncertainty than their exclusively heterosexual counterparts (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). It may be that having a non-normative sexual identity within a patriarchal society that both devalues women and stigmatizes same-sex desires and experiences has pushed sexual minority women to develop a level of sexual consciousness and efficacy that heterosexual women have had more difficulty acquiring.

Although there has been some evidence that sexual minority women may be less concerned with societal appearance norms and thus more accepting of their bodies than heterosexual women (e.g., Alvy, 2013; Polimeni et al., 2009; Taub, 2003), the two sexuality identity groups in the current study reported similar levels of body surveillance and body image self-consciousness. This finding supported past research, including a meta-analysis, suggesting women have similar levels of self-objectification and body dissatisfaction across sexual identity categories (Hill & Fischer, 2008; Morrison et al., 2004). It also supported the theory that women self-objectify and focus on their external appearance due to their shared experience living in a sexually objectifying culture (e.g., Calogero, 2012; Thompson, 2013). Yet, this was some of the first evidence demonstrating that heterosexual and sexual minority women were also similar in terms of their domain-specific body image self-consciousness within intimate relationships. This was also some of the first research

to explore positive embodiment in a sample in which many women identify as mostly heterosexual or bisexual, which may explain some of the similarity with the heterosexual group. It is possible that sexual minority women find it easier to reject societal appearance standards in some aspects of their lives (Taub, 2003), but that they still continue to monitor their bodies and feel self-conscious during intimate encounters in which they want to be sexually attractive to a partner.

**Action.** These data supported the hypothesis that sexual minority women would report more proactive sexual behavior than their heterosexual counterparts, in terms of being more sexually assertive. Limited prior research has shown that, in general, lesbian couples have more positive communication and are more effective at resolving conflict than heterosexual couples (Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2004). Yet, no research was found about the sexual assertiveness of bisexual or mostly heterosexual women. Thus, the current study provided some of the first evidence that women who identify as lesbian, mostly lesbian, bisexual, mostly heterosexual, other, or unsure are, as a group, more assertive than heterosexual women in the sexual domain. Perhaps same-sex relationships among women are more egalitarian, making it easier for both parties to demonstrate their agency and assertiveness about their sexual preferences. However, many of the participants in the current study had only had sexual experiences with men, so there may be something about sexual minority identity development that facilitates sexually assertive actions, regardless of partner gender. Alternatively, women in the sexual minority group may have had male partners that were different than the partners of the heterosexual group in terms of

egalitarian attitudes or other factors, thus creating an interpersonal context that enabled sexual assertiveness.

**Sexual pleasure.** Contrary to the hypothesis, sexual minority and heterosexual women reported similar levels of overall sexual satisfaction and similar orgasm experience with a partner in the past year. This finding contradicted research showing a difference in sexual pleasure outcomes along sexual identity lines (e.g., Garcia et al. 2014; Henderson et al., 2009; Holmberg et al., 2010). It is possible that the similarity found between heterosexual and sexual minority women in the current study may be attributed, in part, to the finding that many of the women who identified as non-heterosexual reported having sexual experiences with men. The similarity in sexual pleasure outcomes in the current study could also be attributed to socialization within the broader patriarchal context of the US in which women's sexual pleasure is seen as unimportant (Brown, 2000; Ussher, 2005) and in which women are not taught to recognize or act on their desires (Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002; Fine, 1988; Hollibaugh, 1984/1992; Tolman, 2002). Although the exact reason for the similarity is undetermined, the findings supported prior research showing no difference between sexual minority and heterosexual women in their sexual satisfaction or orgasms (e.g., Matthews et al., 2003; Satinsky et al., 2012). Importantly, these data indicated that young adult sexual minority women's sexual pleasure was not more restricted than heterosexual women's as a result of heterosexism, homophobia, stigma, or differential access to basic sexual rights.

In sum, these findings implied that there may be benefits to having a sexual minority identity in terms of developing critical consciousness about gender and sexuality, entitlement to pleasure, sexual consciousness, sexual self-efficacy, and sexual assertiveness. Indeed, the current study did not indicate that sexual minority women's experiences were deviant or deficient, in line with historical biases. Such findings encourage a more critical examination of heterosexuality as an institution that may have negative consequences for women's sexual well-being. It is possible that some of the sexual minority women in this sample were adopting a non-heterosexual identity, such as "mostly" heterosexual, as an acknowledgement that they had already violated social expectations of heteropatriarchy simply by expressing their desires, feeling efficacious, and being assertive. By drawing attention to the ways in which power and gender may relate to women's sexual well-being, sexual empowerment processes could be an important element of a critical sexuality studies agenda that decenters heterosexuality as the best or only option for women (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). Of course, more research is needed to explore sexual minority women's resilience in the face of stigmatizing and discriminatory cultural contexts in order to understand how a non-heterosexual identity might create opportunities in which to develop components of sexual empowerment processes.

It is also possible that other aspects of women's social identity in this sample might have contributed to the group differences in sexual empowerment components. The sexual minority group was more likely to be white and politically liberal, and less likely to be religious than their heterosexual counterparts. As others have noted, some

mostly heterosexuals may claim a non-heterosexual label for reasons beyond sexual orientation, such as liberal social views (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013). For this educated group of young women, then, it is possible that a liberal university context with some degree of freedom from stigma and discrimination allowed some women to identify as not exclusively heterosexual as part of their overall sex-positive, radical perspective, and that it was their sexually liberal attitudes in general that set them apart from their heterosexual counterparts.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations worth noting. First, the measures used to assess the components of sexual empowerment processes were imperfect. In particular, the measure of entitlement to sexual pleasure from oneself had to be dropped because it violated statistical assumptions. As seen in Table 4, there was a ceiling effect for the sexual minority group that created a skew that could not be corrected through statistical transformations. It is also possible that slightly changing the wording of the answer options on these scales (e.g., from “very true for me” to “very characteristic of me”) contributed to the high scores found here. Ultimately, although both of these measures were constructed and validated with samples of adolescents and emerging adults (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006), the current study suggests they may not be appropriate for older samples.

In addition, different and/or more reliable evaluations of participants’ beliefs related to gender and sexuality may have yielded different results. The dimension reduction process undertaken in this study may have created scales with underlying



latent traits that differed to some extent from those in the published literature. Further, even after some adjustment, reliability was lower than desirable for measures of heteronormativity beliefs and conformity to feminine norms of romantic relationships. In future studies, measures such as internalized homophobia, lesbian feminist identity, or femininity ideology could be used to capture participants' critical consciousness about gender and power. These measures may be more directly relevant to the sexual domain, especially for sexual minority women.

Moreover, critical consciousness may be only one kind of critical knowledge about the social context important to sexual empowerment processes. For example, sexual empowerment processes could involve knowledge about sexual anatomy and physiology, or knowledge about how to access resources like education, contraception, and peer support. This area is ripe for future research because some evidence suggests that sexual knowledge has been related to sexual subjectivity (Rostosky, Dekhtyar, Cupp, & Anderman, 2008), sexual assertiveness (Curtin et al., 2001), and sexual pleasure (Wade, Kremer, & Brown, 2005).

Furthermore, it was a limitation that only two indicators of sexual pleasure were utilized in the current study. These two measures may have been inadequate because the meaning and experience of sexual pleasure varies for different individual and groups within and across cultural settings and over time (Fahs, 2011; Higgins & Hirsch, 2007; Laumann et al., 2006; Parker, 2007; Philpott, Knerr, & Boydell, 2006; Rye & Meaney, 2007). Different definitions of sexual satisfaction can vary based on expectations, relative deprivation, and social comparisons (McClelland, 2010).

Additional factors such as relationship satisfaction, desire discrepancy, and current relationship duration have been shown to relate to sexual satisfaction for women in same-sex relationships (Bridges & Horne, 2007). Thus, future research would benefit from using a more nuanced conceptualization of sexual pleasure that includes some of these factors as covariates, or as outcomes in and of themselves.

