

It's not that hard:
Women's sexuality and epistemic
injustice

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Abstract

In this paper, I will show that there's a common ignorance on women's sexuality that can be explained as an epistemic injustice created under patriarchy. This injustice limits women's sexual self-knowledge, communication, freedom, pleasure and comfort in sex, while being denied as knowers of their own experiences. The epistemic injustice has also lead to a one-sided perspective on sex of sex as reproduction and therefore vaginal penetration that serves men's pleasure. This concept of sex that is taken to be the objective truth of what sex is, further cements the epistemic injustice into our societies, because all knowledge on women's sexuality that does come forward, is then explained (and thus misrepresented) within this concept of sex. This epistemic injustice towards women's sexuality has not been discussed much in feminist debates on sex, although it should be: after reviewing the debate on the harms in pornography and the debate on a proper account of consent, we can conclude that epistemic injustice plays a major role in the harms in sex. In both debates the account of epistemic injustice allows us to identify different types and degrees of harms, which allows for middle grounds between sex-negative and sex-positive accounts. We can conclude that women's sexuality is not that hard (except for the clitoris when a woman is aroused), but dismantling epistemic injustice in order to see and properly communicate about it, is. However, I will suggest the first step I think we should take, which is to further investigate epistemic injustices in sex and consider an alternative concept of sex. My suggestion is that we should move towards a concept of sex as a social activity between equal and embodied persons who consent to sex, so that all perspectives can be included respectfully and rape and objectification can be excluded of our concept of sex.

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Introduction

It was only in 2021, that the full image and function of the clitoris was finally included in high school biology books in the Netherlands. Unfortunately, sex coaches and sexologists still find that some information about the clitoris and women's sexuality is missing (Samplonius, 2021). If the scientific information exists, why doesn't it end up in our educational books?

27% of Dutch women between the ages 12 and 25 experience pain during vaginal penetration, and according to sex coach Anna Jansen, many women think that this pain is normal (Samplonius, 2021). But it is not. It is a sign that women are not aroused enough when the penetration starts, because for penetration to be comfortable for women, just like with a penis, the erectile tissue (that is mainly part of the clitoris) needs to swell up and vaginal fluids need to be produced (Samplonius, 2021). Then why do women think that this pain is normal? Why do so many women not have this information about their own body?

In 2022, some Dutch news outlets teamed up to research the orgasm gap in the Netherlands for 16-35 year-olds with an opinion poll. Shockingly, only 36% of women and 30% of men turned out to know the actual shape of the clitoris. Only 59% of women and 49% of men know that the tip of the clitoris has twice as many nerve endings than the tip of the penis. 92% of men almost always orgasm when having penetrative sex, while only 36% of women do. Of those 36%, most women emphasized that this was only the case if the clitoris is at the same time stimulated separately. In our society, it is often said that women's orgasm is just way more complicated than men's. But 91% of women do almost always orgasm from solo sex (Kamphuis, 2022). So, it seems that it only gets complicated in sexual interaction. Why is that? And if there are certain physical facts about women's bodies, just as with men's bodies, then what explains the widespread belief about women's orgasms captured by the common phrase "every woman is different"? We definitely need to understand that every person is different and there might be nuances in individual sexual desires. But why do people so commonly believe that there are special differences between individual women that do not exist between individual men?

The same opinion poll also revealed something interesting about the way people view sex: when asked what their definition of sex is, most argued that (vaginal) penetration is sex. The people who argued that sex is broader than vaginal penetration and gave a reason why they thought so, said that viewing sex as vaginal penetration is problematically heteronormative,

only because it would imply that homosexual sex is not sex (Kamphuis, 2022). But might it be problematic to view sex as vaginal penetration - and reduce everything else to foreplay - for an account of heterosexual sex itself as well?

These findings and the questions they raise seem to paint a bigger picture of a lack of common knowledge on women's sexuality. It therefore raises my research question: Is the common ignorance on women's sexuality an injustice and how does it relate to other sex and gender injustices as discussed in philosophical debates?

One might notice that I'm starting this thesis from questions based on data, instead of philosophical theory. The inspiration for this method comes from Lorna Finlayson (2020). Finlayson (2020: 2) expands on Jaggar's critique that most philosophers neglect or actively ignore real history and politics, and argues that we should start our philosophical discussions from the political reality. The clearest illustration of what she means comes from her example of discussions on abortion: Finlayson (2020: 7-9) explains that most philosophers start the discussion on abortion from the purely theoretical question whether a fetus has a right to live. But this obscures the discussion, because the goal of the discussion is to determine whether abortion - in reality - is morally permissible or not. And the reality tells us that bans on abortion have often been used to subordinate women by denying them control over their reproductive capabilities. The reality also tells us that if we ban abortion, many women will suffer or even die. The reality tells us that women do not always have access or the necessary knowledge to prevent unwanted pregnancies. The reality tells us that many women are victims of sexual abuse. And all of these realities are the reason why most feminists are "pro-choice". Not because they necessarily believe that a fetus has no right to live or is unimportant (Finlayson, 2020: 8-9). So, according to Finlayson (2020: 9-11), philosophers' objections that we need to have such 'rights'-talk for philosophical purposes, entail a profound disconnect between 'political' and 'philosophical' modes of thought, in discussions that cannot and should not be separated from the political reality.

It seems that we can combine Finlayson's arguments with Rawls' (2004: 18) method of reflective equilibrium, which holds that we should constantly test our theory through our ethical intuitions, and test our ethical intuitions through theory. Rawls (2004: 18) explains that in doing so, we can render our convictions of social justice coherent and justify them. This also means that this model is unstable, because further examination will possibly lead us to revise our judgements. But it also means that for the time being, we have done what we can. If we consider Finlayson (2020) again, here, we can see how this openness is actually what makes the reflective equilibrium so appropriate for ethics: it allows us to take

(new) information from the political reality and our intuitions on it into account. So, throughout this paper, I will constantly use examples of the (political) reality and the intuitions that they give rise to, to test whether the theory and ethical intuitions conform to the political reality.