Relatedly, although the current study used two measures of sexual pleasure intended to tap into both individual sexual satisfaction and orgasm experience with a partner, more relational aspects of sexual pleasure were not assessed using couples' data. This was a limitation because research with heterosexuals in committed relationships has shown that sexual satisfaction includes relational aspects such as trust and mutual enjoyment (e.g., Daker-White & Donovan, 2002; Pascoal, de Santa Bárbara Narisco, & Pereira, 2014). For instance, interview data has suggested that orgasm in particular may be related to immediate contextual factors such as the purpose of the sexual encounter or the relationship between the individuals involved (Opperman et al., 2014). Collecting couples' data in future research could reveal important insight into sexual empowerment processes that are relational and dynamic.

Although effort was made to assess several components of a hypothesized sexual empowerment process based in Empowerment Theory, it was not possible to measure every element of sexual empowerment in one study. Thus, it was another limitation that impacts and reactions beyond sexual pleasure outcomes were not assessed in the current study. Empowerment theorists contend that it is important for individuals and communities to observe and reflect on the impact, or results, of

empowerment processes in order to use that knowledge to inform their critical consciousness, sense of subjectivity, and future actions (Cattaneo et al., 2014; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). In addition, they suggest that researchers should consider how others in the social environment react to empowerment processes aimed at increasing marginalized individual's and group's power. Reactions to empowerment are important to acknowledge because, within patriarchy, there may be repercussions and backlash for women who violate norms of femininity and compulsory heterosexuality. Women's efforts to realize sexual pleasure and agency may fall short because of the responses of their partner(s) and social institutions. Future research could explore how women and their sexual partners react to their sexual subjectivity and embodiment, assertive behaviors, or experiences of pleasure through focus groups or daily diary studies. Assessing others' reactions can help researchers and practitioners better understand specific interpersonal and social contexts that facilitate or hinder sexual empowerment.

Another limitation of this research was the use of cross-sectional survey data, which made it difficult to capture the dynamic and reflexive nature of empowerment processes (Cattaneo et al., 2014). According to community and health psychologists, empowerment is conceptualized as an on-going, long-term, relational, contextual, and iterative process based on learning through experience (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Menon, 2002; Zimmerman, 1995). Because empowerment occurs through on-going processes and is not an achieved state, the various components involved may dynamically inform each other and develop simultaneously (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Lamb,

2010; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Peterson, 2010; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 1995). For instance, research has suggested that sexual subjectivity both results from and influences sexual experiences and behavior (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994; Hensel, Fortenberry, O'Sullivan, & Orr, 2011). As other researchers have argued, the realities of girls' and young women's sexuality are multidimensional, nuanced, contradictory, and dynamic (Tolman, Anderson, & Belmonte, 2015). Thus, methods beyond survey research will be needed to fully understand women's sexual empowerment.

### **Generalizability**

In addition to these limitations, the current sample was unique in other ways that make it difficult to generalize other groups beyond educated young adult women in a liberal environment. The social context of this study was a historically gay-friendly city and university. The campus also has a strong and established feminist studies department. Aspects of this socially and sexually liberal context might have encouraged participants to question and experiment with their sexuality despite broader social stigma related to sexual minority identities and women who actively engage in sexual endeavors. Nevertheless, the sample is more diverse than most within psychology, which could enhance the somewhat limited generalizability typically attributed to social psychological research.

Moreover, this cross-sectional survey solidified participants' sexual identities into two static groups, although research suggests that sexual identity (including heterosexual identity) is fluid and may change over time (Diamond, 2005a, 2008). As such, these results may be applicable only to some segments of women—those who

actively chose a heterosexual or non-heterosexual identity label. In addition, sexual minorities are not a homogenous group and have different experiences of colonialism, racism, classism and sexism based on other intersecting identities that may inform their experiences (Herek et al., 1991). Although the sample in the current study was diverse in terms of sexual identity, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, without the statistical power to test interactions by ethnicity or socioeconomic status, some nuance of how women negotiate gender and power in sexual empowerment processes was lost. Because many studies of gender and sexuality focus on predominantly young, white, middle-class, heterosexual women from the West/Global North (Hyde, 2007) and research on women's sexuality internationally is particularly limited (Castañeda & Ulibarri, 2010), much more research with diverse groups is needed.

Collapsing across sexual minority identity categories was another limitation of this research that could affect the generalizability of the results. There were not enough members of individual sexual minority groups with which to examine sexual empowerment processes involving many variables, which likely resulted in an oversimplification of the differences and similarities based on sexual identity. It is also important to note that the grouping variables used in this study were based on self-identification, not on sexual experience. As others have noted, knowing a woman's sexual identity label does not necessarily tell a complete story about her life experiences or even current sexual attitudes and feelings (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Indeed, researchers have found different results depending on how sexual identity is assessed, be it self-labeling or self-reported behaviors or desires (Herek et al., 1991).

Further, women use different criteria for labeling themselves as bisexual versus lesbian, according to past theory and research (Rust, 1993). Because the majority of the sexual minority women in the current study identified as mostly heterosexual or bisexual, and many had only had sexual relationships with men, the results may not be generalizable to other groups of non-heterosexual women. Still, it could be argued that this sample reflects the experience of sexual minority women in actuality, as other studies have shown that mostly heterosexuals make up the most numerous non-heterosexual group across age cohorts and locations (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013).

The sexual empowerment processes documented here likely generalize to other power-oriented outcomes relevant to women's sexual well-being within patriarchy. The results of this study should not imply that sexual pleasure is the most important aspect of sexual well-being for women, or the only outcome of sexual empowerment that could be studied. Sexual pleasure is only one possible outcome of sexual empowerment processes involving critical consciousness, sexual subjectivity, and proactive behaviors. For example, it is possible that sexual empowerment processes could predict women's experiences of sexual risk, in addition to sexual pleasure. Indeed, feminist scholars have long argued that the social context of gendered power puts women at risk of violence and HIV (e.g., Amaro & Raj, 2000; Burt, 1980; Gómez & Marín, 1996; Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Future research could explore whether women could increase their ability to make choices about

contraception and to communicate about unwanted sexual behaviors through sexual empowerment processes.

Finally, further research is needed to determine whether the sexual empowerment processes described here would generalize to other social contexts. This study suggests that sexual empowerment processes may have potential utility for a feminist liberation psychology approach that attends to and addresses diversity, marginalization, and power in unique social contexts. Specifically, Empowerment Theory could inform our understanding of how various contextual factors create conditions that are or are not conducive to women's sexual rights, as well as the commonalities in women's experiences of being constrained by particular patriarchal social structures and ideologies. Still, it has been suggested that an empowerment framework may not be appropriate in all contexts, such as in situations of extreme oppression or immediate threats to safety (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2011; Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Peterson, 2010). Using Empowerment Theory requires researcher to be reflexive and to attend to what is already working for people locally. Thus, in line with liberation psychology, empowerment processes could be utilized in multiple contexts by listening to women's diverse voices and lived experiences from the "bottom-up" (Gill, 2012; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Lykes, 2000; Martín-Baró, 1994; Moane, 2010, 2011). In this way Empowerment Theory could be applied within a variety of contexts in order to build capacities and develop the empowerment components that are meaningful in a particular setting, while

always working to create more equitable social conditions (Lykes, 2000; Rappaport, 1981).

### **Implications for Research and Intervention**

The multidimensional sexual empowerment processes demonstrated here have implications for a concrete research and intervention agenda aimed at enhancing women's individual well-being, challenging gender inequalities, and supporting enabling conditions that promote increased opportunities for women and girls to experience pleasurable sexuality. The current study implies that research and community actions that address the personal and political simultaneously will have the most potential to enhance women's sexual pleasure and well-being. Moreover, this research indicates that educational and clinical interventions could address multiple entry-points in an on-going, iterative sexual empowerment process by enhancing individual components or combinations of components.