As established, our research question is: Is the common ignorance on women's sexuality an injustice and how does it relate to other sex and gender injustices as discussed in philosophical debates? The first portion of the question will be discussed in chapter 1 and 2, the second part will be discussed in chapter 3 and 4. In the first chapter, I will combine empirical evidence on the ignorance of women's sexuality and Tuana's (2004) philosophical reflection on it with theories on patriarchal societies (Hudson et al., 2020; MacKinnon, 1987, 1993) and theories on epistemic injustice (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017; Manne, 2021), to argue that we can explain the ignorance on women's sexuality as an epistemic injustice shaped under patriarchy. In the second chapter, I will argue that epistemic injustice is both a harm in itself and results in far-reaching secondary harms, so that it seems important to consider this account in all feminist debates on sex. In the third chapter, I will review the debate on whether pornography is harmful or not, and argue that most accounts (MacKinnon, 1987, 1993; Nussbaum, 1999; Shrager, 2005) identify the harms in pornography as harms of objectification, while epistemic injustice is another harm that should be considered. In the fourth chapter, I will review the debate on the accuracy of an account of consent to explain unjust sex (Miller, 2022; Kukla, 2018), and show that we need a broader model that includes consent, negotiation and epistemic injustice. Throughout these chapters, I will constantly consider what injustices and harms epistemic injustice entails, because that is necessary in order to take the political reality into account, show the severity of the problem and come to proper conclusions.

Before proceeding, I should make two preliminary points. First, my main focus will be on countries that are perceived and perceive themselves as having some degree of sexual liberties and as (close to) having achieved gender equality, but that do have a history and present as patriarchal societies. This for example includes the USA and countries in Northern Europe. In that group of countries, I will focus on the Netherlands. The focus lies on such countries because 1) the purpose of my paper is to reveal prevalent injustices and harms towards women that might not be very visible due to the progress made in other aspects of sexual liberation and gender equality, and 2) because I am a white, affluent, Dutch woman and do not deem myself qualified to expand on cultures and experiences much different from mine. For similar reasons, and because of a lack of space and time in this paper, my focus in

epistemic injustice is on purely gendered marginalization of women, whether or not compounded by intersectional marginalization.

Second, throughout this thesis, I specifically choose to talk about “women” and “women’s sexuality”, and not “females” and “female sexuality”, because 1) as I will show, it is a gendered issue, so that gender is relevant, 2) the word “female(s)” is actually often used in a derogatory way to discriminate against trans and intersex women and reduce cisgender women to their (sexed) bodies, 3) although it is true that not all women will have vulvas (e.g. some trans or intersex women) and that there are people who have vulvas but are not women (e.g. non-binary people or trans men), this does not diminish the fact that the epistemic injustice at hand is gendered. It does raise the important question how their experiences will differ from my conclusions, but that falls outside the scope of this paper.

Chapter 1: Epistemic injustice

In this chapter, I will argue that the ignorance on women's sexuality can be explained as an epistemic injustice, an account most famously coined by Miranda Fricker. In section 1.1, I will explain the ignorance on women's sexuality in terms of epistemic injustice, by combining Nancy Tuana's empirical findings on ignorance on women's sexuality with feminist theories on patriarchal societies and Fricker & Jenkins' explanation of epistemic injustice. Then, I will argue that the epistemic injustice has led to a one-sided perspective on the common concept of sex, that is mainly based on the perspective of (white) cisgender heterosexual able-bodied men, which further facilitates the epistemic injustice. In section 1.2, I will suggest an alternative concept of sex that might contribute to solving our issue: sex as a social activity between equal and embodied persons.

1.1 Epistemic injustice surrounding women's sexuality

1.1.1 Ignorance on women's sexuality

In this section, I will introduce Tuana's (2004) analysis of scientific and societal knowledge on women's genitals and pleasure which suggests that the ignorance on women's sexuality is structural and politically motivated.

Tuana (2004) explains that until the nineteenth century, the clitoris was seen as a mainly interior version of a penis, because men's bodies were seen as the standard, the true form of human biology. When the "two-sex" model became dominant, in which women were viewed as a distinctive gender, the clitoris was still either shown as a simple unimportant nub or left out of cross-sectional images of female genitalia completely, while at that same time, displays of the penis were becoming more complex (Tuana, 2004: 199-200). In the twentieth century, Freud declared that there were two types of orgasm for women: the adult vaginal kind, and the immature clitoral orgasm, with which he distinguished internal and external genitalia (Tuana, 2004: 218).

What it comes down to, is that centuries of scientific theories have treated male pleasure and ejaculation as important to conception, and women's sexual pleasure as inessential (Tuana, 2004: 210). Tuana (2004: 210) argues that this makes sense in the context of the

“politics of sex” (i.e. patriarchal societal norms) that posits reproduction as its main function, and female sexuality as dangerous for men: well into the nineteenth century, women have been described by both scientists and popular media as more lustful than men, and their unregulated passionate sexuality the downfall of mankind¹. So, since the clitoris was seen as inessential to reproduction and merely poses a potential danger, anatomists saw no need to spend attention to its structures and sexual response, and therefore reduced it to that little external and nonreproductive nub, while considering the internal genitalia as the true genitals (Tuana, 2004: 218).

Tuana (2004: 217) does mention that the story shifted in science again in the 1960s because of the politics of feminism and the research by Masters & Johnson (1966): they argued that physiologically speaking, there is only one type of orgasm, because an orgasm that results from penetration is still traceable to clitoral stimulation (Tuana, 2004: 217). But while there seems to be a shift in science, this doesn't seem to be reflected more widely. Is this just a matter of time? Or is there something more complex going on? And although Tuana argues that political motivations affect the knowledge on women's sexuality, she doesn't explain why and how it does.

1.1.2 Epistemic injustice surrounding women's sexuality

In this section, I will argue that there is indeed something more complex going on, an injustice that structurally obstructs the spread of knowledge on women's sexuality: an epistemic injustice (as formulated by Fricker & Jenkins (2017)²) towards women's sexuality.

1.1.2.1 Epistemic injustice

For Fricker & Jenkins (2017) epistemic injustice consists of three main interconnected elements: testimonial injustice, hermeneutical marginalization and hermeneutical injustice.

¹ Tuana doesn't really expand on this or offer empirical evidence. In a footnote she mentions that she defends this claim further in her book *The Less Noble Sex* (1993). But as we will see in section 1.1.2, the existence of the societal idea that women's sexuality and reproduction should be regulated is defended more broadly by feminist philosophers, in their research on patriarchal societies, so we do not have to rely on Tuana alone here.

² Fricker & Jenkins (2017) use Fricker's original concept of epistemic injustice, but add some interesting emphasis to its relation to ignorance and the relation between testimonial injustice, hermeneutical marginalization and hermeneutical injustice, that are useful for the purpose of this paper.

Testimonial injustice “is the injustice of receiving a degree of credibility that has been reduced by some kind of prejudice.” (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 268). Testimonial injustice leads the hearer to not properly listen, understand and believe the speaker. The hearer therefore misses out on the knowledge that the speaker wanted to share (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 268). This for example happens to women who are not believed about being raped, when they are stereotyped as a slut. Since testimonial injustice is caused by prejudice, which is generally deeply rooted in society, it can lead to hermeneutical marginalization (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 268).

Hermeneutical marginalization happens when a certain social group “under-contributes to the common pool of concepts and social meanings.” (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 268). This means that certain perspectives and experiences are not included in our common understandings and concepts. For example, when we are discussing abortion rights, we are often referring to women’s rights and women’s gendered experiences and thereby excluding non-binary and transgender persons who can get pregnant, which suggests that they are hermeneutically marginalized.

Hermeneutical marginalization, in turn, leads to hermeneutical injustice. Hermeneutical injustice is the injustice of not being able “to render a significant social experience intelligible (to oneself and/or to others)” (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 268). For example, only after the term sexual harassment had become widely known, women were able to speak up about many instances of sexual harassment. Without the proper concepts and the meaningful implication of having such concepts - that it is a phenomenon that happens to people (especially women) often, they apparently couldn’t properly explain it or even understand it themselves (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 276).

Importantly, Fricker & Jenkins (2017: 270-271) emphasize that epistemic injustice also produces *practical* ignorance, a lack of conceptual know-how: hermeneutical marginalization causes other groups to miss out on the *competences* needed to understand the social experiences of the marginalized group, because they miss the proper contextual information to understand them. So the preservation of ignorance “may often entail further missed epistemic opportunity to better shape or inferentially enrich one’s belief system” (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 270). This leaves the speakers who do have these competencies to suffer from “an unjust deficit of communicative intelligibility at the hands of those who lack such competencies” (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 270-271). For example, if the epistemic injustice towards trans people leads hearers to not understand the experience of being trans and how

it differs from being a drag queen or being non-binary, that will also leave them unable to understand specific injustices towards them, such as the inability to change their names and gender in passports, or why being misgendered or deadnamed is disrespectful and harmful. The lack of understanding competencies of the hearer therefore leads to communicative intelligibility of the speaker: even if they have found the proper concepts to explain their experiences, they can still not make themselves heard.

1.1.2.2 Epistemic injustice surrounding women's sexuality

I will now use Fricker & Jenkinson's account of epistemic injustice to explain the ignorance on women's sexuality. If we want to fully explain the epistemic injustice at play in the "politics of ignorance" that Tuana (2004) describes, we need to first take a step back to the more general prejudice against women in patriarchal societies that can account for the testimonial injustice - since Fricker & Jenkins identify this as the start of epistemic injustice.

There are many feminist theories on patriarchal societies, but what they all generally agree on, is that gender norms serve to support these systems that benefit men. For example, Hudson et al. (2021: 21-24, 28, 31) argues that men pose themselves as protectors against out-group violence (by other men), so that women are held responsible to reproduce the patriline (the in-group) through their reproductive capabilities. And because men present themselves as protectors, women must pay a price (Hudson et al., 2020: 31). In Kate Manne's words, women are labeled as "givers": she "is then obliged to offer love, sex, attention, affection and admiration, as well as other forms of emotional, social, reproductive and nurturing labor." (Hudson et al., 2020: 32). Catherine MacKinnon, whose work we will further discuss in the chapter on pornography, similarly argues that under patriarchy, women are subordinated through gender roles: "men are depicted as active and dominant, doing things and getting what they want, while women are depicted as more passive and responsive, doing what men would want and responding to men's explicit or implicit desires and decisions." (Earp et al., 2022: 489-490).

The prejudice against women to which these gender roles lead, then, holds that women are caring creatures whose main task is reproduction and caring for their husband and children. So, if women's sexuality is considered irrelevant to reproduction, as Tuana (2004) explains, women are not listened to or given credibility when they try to speak about their sexual experiences. This explains how prejudice and testimonial injustice lead to the hermeneutical marginalization of women concerning their own sexuality in two ways: 1) because women

are reduced to their reproductive and caring capabilities, they have long been denied access to further education, science and powerful societal positions such as political ones, since their word is rendered irrelevant to science, politics and the public realm in general, so that they often couldn't speak in this realm at all, and 2) since women's gender role is to respond to men's sexual desires and their own sexuality only counts insofar it leads to reproduction, their sexual experiences have been ignored. Therefore, women cannot contribute to the common pool of concepts and social meanings about sex as much as men, which in turn leads to hermeneutical injustice: women are unable to gather the proper information and concepts to understand their own sexuality or communicate about it, which in turn obstructs the possibility of obtaining knowledge more generally.

Although it is clear that epistemic injustice renders the ignorance on women's sexuality extremely structural, one might nevertheless wonder why the ignorance on women's sexuality is still this common, even though there has been a shift in science like Tuana (2004) mentions, women being sexually active (within or outside of relationships) is more and more normalized and the full shape of the clitoris is now shown in high school biology books. It might raise the question whether the problem is not already being solved and it just takes some more time. The second section will answer these remaining questions.

1.1.2.3 One perspective as the truth about sex

In this section, I will argue - using Manne's (2021) and Haraway's (1988) ideas, that when it comes to sex, we seem to be taking one perspective on sex to be defining for what sex "objectively" is: the perspective of the heterosexual cisgender man, which consists of sex as procreation. And every finding that could possibly contradict this view or adjust it, doesn't have much effect, because it is again (via epistemic injustice) explained within the terms of that "objective" definition of sex. This is a result of and further perpetuates the epistemic injustice concerning women's sexuality. It is the last piece of the puzzle of why the ignorance on women's sexuality is still so prevalent, despite a rise in feminism and gender equality more broadly.

Kate Manne argues that there's one more component to epistemic injustice: epistemic entitlement. Manne (2021: 140) describes epistemic entitlement as taking "the conversational position of the knower by default: to be the one who dispenses information, offers corrections, and authoritatively issues explanations." (Manne, 2021: 140). This becomes objectionable when the person does not actually know more than others, or might

even know less, but doesn't even consider that possibility. Manne (2021: 140-141) acknowledges that this concept is closely linked to testimonial injustice, but testimonial injustice is more about dismissing a less privileged speaker, while epistemic entitlement "involves peremptorily assuming greater authority to speak" (Manne, 2021: 140-141). Epistemic entitlement therefore often precedes and causes testimonial injustice. Now we can see how the idea that we should view sex as reproduction, as identified by Tuana (2004), comes from an idea of sex from men's perspective as the whole truth to start with, which in turn fuels the testimonial injustice towards women. So, not only women's sexuality has been obscured by epistemic injustice, but our concept of sex itself as well. And since men's sexual pleasure is fulfilled through the concept of sex as reproduction, they would not really have a reason to doubt or want to doubt this concept of sex.