**Implications for future research.** The current study suggests that Empowerment Theory is a particularly useful approach for integrating analyses of power into research on sexual pleasure. By bringing power into focus, empowerment research allows us to move away from an analytical focus that privileges the individual toward one that includes increased analysis of the societal structures and ideologies that grant more power to some individuals or groups more than others (Cattaneo et al., 2014; Else-Quest & Grabe, 2012). It also allows for an informed discussion of women's strengths, rather than their deficiencies (Cattaneo et al., 2014), as well as how those strengths and competencies can be enhanced when the



connection between the personal and political is highlighted. Moreover, an empowerment approach to sexuality research centers women's voices and lived experiences, because the power-oriented goals of empowerment processes must be personally relevant to marginalized groups and defined from their perspectives. A nuanced definition of the goals of sexual empowerment processes is essential in order to take into account women's intersecting social identities.

Investigating sexual empowerment processes could help researchers (and practitioners) identify how gains in power at individual, interpersonal, and structural levels may promote sexual justice for women. Because power is dynamic and operates through diffuse mechanisms, resistance is also inevitably multifaceted (Foucault, 1978/1990). Therefore, research aimed at improving women's sexual well-being could focus on how to enhance any or all components in sexual empowerment process so that less powerful individuals have increased opportunities to control decisions that affect their lives.

Oddly enough, power remains missing in many popular and academic discussions of empowerment and psychological well-being (as argued by Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Gill, 2012; Prilleltensky, 2012; Riger, 1993). Mainstream discourses have often equated empowerment with individual elements of the multidimensional processes like self-efficacy, skills, and individuals' choices. This perspective assumes individual autonomy and takes agentic choice for granted and out of context.

An individualistic approach to sexual empowerment is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it places blame and guilt on individuals for sexual violation,

unwanted sex, failure to orgasm, or “un-feminist” and “disempowering” behaviors, which are framed as the result of a women’s own agency, choices, and weaknesses (as argued by Bay-Cheng, 2012; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Fahs, 2011; Hollibaugh, 1984/1992; Peterson, 2010; Phillips, 2000; Vance, 1984/1992). Second, it leads to the promotion of individualized remedies and solutions that do nothing to transform social structures, such as labial reduction surgery marketed to enhance women’s sexual pleasure and the medicalization of women’s desire and promotion of pills to cure sexual dysfunction (Tiefer, 2001). A third problem is the resulting belief that once someone *feels* empowered they cannot simultaneously experience victimization or cultural oppression, rendering power dynamics in relationships and systemic patriarchal sexist oppression invisible (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Bay-Cheng & Zucker, 2007). Fourth, individualistic ideologies perpetuate the idea that feminism is victimizing because self-determined individuals should not need help in overcoming their problems (Rich, 2005). This silencing of structural critique reduces the chance of collective identity and community activism. These individualistic approaches to empowerment have prompted some academics to critique sexual empowerment as being too simple and depoliticized (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Gavey, 2010; Lamb, 2010b; Tolman, 2012). However, the current study implies that when situated fully in Empowerment Theory and the lived experiences of women, sexual empowerment need not be apolitical or individualistic.

In fact, according to many theorists, empowerment processes involve collective social action and the pursuit of political change, in addition to building the individual psychological capacities necessary to overcome internalized oppression (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Menon, 2002; Peterson, 2010; Rappaport, 1981; Riger, 1993; Zimmerman, 1995). Thus, the connection between sexual empowerment and social/community level empowerment is an important area for further research. Through processes of sexual empowerment it may be possible for women to resist and change socially constructed and dynamic norms of gender and power at both individual and structural levels, thereby expanding sexual possibilities for themselves and other women in society (Mosedale, 2005). To the extent that the components of sexually empowering processes enhance women's ability to challenge subordination, objectification, and passivity, they may be springboards to recognize and demand other rights, such as safety and security (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Tolman, 2012). For instance, one possible impact of sexual empowerment processes could be that women are more inclined to challenge the social norms in their immediate context through communicating with friends or younger siblings, educating others through weblogs, or engaging in collective actions. Indeed, recent research has suggested that women who report less self-objectification (one element of sexual subjectivity) report more collective action (Zurbriggen, 2013) and social activism (Calogero, 2013). Future research could assess such community-based actions as outcomes of sexual empowerment processes to further understand the connections between individual and community empowerment.

**Implications for sexual education.** Most concretely, this study's findings have the potential to inform sexual education policy and curricula. Conventional sexual education generally reinforces gendered and heterosexist stereotypes about sexual desire, power dynamics, and intimate relationships (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Holland et al., 1992; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Kantor, Santelli, Teitler, & Balmer, 2008; Lamb, 2010; Rasmussen, 2004). Indeed, scholars from the US, New Zealand, and Ireland have argued that programs rarely teach about non-coital, non-penetrative activities such as masturbation, or acknowledge sexual pleasure, happiness, and enjoyment (Allen, 2004, 2007; Bay-Cheng, 2003; Coleman, 2002; Higgins & Hirsch, 2007; Jackson & Weatherall, 2010; Kiely, 2005; Peterson, 2010). This study provides further support for the need to promote discussions of gender and power, pleasure, active and desiring consent, sexual objectification in the media, and the connection between sexuality and feelings about the body within school and community-based sexual education curricula.

In particular, the results of the current study support investment in a “rights-based approach” to sexual education that includes discussion of sexual rights, gender, race and class, and context-specific social norms (Berglas, Constantine, & Ozer, 2014). In addition to more typical content, rights-based approaches prioritize critical thinking and reflection, agency, and assertiveness. These efforts would ideally be participatory and youth-centered, designed in collaboration with participants so as to build on students existing skills, incorporate their lived experiences, and engage them as agents of change in community (Berglas et al., 2014; Spencer, Maxwell, &

Aggleton, 2008). Some have even suggested that the language of sexual empowerment may be a more palatable alternative to the language of sexual rights for some stakeholders, particularly in the US context (Berglas et al., 2014).

**Implications for clinical practice.** Sexual empowerment processes also have implications for clinical practice with heterosexual and sexual minority women. Specifically, empirical support for sexual empowerment processes implies a need for therapeutic practices that have an explicitly feminist perspective. In line with the tenants of feminist liberation psychology (Lykes, 2000; Moane, 2011; Mosedale, 2005), empowerment theory centers analyses of power in order to promote sociostructural transformation, rather than attribute causes of disadvantage to individuals. Similarly, feminist clinical practice explicitly acknowledges how sex roles, feminine socialization, and gender inequality may influence women's psychological well-being (Israeli & Santor, 2000). As such, many feminist therapy techniques align with empowerment processes in that they often involve consciousness raising, social and gender role analysis, and re-learning of socialized roles in order for women to begin to undo internalized oppression within patriarchy (Israeli & Santor, 2000). Feminist sex therapy in particular helps women interrogate the values, expectations, and messages about gender and sexuality that they have learned and make connections between their personal problems and broad social structures of gender and compulsory heterosexuality (Tiefer, 1996). For sexual minority women, discussions of internalized homophobia and shame would be particularly important. In addition, women's (and their partners') expectations about

pleasure are often interrogated, because orgasm is not necessarily the most important element of a healthy and satisfying intimate relationship. In fact, feminist sex therapists often highlight the importance of contact comfort, cuddling, and other non-coital activities as a way to take some of the pressure off and reduce anxiety surrounding pleasure and orgasm (Tiefer, 1996). Moreover, some feminist therapy involves social activism interventions to affect societal change because feminist therapists recognize that individual women's health may not be improved without structural transformation (Israeli & Santor, 2000).