In her article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," Haraway (1988) argues that the use of the concept of objectivity is usually incomplete. Objectivity as it occurs in science, among others, is based on the perspectives of predominantly Western white males (Haraway, 1988: 10). Haraway (1988: 8) rejects absolutism without adopting relativism: she argues that we can only speak of objectivity when we have arrived at knowledge through different perspectives, because we otherwise omit relevant context. She therefore argues that the feminist conception of objectivity amounts to "situated knowledges".

Considering Haraway's (1988) findings, we can see how the concept of sex as reproduction is formed by (the perspective of) heterosexual cisgender men, but is treated as the one objective truth about sex. This is a direct result of hermeneutical marginalization (caused by epistemic entitlement and testimonial injustice in turn) and part of the hermeneutical injustice: when potential contributions of the hermeneutically marginalized group remain private, other groups miss out on the competences needed to understand the social experiences of the group (Fricker & Jenkins: 270-271). Such a one-sided definition of sex further eliminates competences to understand the social experiences of women because it renders its existence completely invisible, when the one-sided definition is considered to be the objective truth.³ To be clear: one might then still acknowledge other perspectives as subjective experiences (obviously, a man does know that sex feels different for a woman), but not as independent from what they themselves believe sex itself to be.

³ Fricker & Jenkins (2017) mainly focus on how missing out on information about the world from other experiences leads to missing out on learning certain concepts needed to understand other experiences as a loss in competences, but I think that the more specific problem of treating one definition or concept of an act as the objective truth about that act, fits into this theory neatly and reveals an even more structural loss of competences to understand others.

This reveals the problem I want to address more specifically: even if information about the clitoris is becoming common knowledge more and more (as I would argue is actually happening, both through the shift in science in the 1960s that Tuana described, and through contemporary feminism that has pushed for, for example, improvement of high school biology books in the Netherlands), the epistemic injustice still majorly influences our knowledge and ignorance. Sex is still generally understood as reproduction and knowledge about women's sexuality and genitals is often explained within this concept of sex. Let us consider what this looks like.

The view of sex as reproduction explains why direct stimulation of the clitoris is constantly reduced to the realm of 'foreplay', suggesting that it is not sex itself and therefore, optional. Foreplay and other wishes that women often do voice such as wanting the whole process of sex to go slower, asking men to include soft and slower treatment of their bodies, or offering "aftercare" - something that basically means treating one another as valuable human beings one just shared an intimate experience with, after sex - are very often reduced to women supposedly wanting to romanticize sex⁴, which again, excludes women's perspective on sex from the definition of sex and puts it into a different realm: that of romance.

One might wonder if the solution is, then, to define sex as a romantic activity, as to include women's wishes that are so often called romantic wishes. However, the reduction of women's sexual wishes to romantic wishes, actually *is* a misrepresentation of women's sexuality within epistemic injustice. I'm not arguing that romance in sex could not be a valid desire in sexual encounters. But many of these preferences in sex such as going slower or handling women's bodies softer, are actually a physical desire for women or, as I will further argue in section 1.2, possibly a desire for the social experience that sex is or can be. In that case, it might be that romance is not even involved in their desires.

First of all, this means that we shouldn't reduce sex to romance either. Romance is simply an individual sexual desire that is context-dependent, or in simpler words: one of the ways to have and experience sex. But more importantly, for the purpose of this paper, we need to consider how this misrepresentation is caused by and is perpetuating epistemic injustice.

⁴ Women themselves might even explain it to men as "romance" because they either don't know why it actually feels better or lack the proper concepts to describe it due to hermeneutical injustice.

Tuana (2004: 220-222) writes: "If we have for centuries insisted that the proper function of sexuality is reproduction, then it is crucial to "civilize" it, that is, to put it in service of family values." (Tuana, 2004: 220). Therefore, evolutionary theorists ignored the orgasmic ability of female apes and positioned women's orgasm as something uniquely human: they opted for the idea that the human female orgasm serves to facilitate bonding and long term relationships between sexes, so that it is a type of reward and motivation for having frequent intercourse with one person (monogamy), to ensure reproduction, male cooperation and male assistance with rearing children (Tuana, 2004: 220-222). Ergo: women want sex for romantic reasons. In reality, however, many female apes orgasm too, and it's actually the more monogamous primate species who do not show a lot of signs of female orgasms (Tuana, 2004: 220-222). Furthermore, female orgasm through vaginal penetration is very rare, in both humans and nonhuman primates. It is clear that they orgasm much more from any additional clitoral stimulation (Tuana, 2004: 222). Relatedly, the often told evolutionary tale is that men could procreate far more than women, so that "in males at least, the desire for "sex for sex's sake," the taste for sex without emotional attachment, very likely has been genetically reinforced" (Tuana, 2004: 223). But the facts show us that there is not such a dramatic difference in reproductive potential between males and females. Since men cannot orgasm more than 3.5 times per week without reducing reproductive efficacy, but women can orgasm twenty to fifty times per sexual encounter, it might be more logical to argue that women's orgasm serves to have sex with many different men, to ensure sperm competition. Or it could be argued that sex doesn't have an exclusively reproductive role and it has other functions: when we look at bonobos, for example, we can see that their female sexuality is also "a means of assuring societal harmony and diffusing tensions or as a way to ensure the assistance of others, and not just male others, in procuring food and assisting in the care of offspring." (Tuana, 2004: 223-224). But, as Tuana (2004: 224) says: these stories are not the ones that are told.

So, because our society favors women's sexuality as a function of family values, wanting romance is seen as a valid view on sex in romantic contexts. However, if any social or physical sexual preference of women is reduced to romance and we generally believe that romance is not an inherent part of sex, the romance misrepresentation of women's sexuality becomes a weapon of epistemic injustice towards women's sexuality: it makes it seem as if women's sexual preferences have no place in many instances of sex, such as one-night-stands, or that even in a long-term relationship women should not always expect these preferences to be fulfilled, because sometimes "sex is just sex", in the way it is defined by men in our society.

The romance misrepresentation of women's sexuality shows how the prevalent concept of sex as reproduction creates a vicious cycle of epistemic injustice. Even if we fix the science about women's bodies, the issue is not resolved, because the information is either commonly ignored or misrepresented as to fit within the concept of sex as reproduction. Therefore, we need a new account of what sex is.

It seems that we should follow Haraway (1988) and acquire this new concept of sex through situated knowledges in order to reach objectivity: as we have seen in the introduction, LGBTQIA+ activism already contributes to reimagining our concept of sex as something broader than vaginal penetration, but we also specifically need to emphasize (heterosexual cisgender) women's experiences in sex, because otherwise, sex as reproduction and therefore penetration, might still be accepted as the norm for heterosexual sex. This could in turn also hurt the understanding of the sexualities of the LGBTQIA+ community, because it might maintain heterosexual sex as penetration as the actual form of sex, and only accept LGBTQIA+ experiences of sex as exceptions, or as mirroring "actual sex" that just looks differently because the bodies that come together do not allow for penis-in-vagina-penetration, instead of seeing these instances of sex as part of what sex is itself.

1.2 Sex as a social activity

So the question now is, if sex as reproduction is a one-sided perspective on sex, what concept of sex could we use that includes every perspective on sex without epistemic injustice and without including morally objectionable definitions, activities or concepts. I would argue that this new definition should 1) be inclusive to all (morally permissible) perspectives on sex, 2) exclude coercion and deception, 3) exclude objectification and other unequal and morally objectionable treatment of persons, 4) exclude epistemic injustice and its secondary harms as much as possible⁵, and 5) be empowering.⁶ Given these conditions, I conclude that we should move towards a concept of sex as a social activity between embodied equals who consent to sex.

⁵ As I will argue in chapter 3, with certain instances of epistemic injustice in sex, that are outside of the control of the agents involved, we should rather consider the sex to be unjustly flawed than morally impermissible.

⁶ These conditions are not just based on the first chapter, but on this thesis as a whole. It might become more clear for the reader where these exact conditions and my alternative definition come from, in the following chapters.

The definition of sex as a social activity between embodied equals who consent to sex includes the possibility to have romantic sex, casual sex, reproductive sex, any non-heterosexual sex and sex with disabled persons, so that it allows for any morally permissible perspective to be included, while excluding non-consensual sex (rape) and the instrumental use of someone else for one's own pleasure (objectification), since it would then no longer be social or between embodied equals. It acknowledges people as embodied persons whose personal sexual desires and experiences are relevant to the shared experience, so that agents omit epistemic injustice insofar as they can be held epistemically responsible for. Furthermore, we can see how epistemic injustice obstructs the sociality and equality in sex: it becomes hard to genuinely engage with one another if the agents are unable to understand each other's perspective and their own properly, and the agents' beliefs about sex are formed by epistemic injustice. Therefore, the concept of sex as a social activity between equal and embodied persons problematizes epistemic injustice, without placing blame on the agents for ignorance that is outside of their control. I will elaborate on this in chapter 3. This new concept also opens up heterosexual sex to be a more equal and fulfilling experience for both parties, because sex between two or more people who are enjoying the activity *together* allows for other and deeper experiences than just bodily pleasure, such as more interaction, play or different types of acts. So it allows space for understanding women's sexual wishes in other terms than just romance, since some of the wishes women frequently voice, such as aftercare after a one-night-stand, might be better explained as a need for sociality in sex. Lastly, viewing sex as a social activity might be helpful in empowering women and other hermeneutically marginalized groups in their sexual positions. The reason that my definition ends with "who consent to sex" is in order to make the definition specific (so that it is not just any social activity) without filling in what does and doesn't fall under sex.

One might object that a concept of sex as a social activity might exclude its reproductive function. I would argue that it doesn't, because even when the goal of an instance of sex is reproduction, the act itself still needs to be considered a social activity in order to be morally sound.

A common joke on the internet (mainly Tiktok) is that lesbians claim to often have sex for hours. Heterosexual women often respond confused, saying that they don't think they would even want that, because they would get tired, bored or uncomfortable. Lesbian women in turn respond that that is because heterosexual women have no idea of the possibilities in sex and what such hourly long sex looks like, so the problem lies in them having heterosexual sex with men. This response is very interesting in the light of epistemic

injustice. It raises the question why lesbian sex would be so different. For one, of course, women do know more about women's bodies than men do, so that women have a better idea of what is pleasurable for the women they are having sex with. It also makes it easier to communicate about preferences with someone who understands them more easily because they have similar bodily experiences. Secondly, the sex can be oriented at women's preferences alone, which might cause less conflict between the desires of the persons involved than between a man and a woman. Thirdly, in homosexual sex there are less constraints by patriarchal heterosexual accounts of sex and women's sexuality, because there is no standard penis-in-vagina sex as a starting point. Another possible explanation would be that it has something to do with the fact that sex between women involves everyone having equal positions, which allows for more freedom and agency and connection, because it is easier to communicate about preferences with someone on an equal standing, and because women will generally objectify each other less and consider the other person as embodied more often, because they can better identify with them. We can see, however, how viewing sex as a social activity between embodied persons, then, might bring men and women involved in heterosexual closer to knowing more possibilities in sex and develop an experience that might look different than lesbian sex, but as fulfilling.

My claim is that this concept of sex can be a first step, or a part of the solution for epistemic injustice. It is not a definitive claim about what sex is. After all, we cannot conclude this from my - a heterosexual cisgender white woman in her twenties - perspective alone. However, considering the arguments I made above, I think it might be close to the concept we would come up with if we were to include the perspectives on sex of the hermeneutically marginalized: it leaves almost everything open, but excludes coercion, objectionable inequality and objectification. Developing a just account of sex is a major task, so I am just scratching the surface here. To the best of my knowledge, this account of sex has not been defended before, so that it offers a proper starting point to reflect on epistemic injustice and alternative ways of thinking that omit this injustice.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the common ignorance on women's sexuality is an epistemic injustice, caused by patriarchal gender norms that men posed through their epistemic entitlement. By emphasizing Manne's (2021) epistemic entitlement and Haraway's (1988) concept of feminist objectivity, I have argued that this epistemic injustice has caused

us to believe that the definition of sex as reproduction is the one true objective concept of sex, which further causes epistemic injustice towards perspectives from people other than cisgender heterosexual men, by misrepresenting their experiences. Lastly, I have suggested to move towards a concept of sex as a social activity between equal and embodied persons who consent to sex, so that all perspectives can be included respectfully and rape and objectification can be excluded of our concept of sex - or at least what sex *should* be.

Chapter 2: Harms

In this chapter, I will explain what harms appear with the epistemic injustice surrounding women's sexuality, and I will argue that this shows that we should take these injustices and harms into account in the philosophical debates about sex and sexuality.