Beyond support for the inclusion of critical consciousness-raising, sexual empowerment processes have implications for other aspects of feminist sex therapy for both heterosexual and sexual minority women. In particular, the finding that sexual empowerment processes involved both sexual subjectivity and sexual assertiveness suggests that clinical interventions focused on body image and assertiveness training could play an important role in women's sex therapy, as others have argued previously (Tiefer, 1996). The current study supports feminist therapy techniques that promote experiencing bodily sensations and competencies and that help women move away from an objectified perspective about the body involving appearance comparison and hypervigilance. Because knowledge about and comfort with one's genitals is lacking for many women (Herbenick et al., 2011; Wade et al., 2005), education about anatomy and physiology and masturbation may also be important to promote women's positive embodiment and sexual pleasure (Tiefer, 1996). Encouraging masturbation is itself an important intervention because the

ability to communicate sexual desires to a partner may depend on awareness of one's personal physiological experiences of arousal and pleasure (Coleman, 2002). For heterosexual women in particular, assertiveness training may also be useful if it is explicitly linked to discussions of gender and power and acknowledges the inequality often present in heterosexual relationships (Tiefer, 1996). Although assertiveness training may not be appropriate in all contexts (i.e., those in which women's assertiveness could be met with violence), for many women enhancing the ability to communicate with their partners and navigate when and how to discuss sexuality in relationships would be an asset.

The sexual empowerment processes found in the current research also have direct implications for the treatment of women's sexual "dysfunction," that is, their problems with desire, arousal, or orgasm. In particular, this study provides support for the New View perspective on female sexual dysfunction that highlights the social context of sexuality and critiques the medicalization of women's sexual problems (Tiefer, 2001). The New View Campaign highlights how current conceptualizations of female sexual dysfunction often portray the experiences of men and women as similar without a critical analysis of gender and power. In addition, the authors argue that most definitions of women's sexual problems erase the relational context of sexuality without considering the interpersonal interactions in which desire, arousal, and orgasm often occur. The core tenant of the New View is that many, if not most, of women's sexual problems arise from socio-cultural, psychological, political, economic, and relational factors. For example, rather than just biological

explanations, sexual problems can be attributed to such things as distress about one's perceived inability to meet cultural norms of ideal sexuality or lack of interest or fatigue due to family and work obligations. As such, individual medical solutions such as the new pill, Addyi, recently approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (National Public Radio, 2015) will fall short of enhancing women's sexual well-being and empowerment if larger social structures that subordinate women are not addressed.

### **Conclusions**

Although social change was not assessed directly in the current study, the inclusion of critical consciousness in multidimensional sexual empowerment processes extends empowerment beyond individualistic strategies for self-enhancement (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Rappaport, 1981). Individual-level solutions will not be enough to support women's well-being in patriarchy because men's structural and ideological power subordinates women through compulsory heterosexuality, sexual objectification, and mainstream sexual scripts. If sexist contexts and norms go unquestioned, the transformative potential of individual or interpersonal changes will be limited (Bay-Cheng, Livingston, & Fava, 2011; Schick et al., 2008). Attention to social change is essential if scholars are to refuse to place the sole burden of changing one's consciousness and circumstances onto marginalized people (Bartky, 1990; Prilleltensky, 2008, 2012).

Importantly, this study highlights the need for alternative discourses surrounding women's sexuality at the societal level. Challenging and changing



harmful social conditions and patterns of power, while supporting enabling conditions, is integral to empowerment (Bay-Cheng, 2012; Gavey, 2012; Grabe, 2010, 2012; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Mosedale, 2005; Peterson, 2010; Phillips, 2000; Riger, 1993; Zimmerman, 1995). Gendered power inequalities, cultural ideologies of masculinity and femininity, and compulsory heterosexuality are emergent, dynamic, and actively constructed through interpersonal relationships and social institutions like the media, religion, and the legal system (Connell, 1987, 2009; Foucault, 1978/1990; Kimmel, 1997; Simon & Gagnon, 1984; Tolman, 2006). As such, they can be challenged and changed. Increased exposure to ideologies and scripts about female sexuality as knowledgeable, entitled, desiring, comfortable with the body, efficacious, and assertive may help women resist and reject ideologies that support women's subordination globally. Diversity in sexual behaviors and sexual bodies must also be nurtured and promoted in order to counter stigma against lesbians, women of color, feminists, and other women who do not fit within heteronormative standards of beauty and femininity. Because hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality are complementary, they are also problematic for men's well-being (Courtenay, 2000; Kimmel, 1997). For the well-being of all, it is essential to challenge masculinity norms that involve the subordination of women, men's entitlement to unreciprocated emotional and sexual care, and definitions of heterosexual intercourse with male orgasm as the epitome of sex.

Changing ideologies will require community efforts that emphasize the social and relational context of sexual rights, challenge gendered power, and focus on

advocacy, alliance, and policy change (Tolman & Costa, 2010). Scholars of sexuality can contribute to these efforts by applying their research through blogging, promoting media literacy, boycotting problematic media, supporting community organizations that serve women and girls, and creating evidence-based educational programs. These endeavors must be combined with increased material resources for women and girls such as access to education, contraception and local reproductive health services (Rubin, 1984; Spencer et al., 2008; Tolman et al., 2003).

Finally, to be truly transformative, sexual empowerment processes must be integrated into a larger intersectional struggle for social justice because of interlocking systems of oppression on a global scale (Collins, 2004; Parker, 2007). Feminist engagements with human rights, including the sexual right to pleasure, requires coalition building (Parker, 2010), transforming unjust social and economic systems (Parker et al., 2004), and promoting anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist (Collins, Falcon, Lodhia, & Talcott, 2010) and anti-war (Zurbriggen, 2010) critiques and activism. Along with shifts in discursive and ideological power, changes in structural power are necessary to ensure people have access to equal rights and protection from violence and discrimination across variations in gender and sexuality. Promoting female sexual empowerment in patriarchal contexts is part of a struggle for a world in which all people are free to think for themselves, make decisions according to their own best interests, and pursue satisfying, safe, and pleasurable sexual lives (Collins, 2004; Parker, 2007).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Power analysis was conducted in order to determine the appropriate number of study participants to be able to estimate effects as small as .20, with a confidence interval having a width of .20, and precision of  $p = .050$ . Given the number of independent variables in the proposed model, it was found that a sample of at least 400 participants would be needed.

<sup>2</sup> Modification indices are not available in MPlus when estimating models using Multiple Imputation with 20 imputations. In order to obtain modification indices I ran the model on each of the 20 multiply imputed datasets individually to ensure the same paths were recommended in each imputation. In the first pass, the path between sexual self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction had the highest modification index for sexual minority and heterosexual women and the second highest modification index for heterosexual women (for heterosexual women, a path in which sexual satisfaction predicted sexual assertiveness was first). The path between sexual self-efficacy and sexual satisfaction was added to the model because it was theoretically sound and was suggested as a modification for both groups. Although fit was improved with this path added, the revised model did not meet the goodness-of-fit criteria. Modification indices were examined a second time and results suggested that the path between body surveillance and orgasm experience with a partner should be added to the model, but only for heterosexual women (no additional modifications were suggested for sexual minority women). In order to keep the models the same, the path between

body surveillance and orgasm experience was added for both groups in the revised model, which fit the data well.

Table 1

*Variables Included in the Multiple Imputation Procedure*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Missing Data Points</b>	
Sexual Identity	Grouping variable	Sexual Minority	Heterosexual
<b><u>Sexual Empowerment Process Variables</u></b>			
Feminist Identity	Predictor and imputed	1	0
Awareness of Gender Discrimination	Predictor	0	0
Heteronormativity Beliefs	Predictor	0	0
CFNI: Fidelity	Predictor	0	0
CFNI: Romance	Predictor	0	0
Entitlement to Pleasure from Oneself	Predictor and imputed	0	1
Entitlement to Pleasure from Partner	Predictor and imputed	0	1
Sexual Consciousness	Predictor and imputed	0	1
Sexual Self-Efficacy	Predictor and imputed	0	1
Body Image Self-Consciousness	Predictor and imputed	8	12
Body Surveillance	Predictor	0	0
Sexual Assertiveness	Predictor and imputed	0	1
Sexual Satisfaction	Predictor and imputed	0	3
Orgasm experience with a partner	Predictor and imputed	1	4
<b><u>Background Information</u></b>			
Ethnicity	Predictor and imputed	2	1
First Generation Status	Predictor	0	0
Political Affiliation	Predictor and imputed	5	6
Religious Affiliation	Predictor and imputed	0	2
Religiosity	Predictor	0	0
Age	Predictor	0	0
<b><u>Relationship and Sexual Experience</u></b>			
Lifetime sexual partners	Predictor	0	0
Gender of partner(s)	Predictor and imputed	1	0
Ever had penile-vaginal intercourse	Predictor and imputed	11	1
Ever had an orgasm	Predictor and imputed	1	7
Current Relationship Status	Predictor	0	0

NOTE: see Table 2 for coding information.