2.1 The intrinsic harms of epistemic injustice

As Fricker & Jenkins (2017: 273-274) have argued, epistemic injustice is an injustice in itself: with testimonial injustice, someone is denied as being a knower. Fricker & Jenkins (2017: 273) use the example of how trans persons are unable to contribute to the discourse on transgender healthcare, and "rather than being seen as experts on their own lives their voices were effectively overridden by those of cis people with medical training but no first-hand experience of being a trans person." (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 273). In the case of women and their accounts on sex and their own sexuality, they are similarly denied as knowers of their own experience.

With hermeneutical injustice, there's the intrinsic harm of the unjust deficit of intelligibility (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 274), which means that persons who are hermeneutically marginalized are unable to render their experiences intelligible (for themselves and/or towards others) for unjust reasons. In the case of the epistemic injustice towards women, that means that women cannot understand everything about their sexuality or have others understand them. Furthermore, women might find it hard to communicate with men about their desires, because there's so little attention and common knowledge in society on their sexuality. They might also feel ashamed because of their sexuality in general or of specific desires, because there's so little representation of women's wants and needs, or representation of experiences of sex outside the perceived 'objective' concept of sex as reproduction. In chapter 2 I will further argue that the representation of women's sexuality that exists in mainstream pornography, for example, is only shown through the perspective of men. Women therefore don't have the luxury of being able to build on fantasies and bodily desires that are well-known in society, the way that men can. This can cause a huge epistemic discomfort and/or frustration in the sex lives of women. Importantly, it is also an injustice that women need to communicate so much about their sexual pleasure and desires in order to have their desires fulfilled, while men can rely much more on women's (and

everyone else's) knowledge of their pleasure - or don't even need to because the concept of sex as reproduction already secures their pleasure. It is often said in public debates about women's sexual pleasure and consent, that women just need to "toughen up" and stand up for themselves, because men (can) do it too. But from the perspective of epistemic injustice, it has become clear that women need to have a lot more courage and intelligence to stand up for their desires than men do. It is harmful to expect this much strength from women (especially young women who are still developing themselves), while society could make it a lot easier for them.

2.2 Secondary harms

In addition to epistemic harms, there are also secondary and non-epistemic harms surrounding epistemic injustice. Looking into these harms helps us to further understand why the epistemic injustice related to women's sexuality is problematic. I will get into six types of harms.

2.2.1 Bodily autonomy

Rebecca Kukla (2018) argues that "Positive bodily agency is as much a component of autonomy as is negative freedom from unwanted bodily intrusion." (Kukla, 2018: 71). So if we consider bodily autonomy to be important, and epistemic injustice contributes to women being unable to fully understand and properly communicate about their sexuality so that they experience less pleasure and comfort, that means that their positive bodily agency is limited and we should consider this to be harmful.

2.2.2 Pleasure and comfort in sex

Quite obviously, ignorance on women's sexuality and their bodies leads to less pleasure, comfort and sexual fulfillment for women. This is not only a result of limitations in bodily autonomy for women, but also a harm itself. Not because women or people in general have

some right to sexual pleasure from others⁷, but because women experience less pleasure and comfort, or their pleasure and comfort is delayed (most women do figure out more about their sexuality through time and experience) for unjust reasons (i.e. due to inequality and epistemic injustice). Important here is that women do not only experience less pleasure and comfort in comparison to what they could ultimately experience, but also in comparison to men: as we have seen with the workings of epistemic injustice, the focus on men's sexual pleasure as the objective truth about sex, directly leads to less pleasure for women.

Furthermore, the ignorance on women's sexuality, genitals and alternative perspectives on sex often lead to discomfort, as mentioned in the introduction already: many women experience pain during penetration, because the penetration started before their bodies were aroused enough to comfortably (and pleasurably) engage in vaginal penetration. It might also lead to men handling the clitoris too roughly in direct stimulation, if they do not know how sensitive the clitoris is and that this is significantly different from men's sexual experiences.

2.2.3 Access to healthcare

Fricker & Jenkins (2017: 274) provide an example of a secondary harm to trans people specifically: "difficulty in rendering their identities intelligible to medical practitioners has meant that trans people have found it hard to access medical care related to transition." (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 274). To put this harm in more general terms, we could argue that certain types of epistemic injustice may lead to obstructions of access to proper healthcare. That seems to be true for women in regards to their sexual health. For example, women risk getting UTI's or vaginal yeast infections from sex or soap (which young women often use because they are ashamed of the smell of their vulva, in turn because of epistemic injustice towards women's sexuality and bodies), but if they do not know what the issue is or where it comes from, because they don't know everything about their genitals, it will be hard to prevent or treat. The same goes for the enormous amount of women who experience pain during vaginal penetration, as mentioned in the introduction: if they don't know that it isn't normal, they can't change anything about it. Especially if doctors don't take their experiences seriously enough. For example, many women with vaginismus or other forms of pain in sex

⁷ As mentioned in the introduction, I believe Finlayson to be right that 'rights'-talk obscures ethical discussions. Furthermore, this would lead to problems because rights entail duties, and we wouldn't want to end up arguing that people owe each other sex.

tell us that their doctor was uncomfortable with talking about their sexual experiences, didn't refer them to a sexologist or suggested that drinking some wine beforehand might help (Gijzen, 2022; Koch, 2022). Another obstruction might be gender norm enforcement through epistemic injustice. As shown in section 2, the focus in the common concept of sex lies on men's sexual pleasure and their high libido, and on women's reproductive capabilities and tendency for monogamous relationships. Therefore, women are held to be responsible for choosing the proper partner and regulating their reproduction. This creates a bigger risk for women to get pregnant or to get STD's or UTI's, because many men do not feel responsible to wear a condom or talk about other forms of birth control, for example. Also, these gender norms are often enforced via slut-shaming and victim-blaming, which might make access to healthcare (concerning birth control, pain during sex, STD's, UTI's, etc.) difficult because women are afraid to reach out because they might be judged.

2.2.4 Identity related harms

According to Fricker & Jenkins (2017: 274-275), hermeneutical injustice can result in identity related harm. This can appear as not being socially counted as one identifies (through stereotypes, for example), or as having issues in how one sees themselves because their self-knowledge is lacking or delayed. (Fricker & Jenkins, 2017: 274-275).

In line with Fricker & Jenkins (2017), I would argue that a lack of common knowledge about women's bodies and sexuality, leads to identity related harms: people are embodied persons (as Anne Philips (2013) reminds us), so their bodily experiences are part of their identity. They should therefore have the means to make sense of these bodily experiences and not be unjustly delayed in doing so.