CFNI = Conformity to Feminine Norms

Table 2

*Background Characteristics for Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Women (Average of 20 Multiple Imputations in Bold)*

		Sexual Minority ( <i>n</i> = 159)			Straight (Heterosexual) ( <i>n</i> = 271)			All ( <i>N</i> = 430)			<sup>2</sup>	df	<i>p</i>
		Count	%	%	Count	%	%	Count	%	%			
Ethnicity	White/European American	72	45.9%	<b>45.3%</b>	90	33.3%	<b>33.2%</b>	162	37.9%	<b>37.7%</b>	22.80	4	.000
	Hispanic/Latino	27	17.2%	<b>17.0%</b>	81	30.0%	<b>29.9%</b>	108	25.3%	<b>25.1%</b>			
	Asian American	20	12.7%	<b>12.6%</b>	62	23.0%	<b>22.9%</b>	82	19.2%	<b>19.1%</b>			
	Multi-Ethnic	28	17.8%	<b>18.2%</b>	30	11.1%	<b>11.4%</b>	58	13.6%	<b>14.0%</b>			
	Other	10	6.4%	<b>6.9%</b>	7	2.6%	<b>2.6%</b>	17	4.0%	<b>4.2%</b>			
		157			270			427					
First Generation Status	First generation college student	68	42.8%		147	54.2%		215	50.0%		5.28	1	.022
	At least one parent has a college degree	91	57.2%		124	45.8%		215	50.0%				
		159			271			430					
Political Affiliation	Moderate/Conservative	40	26.0%	<b>25.2%</b>	114	43.0%	<b>43.2%</b>	154	36.8%	<b>36.5%</b>	12.17	1	.000
	Very liberal/liberal	114	74.0%	<b>74.8%</b>	151	57.0%	<b>56.8%</b>	265	63.2%	<b>63.5%</b>			
		154			265			419					
Religious Affiliation	Christian/Catholic	29	18.2%		122	45.4%	<b>45.4%</b>	151	35.3%	<b>35.3%</b>	42.50	3	.000
	Buddhist/Hindu/Sikh	4	2.5%		20	7.4%	<b>7.4%</b>	24	5.6%	<b>5.6%</b>			
	Other Religions	22	13.8%		23	8.6%	<b>8.9%</b>	45	10.5%	<b>10.7%</b>			
	Atheist/Agnostic/No Religion	104	65.4%		104	38.7%	<b>38.4%</b>	208	48.6%	<b>48.4%</b>			
		159			269			428					
Religiosity	Not at all religious	94	59.1%		112	41.3%		206	47.9%		12.71	1	.000
	Somewhat to very religious	65	40.9%		159	58.7%		224	52.1%				
		159			271			430					
		<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>		<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Age (in years)		20.05	2.07		19.79	1.37		19.89	1.67		1.42	240.6	.158

NOTE: The Sexual Minority group includes participants who self-identified as lesbian, mostly lesbian, bisexual, mostly straight, or other. Levene's test for equality of variances was significant for the *t*-test comparing groups on age.

Table 3

*Relationship and Sexual Experience for Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Women (Average of 20 Multiple Imputations in Bold)*

		Sexual Minority (n = 159)			Straight (Heterosexual) (n = 271)			All (N = 430)			<sup>2</sup>	df	p
		Count	%	%	Count	%	%	Count	%	%			
Lifetime Sexual Partners	1 to 2	54	34.0%		130	48.0%		184	42.8%		8.03	1	.005
	3 or more	105	66.0%		141	52.0%		246	57.2%				
		159			271			430					
Gender of partner(s)	All men	87	55.1%	<b>55.3%</b>	261	96.3%		348	81.1%	<b>81.2%</b>	111.61	2	.000
	Any female partner	71	44.9%	<b>44.7%</b>	10	3.7%		81	18.9%	<b>18.8%</b>			
	All women	10	6.3%		0	0.0%		10	2.3%				
	To some extent both men and women	61	38.6%		10	3.7%		71	16.6%				
		158			271			429					
Ever had penile-vaginal intercourse	No	14	9.5%	<b>9.4%</b>	16	5.9%	<b>5.9%</b>	30	7.2%	<b>7.2%</b>	1.79	1	.181
	Yes	134	90.5%	<b>90.6%</b>	254	94.1%	<b>94.1%</b>	388	92.8%	<b>92.8%</b>			
		148			270			418					
Ever had an orgasm	No	7	4.4%	<b>4.4%</b>	22	8.3%	<b>8.1%</b>	29	6.9%	<b>6.7%</b>	3.64	2	.162
	Yes	141	89.2%	<b>89.3%</b>	218	82.6%	<b>82.7%</b>	359	85.1%	<b>85.1%</b>			
	I don't know	10	6.3%	<b>6.3%</b>	24	9.1%	<b>9.2%</b>	34	8.1%	<b>8.1%</b>			
		158			264			422					
Current Relationship Status	Not in a relationship	68	42.8%		96	35.4%		164	38.1%		2.29	1	.130
	In a relationship	91	57.2%		175	64.6%		266	61.9%				
		159			271			430					
		<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>		<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>		<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
Number of lifetime sexual partners		6.33	7.20		4.55	5.43		5.21	6.19		2.69	263.85	.008

NOTE: The Sexual Minority group includes participants who self-identified as lesbian, mostly lesbian, bisexual, mostly straight, or other. Levene's test for equality of variances was significant for the *t*-test comparing groups on number of lifetime sexual partners.

Table 4

Main Study Variables for Sexual Minority and Heterosexual Women (Average of 20 Multiple Imputations in Bold)