Furthermore, gender norms about women's sexuality (such as women having to be submissive in sex, desire sex less than men, except for in response to their monogamous partner) might make women feel like they should adhere to such standards, even though they don't identify with it. Such stereotypes are enforced through slut-shaming, shaming women (married women and mothers specifically) for not wanting to have sex with their husband (even if this might be a response to experiencing less pleasure than men in sex because of epistemic injustice⁸), or praising them for being "not like other girls" when they

⁸ According to Wetzel et al., (2022) the orgasm frequency for cisgender men and women predicts how much desire and expectation they have for orgasms in the future. And since women reach orgasm

are only sexually active within a monogamous relationship. Women might then not only be treated differently than they identify, they might also develop issues in how they view themselves, their sexuality and their gender, so that it might even fuel misogyny in women (Means, 2021; Roe, 2020).

2.2.5 Consent

The epistemic injustice at hand leads to issues surrounding consent, both because the one-sided perspective on sex leads people to believe that there is no need to ask for consent, and because epistemic injustice and the secondary harms mentioned above might lead to women being unable to communicate properly about their genuine boundaries and desires. This topic of consent will be further discussed in chapter 3.

2.2.6 Harms for the hermeneutically marginalized

In this paper, I am focusing on the epistemic injustice towards women as a purely gendered issue. We should, however, not forget that other hermeneutically marginalized groups such as the LGBTQIA+ community and disabled people, experience epistemic injustice concerning their sexualities. And of course, many of them are women and are therefore intersectionally affected. For example, the LGBTQIA+ community is mainly affected in the sense that they are judged and discriminated against on a very deep level, because they are seen as doing something unnatural, and they also lack a lot of knowledge and understanding because sex education doesn't include homosexual sex, the meaning of sex for asexual persons, sex for people with intersex bodies, sex for non-binary and transgender people, etc. (see Hall (2017)). Disabled people are affected by epistemic injustice in the sense that they are often infantilized or considered completely asexual or not able to have sex, so that their sexuality is even more invisible than women's sexuality, which makes it even harder to learn about their bodies, sexuality and sexual identity (see MacKenzie (2018)). Again, this proves why Haraway's contribution of feminist objectivities is so important to take into account in this issue. Specific research on these and other marginalized groups is necessary to extend our knowledge on the epistemic injustice involved in sex. Luckily, Hall (2017) and MacKenzie (2018) offer a starting point.

less than men in heterosexual relationships, they lower their expectations - instead of fighting the injustice here.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that this epistemic injustice leads to inherent harms of persons being denied as knowers or being denied the opportunity to properly communicate about their perspectives, and secondary harms such as harms to physical and mental health, pleasure and comfort in sex, identity related harms and issues concerning consent. Considering these harms related to epistemic injustice, it seems important to review philosophical feminist debates on topics related to sex and sexuality from the perspective of epistemic injustice, to see if anything is overlooked. Therefore, I will review the debate on pornography and the debate on consent in the next chapters of this paper.

Chapter 3: Pornography

Anti-porn feminists like Catherine MacKinnon have argued that pornography inherently entails treating women as objects, while moderate and sex (work) positive philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Laurie Shrage have argued that the objectification in pornography isn't or isn't always harmful. However, both sides have one thing in common: they believe that if there are any harms specific to pornography, they involve sexual objectification.

Philosopher Amia Srinivasan (2021) points out that the focus on violent pornography in the debates on pornography, often results in mainstream pornography being overlooked, i.e.

“good old-fashioned straight ‘strip-blow-fuck-cum’ porn - [...] the kind where hot blondes suck dicks, get fucked hard, told that they like it, and end up with semen on their face. This sort of porn conveys the message that women are there to be fucked, and that they love it: that tying women up, hitting them or overpowering them is generally unnecessary.” (Srinivasan, 2021: 58).

Srinivasan's observation that most mainstream pornography conveys the message that women *like* to have sex in this male-oriented way, raises the question if it really shows objectification or if there's something else going on. In this chapter I will argue that although objectification might be a harm that happens in pornography and sex more generally, there's another type of injustice that can better account for the harms in mainstream pornography: epistemic injustice and its consequences. By proving this, we will find that the anti-porn feminist and the sex (work) positive feminists might not need to be so opposed. If we work in the theory of epistemic injustice, we can find that they are both right in some regards and can strengthen each other's theories.

3.1 Objectification as insufficient to account for the harms

3.1.1 MacKinnon's anti-porn view on objectification

In this section, I will explain Catherine MacKinnon's (1987; 1993) anti-porn view and argue that my account of epistemic injustice combined with Srinivasan's and parts of MacKinnon's own findings reveal that objectification is not the only problem in pornography.

MacKinnon (1987; 1993) argues that pornography is harmful, because it is a male-dominated sphere shaped under patriarchy, which is why it depicts the subordination of women through sexual objectification: “the personhood of women becomes secondary to their appearance and sexual desirability” (Earp et al., 2022: 182). The scenes in pornography therefore feed into the male rape fantasy that women like to be treated this way (MacKinnon, 1993). MacKinnon (1993) argues that this leads to four ways in which pornography is harmful:

1) the perpetuation of women’s subordination. For MacKinnon (1987), the objectification in pornography leads to seeing and treating women’s humanity and agency as less deserving of respect, which makes it a crucial mechanism to reinforce patriarchal gender norms (Earp, et al., 2022: 489-490);

2) the harm to porn actresses. (Srinivasan, 2021: 36). Since the harmful sex in pornography is real, porn actresses are the ones who endure this treatment (MacKinnon, 1993: 105). MacKinnon (1993: 107) does acknowledge that some women might choose this profession, but thinks the actual sex remains problematic, because porn actresses are not choosing to have this particular type of sex because they like it. They just choose to do it for payment. And since MacKinnon (1993: 103) claims that all pornography is made under gender and sex inequality and especially targets poor, homeless, pimped women who were sexually abused as children, it remains coercive;

3) the shaping of men’s sexual desires in harmful ways to women. MacKinnon (1993: 104) argues that pornography plays into sexual desires of men and makes men want to perform these acts themselves. “It eroticizes male dominance and female submissiveness, and puts this forward as the apparent truth about sex.” (MacKinnon 1987: 171);

4) Lastly, MacKinnon (1993: 95-96) also seems to acknowledge a testimonial injustice around pornography, although she doesn’t use the term: when (abused) women speak out against what they see happening in pornography, they are told that pornographic images are not the problem, because they are just an idea, not an actual harm. She writes: “You learn that language does not belong to you, that you cannot use it to say what you know, that knowledge is not what you learn from your life, that information is not made out of your experience.” (MacKinnon, 1993: 96).