Variable	Sexual Minority (n = 159)			Straight (Heterosexual) (n = 271)			ALL (N = 430)			Possible Range	Actual Range	t	df	p	d
	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	N						
Feminist (yes = 1, 0 = no)	0.75	0.43	158	0.53	0.50	271	0.61	0.49	429	0-1	0-1	-4.91	367.37	.000	0.47
	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>0.53</b>	<b>0.49</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>0.61</b>	<b>0.50</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>-4.58</b>		<b>.000</b>	<b>0.47</b>
Awareness of Gender Discrimination	4.81	0.66	159	4.51	0.72	271	4.62	0.71	430	1-6	1.11-6	-4.36	428	.000	0.43
	<b>4.81</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>4.51</b>	<b>0.76</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>4.62</b>	<b>0.75</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>-4.27</b>		<b>.000</b>	<b>0.40</b>
Heteronormativity Beliefs	1.65	0.63	159	2.42	0.94	271	2.13	0.92	430	1-7	1-5	10.20	420.57	.000	-0.92
	<b>1.65</b>	<b>0.86</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>2.42</b>	<b>0.99</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>2.14</b>	<b>1.08</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>7.70</b>		<b>.000</b>	<b>-0.82</b>
CFNI: Fidelity	2.09	0.68	159	2.53	0.70	271	2.37	0.72	430	1-4	1-4	6.32	428	.000	-0.64
	<b>2.09</b>	<b>0.72</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>2.53</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>2.37</b>	<b>0.73</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>6.22</b>		<b>.000</b>	<b>-0.63</b>
CFNI: Romance	2.62	0.53	159	2.75	0.48	271	2.70	0.50	430	1-4	1.6-4	2.62	428	.009	-0.26
	<b>2.62</b>	<b>0.53</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>0.48</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>2.70</b>	<b>0.50</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>2.68</b>		<b>.007</b>	<b>-0.26</b>
Entitlement to Pleasure from Oneself	3.61	0.72	159	2.78	1.09	270	3.09	1.05	429	0-4	0-4	-9.43	420.68	.000	0.86
	<b>3.61</b>	<b>1.41</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>2.78</b>	<b>1.38</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>3.09</b>	<b>1.56</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>-6.95</b>		<b>.000</b>	<b>0.60</b>
Entitlement to Pleasure from Partner	3.43	0.64	159	3.20	0.75	270	3.29	0.72	429	0-4	0.5-4	-3.32	371.13	.001	0.32
	<b>3.43</b>	<b>0.93</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>3.20</b>	<b>0.97</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>3.29</b>	<b>0.97</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>-3.06</b>		<b>.002</b>	<b>0.24</b>
Sexual Consciousness	3.46	0.58	159	3.11	0.66	270	3.24	0.65	429	0-4	.2-4	-5.63	427	.000	0.55
	<b>3.46</b>	<b>0.83</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>3.11</b>	<b>0.76</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>3.24</b>	<b>0.79</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>-5.40</b>		<b>.000</b>	<b>0.45</b>
Sexual Self-Efficacy	3.16	0.76	159	2.68	0.88	270	2.86	0.87	429	0-4	0-4	-5.76	427	.000	0.57
	<b>3.16</b>	<b>0.98</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>2.67</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>2.85</b>	<b>1.04</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>-5.52</b>		<b>.000</b>	<b>0.49</b>
Body Image Self-Consciousness	16.3	13.00	151	18.6	14.6	259	17.77	14.03	410	0-75	0-69	1.64	408	.103	-0.17
	<b>16.61</b>	<b>17.77</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>18.85</b>	<b>19.65</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>18.02</b>	<b>17.01</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>1.52</b>		<b>.130</b>	<b>-0.12</b>
Body Surveillance	4.00	1.00	159	4.00	1.00	271	4.00	1.00	430	1-6	2-6	1.00	428	.319	0.00
	<b>3.97</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>4.06</b>	<b>0.82</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>4.03</b>	<b>0.85</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>1.01</b>		<b>.311</b>	<b>-0.11</b>
Sexual Assertiveness	3.98	0.6	159	3.82	0.63	270	3.88	0.62	429	1-5	1.79-5	-2.56	427	.011	0.26
	<b>3.98</b>	<b>0.63</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>3.82</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>3.88</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>-2.52</b>		<b>.012</b>	<b>0.24</b>
Sexual Satisfaction	2.91	0.98	159	2.86	0.82	268	2.88	0.88	427	0-4	0-4	-0.58	288.17	.562	0.06
	<b>2.91</b>	<b>1.25</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>2.82</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>2.88</b>	<b>1.06</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>-0.66</b>		<b>.510</b>	<b>0.10</b>
Orgasm Experience with a Partner	9.97	3.82	158	9.81	3.75	267	9.87	3.77	425	0-15	3-15	-0.44	423	.662	0.04
	<b>9.98</b>	<b>4.31</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>9.81</b>	<b>4.07</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>9.87</b>	<b>4.15</b>	<b>430</b>			<b>-0.46</b>		<b>.649</b>	<b>0.04</b>

NOTE: The Sexual Minority group includes participants who self-identified as lesbian, mostly lesbian, bisexual, mostly straight, or other. Levene's test for equality of variances was significant for the *t*-test comparing groups on Feminist Identity, Heteronormativity Beliefs, Entitlement to Pleasure from Onself and from Partner, and Sexual Satisfaction  
CFNI = Conformity to Feminine Norms Scale



Table 5

*Correlations Among Transformed Sexual Empowerment Variables for Sexual Minority (n = 159, Below the Diagonal) and Heterosexual Women (n = 271, Above the Diagonal) After Multiple Imputation of Missing Data*

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>
1. Feminist Identity	-	.40***	-.23***	.05	-.19**	.14*	.13*	.11	.02	.04	.04	.04	.10
2. Awareness of Gender Discrimination	.36***	-	-.25***	.04	-.09	.09	.09	.01	.05	.07	-.12	-.01	-.01
3. Heteronormativity Beliefs	-.30***	-.31***	-	.30***	.22***	-.15*	-.19**	-.23***	.05	-.15*	-.12*	-.18**	.03
4. CFNI: Fidelity	-.08	-.03	.20*	-	.11	-.23***	-.32***	-.24***	.00	-.11	-.11	-.05	.14*
5. CFNI: Romance	-.08	-.28***	.33***	.19*	-	.12*	.01	.00	-.04	.14*	.00	.02	.00
6. Entitlement to Pleasure from Partner	.06	.12	-.06	-.09	.07	-	.46***	.40***	-.12*	.13*	.31***	.29***	.03
7. Sexual Consciousness	.09	-.02	-.14	-.21**	-.03	.15	-	.58***	-.21**	.06	.47***	.50***	.22***
8. Sexual Self-Efficacy	.07	-.01	-.14	-.25**	-.10	.05	.51***	-	-.13*	.03	.39***	.50***	.20**
9. Body Image Self-Consciousness	-.11	-.15	.15	.18	.08	-.06	-.15	-.08	-	.34***	-.48***	-.35***	-.31***
10. Body Surveillance	-.07	-.03	.13	.04	.22**	.16	-.06	-.19*	.46***	-	-.10	-.06	-.24***
11. Sexual Assertiveness	.06	-.07	-.09	-.12	.01	.02	.39***	.43***	-.46***	-.39***	-	.50***	.32***
12. Sexual Satisfaction	-.02	-.01	-.14	-.05	-.04	-.03	.38***	.64***	-.14	-.14	.50***	-	.44***
13. Orgasm experience with a partner	-.08	-.03	.00	-.09	-.04	-.03	.20*	.33***	-.26**	-.20*	.38***	.48***	-

NOTE: CFNI = Conformity to Feminine Norms

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 6

*Goodness-of-Fit Statistics*

Model Specified	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	$\chi^2/df$	$\chi^2 p$ value	CFI	RMSEA [95% CI]	AIC	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta\chi^2 p$ value
1. Hypothesized Model	185.04	52	3.56	.000	.861	.109 [.192, .126]	2133.38		
2. Revised Model	85.25	48	1.78	.001	.961	.060 [.039, .081]	2039.42	99.79	.000
3. Freely Estimated Trimmed Model	77.44	42	1.84	.001	.963	.063 [.040, .084]	1858.94	7.81	.252
4. Constrained Trimmed Model	141.47	86	1.65	.000	.942	.055 [.038, .071]	1836.90	64.03	.026
5. Partially Constrained Final Model	120.17	82	1.47	.004	.960	.047 [.027, .064]	1823.22	42.73	.355
6. Alternative Model	326.96	84	3.89	.000	.736	.116 [.103, .129]	2029.69	206.79	.000

Note: CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation; CI = 90% confidence interval for RMSEA; AIC = Akaike Information Criteria

Table 7

*Significant and Non-Significant Standardized Parameter Estimates, 95% Confidence*

*Intervals, and p-values for the Final Partially Constrained Model*

	Sexual Minority				Heterosexual			
	Est.	-2.5% CI	+2.5% CI	p-value	Est.	-2.5% CI	+2.5% CI	p-value
<i>Entitlement to Pleasure from a Partner ON</i>								
Feminist Identity	<b>.11</b>	.02	.19	.021	<b>.11</b>	.02	.21	.022
Heteronormativity Beliefs	<b>-.08</b>	-.17	.02	.106	<b>-.09</b>	-.19	.02	.105
CFNI: Fidelity	<b>-.18</b>	-.28	-.08	.000	<b>-.17</b>	-.26	-.08	.000
CFNI: Romance	<b>.17</b>	.07	.27	.001	<b>.15</b>	.06	.24	.001
<i>Sexual Consciousness ON</i>								
Feminist Identity	<b>.09</b>	.00	.17	.043	<b>.10</b>	.00	.20	.042
Heteronormativity Beliefs	<b>-.08</b>	-.17	.01	.066	<b>-.10</b>	-.20	.01	.063
CFNI: Fidelity	<b>-.26</b>	-.35	-.17	.000	<b>-.26</b>	-.35	-.17	.000
CFNI: Romance	<b>.06</b>	-.04	.16	.240	<b>.05</b>	-.04	.15	.238
<i>Sexual Self-Efficacy ON</i>								
Feminist Identity	<b>.06</b>	-.03	.14	.178	<b>.07</b>	-.03	.17	.178
Heteronormativity Beliefs	<b>-.13</b>	-.22	-.04	.005	<b>-.15</b>	-.25	-.05	.005
CFNI: Fidelity	<b>-.20</b>	-.30	-.10	.000	<b>-.20</b>	-.21	-.11	.000
CFNI: Romance	<b>.03</b>	-.07	.13	.518	<b>.03</b>	-.06	.12	.519
<i>Body Image Self-Consciousness ON</i>								
Feminist Identity	<b>.01</b>	-.09	.10	.843	<b>.01</b>	-.09	.11	.843
Heteronormativity Beliefs	<b>.07</b>	-.03	.16	.199	<b>.07</b>	-.04	.18	.199
CFNI: Fidelity	<b>.05</b>	-.05	.16	.320	<b>.05</b>	-.05	.15	.316
CFNI: Romance	<b>-.02</b>	-.13	.09	.729	<b>-.02</b>	-.11	.08	.730
<i>Body Surveillance ON</i>								
Feminist Identity	<b>.01</b>	-.08	.10	.844	<b>.01</b>	-.09	.11	.844
Heteronormativity Beliefs	<b>-.08</b>	-.17	.01	.088	<b>-.09</b>	-.20	.01	.090
CFNI: Fidelity	<b>-.06</b>	-.16	.04	.225	<b>-.06</b>	-.16	.04	.224
CFNI: Romance	<b>.22</b>	.11	.32	.000	<b>.20</b>	.11	.29	.000
<i>Sexual Assertiveness ON</i>								
Entitlement	<b>.04</b>	-.04	.11	.328	<b>.04</b>	-.04	.13	.328
Sexual Consciousness	<b>.21</b>	.12	.30	.000	<b>.22</b>	.13	.31	.000
Sexual Self-Efficacy	<b>.23</b>	.14	.32	.000	<b>.24</b>	.14	.33	.000
Body Image Self-Consciousness	<b>-.35</b>	-.44	-.27	.000	<b>-.39</b>	-.48	-.30	.000
Body Surveillance*	<b>-.18</b>	-.30	-.05	.005	<b>-.00</b>	-.10	.10	.983
<i>Sexual Satisfaction ON</i>								
Sexual Assertiveness	<b>.33</b>	.25	.41	.000	<b>.36</b>	.28	.44	.000
Sexual Self-Efficacy*	<b>.47</b>	.37	.57	.000	<b>.33</b>	.24	.42	.000
<i>Orgasm w/Partner ON</i>								
Sexual Assertiveness	<b>.31</b>	.22	.40	.000	<b>.30</b>	.21	.38	.000
Body Surveillance	<b>-.16</b>	-.25	-.08	.000	<b>-.16</b>	-.25	-.08	.000

\*Variable was allowed to vary between groups in the partially constrained model

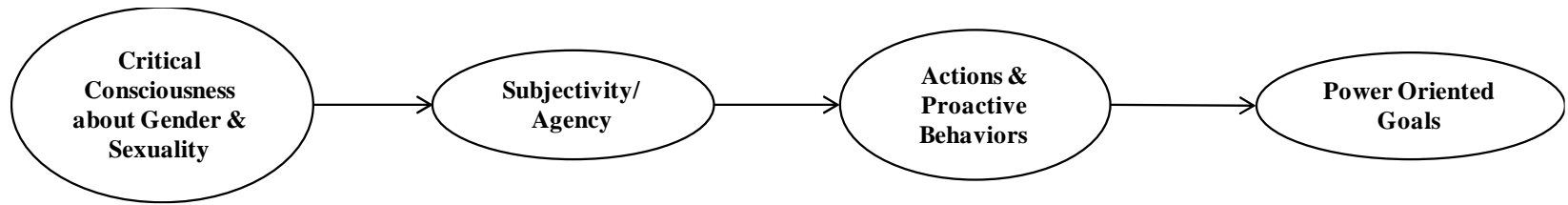
Table 7 (continued)

*Significant and Non-Significant Standardized Parameter Estimates, 95% Confidence*

*Intervals, and p-values for the Final Partially Constrained Model*

	Sexual Minority				Heterosexual			
	Est.	-2.5% CI	+2.5% CI	p-value	Est.	-2.5% CI	+2.5% CI	p-value
<i>Orgasm w/Partner WITH</i>								
Sexual Satisfaction	<b>.32</b>	.23	.41	.000	<b>.34</b>	.25	.43	.000
<i>Feminist Identity WITH</i>								
Heteronormativity Beliefs	<b>-.30</b>	-.40	-.19	.000	<b>-.23</b>	-.31	-.15	.000
CFNI: Fidelity	<b>.00</b>	-.10	.10	.968	<b>.00</b>	-.09	.09	.968
CFNI: Romance	<b>-.15</b>	-.24	-.05	.002	<b>-.14</b>	-.24	-.05	.003
<i>Heteronormativity Beliefs WITH</i>								
CFNI: Fidelity	<b>.27</b>	.18	.37	.000	<b>.24</b>	.15	.34	.000
CFNI: Romance	<b>.27</b>	.18	.37	.000	<b>.26</b>	.17	.35	.000
<i>CFNI: Fidelity WITH</i>								
CFNI: Romance	<b>.12</b>	.04	.21	.006	<b>.14</b>	.04	.24	.005
<i>Entitlement to Pleasure from a Partner WITH</i>								
Sexual Consciousness*	<b>.15</b>	-.01	.30	.060	<b>.39</b>	.30	.49	.000
Sexual Self-Efficacy*	<b>.06</b>	-.10	.21	.452	<b>.33</b>	.22	.43	.000
Body Image Self-Consciousness	<b>-.08</b>	-.18	.02	.137	<b>-.07</b>	-.16	.02	.141
Body Surveillance	<b>.10</b>	.01	.20	.040	<b>.10</b>	.01	.19	.036
<i>Sexual Consciousness WITH</i>								
Sexual Self-Efficacy	<b>.49</b>	.41	.57	.000	<b>.52</b>	.45	.60	.000
Body Image Self-Consciousness	<b>-.17</b>	-.26	-.08	.000	<b>-.17</b>	-.26	-.07	.001
Body Surveillance	<b>-.01</b>	-.10	.08	.839	<b>-.01</b>	-.11	.09	.839
<i>Sexual Self-Efficacy WITH</i>								
Body Image Self-Consciousness	<b>-.08</b>	-.18	.01	.084	<b>-.08</b>	-.18	.01	.088
Body Surveillance	<b>-.07</b>	-.16	.02	.145	<b>-.07</b>	-.17	.02	.137
<i>Body Image Self-Consciousness WITH</i>								
Body Surveillance	<b>.41</b>	.32	.51	.000	<b>.40</b>	.32	.48	.000

\*Variable was allowed to vary between groups in the partially constrained model



*Figure 1.* A model of sexual empowerment with direct and mediated relationships among components.

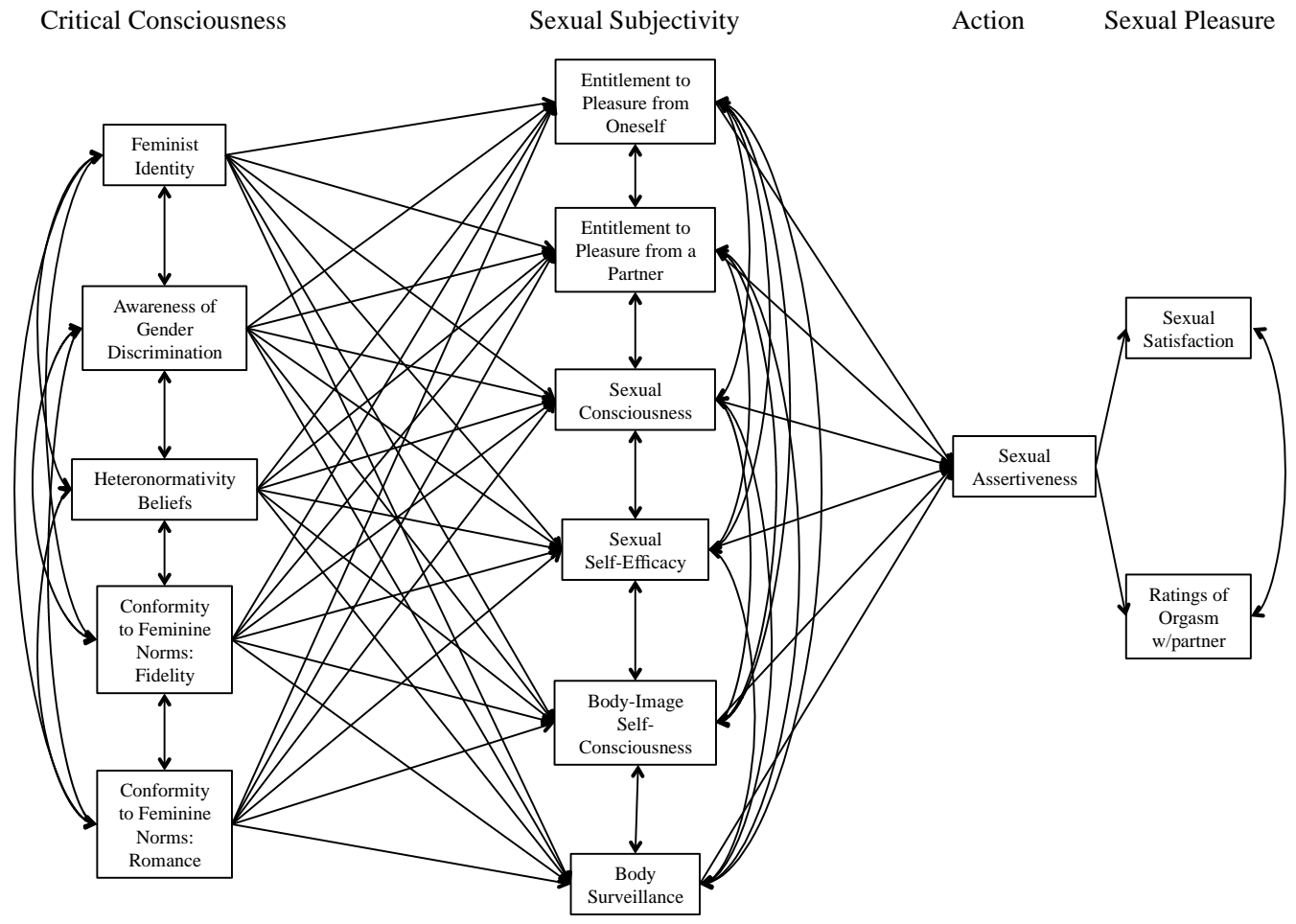


Figure 2. The proposed sexual empowerment model in which sexual subjectivity and action are mediators in the relationship between critical consciousness and pleasure.

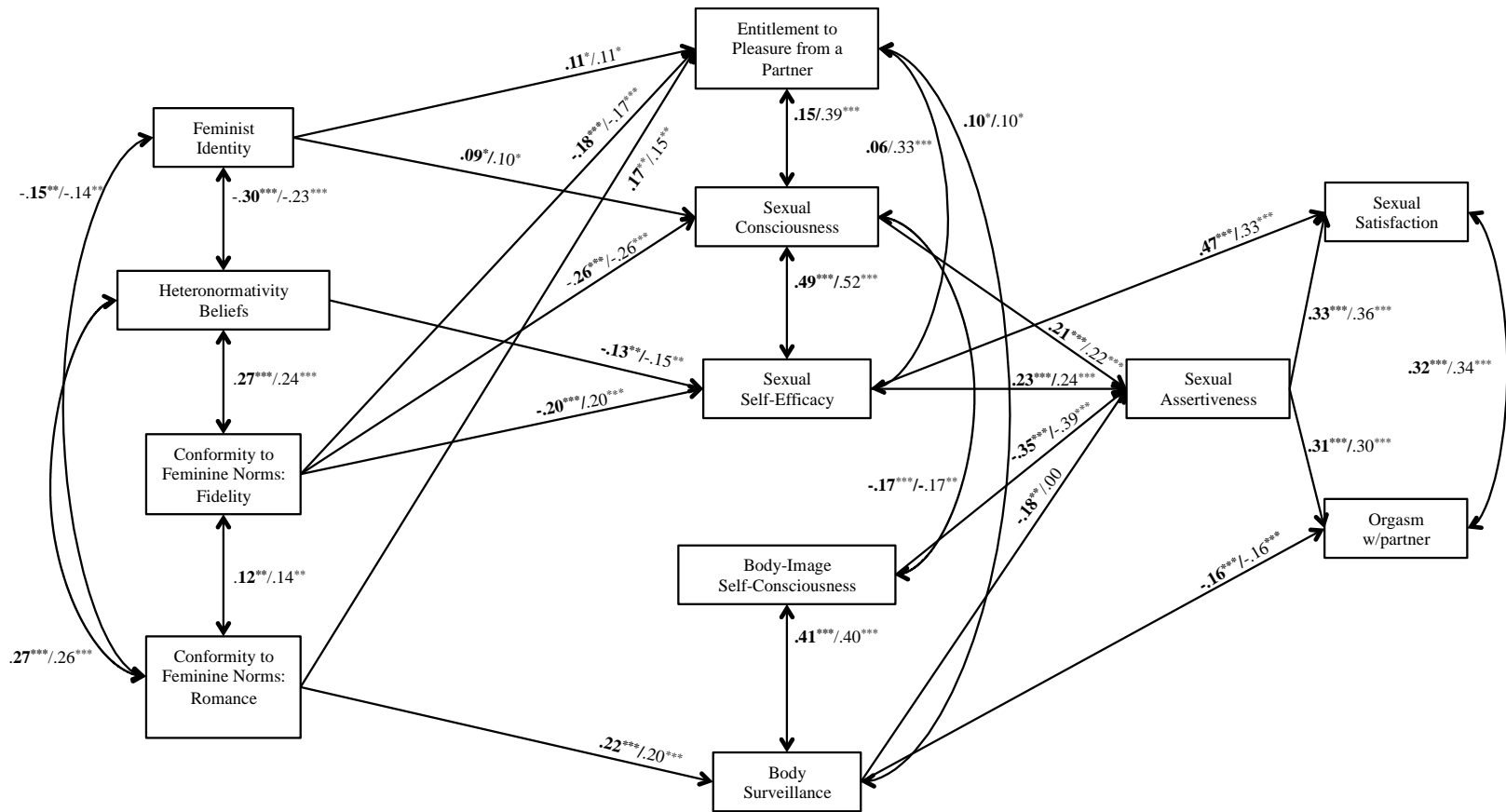


Figure 3. The final partially constrained model fit the data well for sexual minority and heterosexual women. Statistically significant standardized estimates are shown for sexual minority (bold font, left side) and heterosexual women (plain font, right side). \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

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