3.1.2 Epistemic injustice in pornography

Although MacKinnon (1987; 1993) talks about violent and abusive pornography, it is quite clear that she does include mainstream pornography in that. After all, she argues that (problematic) pornography is generally male-dominated and shaped under patriarchy, and she notices just like Srinivasan (2021) that most pornography depicts women as enjoying the way they are treated, even though they are merely serving men's pleasures and their personhood is made secondary in these scenes. MacKinnon (1993: 107) argues that porn consumers often defend such porn scenes by claiming that it is not actually rape, because the pleasure in the scene is real. They need to believe this because "the consumer's pleasure requires that the scenario conform to the male rape fantasy, which requires him to abuse her and her to like it." (MacKinnon, 1993: 107). So here, she quite clearly argues that the idea that women actually like the sexual acts that are happening, is generally crucial for men's enjoyment of pornography. That is the same thing as Srinivasan describes about mainstream pornography. But this seems to conflict with her concept of objectification.

Linda LeMoncheck (1997: 133) argues that the sexual fantasies in pornography imply that women's subjectivities are important to the consumers, because the fantasy of overcoming a woman's will implies that she has a will to overcome. And the fantasy that women like to be treated in this way implies that they have desires that men's sexual desires fulfill. So if the subjective experience of women is crucial to this fantasy, women's needs and desires aren't disregarded. We should then take into consideration why women's pleasure in conformity to men's wishes matters so greatly to men.

MacKinnon (1987; 1993) would probably answer that this is all part of the subordination of women: it makes it easier to use women if our society generally believes that they secretly like it. But such an idea makes it seem as if men are consciously and deliberately keeping the patriarchal society intact and do not actually believe in or desire the male rape fantasy. It seems much more plausible that men desire women's confirmation because their worldview and self-image is impacted by the patriarchal society as well. We shouldn't underestimate the fragility of men's egos and epistemic certainty in patriarchal societies that put them forward as heroes with epistemic entitlement, without them having to do anything for it. The inspiration for this argument comes from De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and her concept of woman as "the Other" (as explained by Lopes (2022: 11, 13-14)). De Beauvoir believes that in patriarchal societies, men view themselves as heroic subjects and never as objects of opinion, because that is how the patriarchy presents them. But in order to keep

believing in this fantasy, they need confirmation, and they use women to get it. They do so by viewing women as both objects and subjects. While Beauvoir argues that women are indeed subordinated through objectification, in that men view women as objects that can be overcome, so that they can defy women's criticism, she argues that men view women as subjects when they praise them, because only then, they can truly feel like the heroic subjects that they think they are (Lopes, 2021: 11, 13-14).

I would argue that in pornography, that is exactly the appeal: women that like whatever men like to do with them in sex, perfectly confirm the comfortable beneficial positions men grew up in, so that although in our society in general, we are acknowledging women's perspective more and more, in pornography, we get the confirmation from women that sex is just this one thing, and women love how men can make them feel.

It seems, then, that mainstream pornography is often not convincing men that women are violable, but that sex never violates women because women actually want sex in the way that men understand it and want it. This means that in mainstream pornography, the problem might not just be objectification, but the misrepresentation of women's sexuality, which is an instance of epistemic injustice: the different experience and perspective on sex of women is denied, and women's sexuality is aligned or replaced with men's sexuality, so that women's actual sexuality is made to be invisible. And precisely because this misrepresentation of women's pleasure is portrayed as women's autonomous and subjective experience, it makes the wrongful treatment of women in sex invisible and confirms men's "objective" truth about sex. This entails that such pornography can easily survive and reinforce epistemic injustice in countries such as the Netherlands in which people generally believe that gender equality is (almost) achieved. So even though I would agree with Mackinnon that this portrayal of women allows for treating women however men want, that is not (just) because they are objectified, but because they are misrepresented.

I am not arguing that objectification never happens in pornography. There's simply only objectification insofar that women's subjectivity or will is disregarded. So, there might be objectification in scenes where a woman shows no signs of pleasure or her pleasure is rendered irrelevant altogether.⁹ There might even be a partial instance of objectification in the mainstream pornographic scenes in which women do not actively consent to sex, or (initially) refuse sex because of non-sexual reasons such as incest or adultery, but are

⁹ In section 2.2 I will show that it is not objectification if the porn actress did consent under proper circumstances and the context allows viewers to understand that this is a mere play of objectification.

nevertheless forced and then portrayed as enjoying the sex. This is partially objectification because the non-sexual part of a woman's will or their initial sexual will is rendered irrelevant, but mainly epistemic injustice because women's sexuality is misrepresented and used to excuse the objectification as if it's not truly objectification: it depicts women as reluctant or passive in sex but always enjoying it when men trigger their sexuality, so that it overpowers their initial will. That way, it serves men's rape fantasy that confirms their position: women are objectified in the sense that they can be overcome, and considered subjects through their praise. The objectification that happens in rape is then excused by the misrepresentation of women's sexuality. There might also be cases of epistemic injustice alone, when a woman is portrayed as physically liking the sex even though her body is treated in ways that aren't pleasurable to her. So, we need to take epistemic injustice into account to account for all harms in pornography.

3.2 Harmless pornography(?)

In this section, I will consider the more moderate and sex work positive views of Martha Nussbaum (1999) and Laurie Shrage (2005), who have critiqued MacKinnon by arguing that there is space for unproblematic and even delightful objectification in sex and pornography. I will, however, argue that LeMoncheck's and my argument that there's no objectification insofar as a woman's subjective experience and will is integral to the situation, apply to their idea of "delightful objectification" as well, so that we can conclude that this is not actually objectification. I will then argue that as long as there is epistemic injustice at play, such pornographic scenes are nonetheless morally objectionable.

Nussbaum (1999: 218-219) argues that objectification is a broad concept that involves variable combinations of treating someone as an instrument, as inert, lacking in agency, fungible, violable, denying their autonomy or subjectivity, or treating them as if one owns them. Although the *mere* instrumental treatment of others is always morally objectionable because it involves denying someone's status of being an end in themselves, there are many forms of objectification that are not morally objectionable, including in sex and pornography. Under the right circumstances and intentions objectification might actually be an especially pleasant component to sex (Nussbaum, 1999: 219):

Nussbaum (1999: 228-233) argues that when both parties put aside some of their individuality and autonomy and see each other in terms of their bodily parts, in the absence

of mere instrumentality (thereby excluding non-consensual sex), they are not necessarily denying each other's humanity. That is because mutual vulnerability through surrendering some of our autonomy, agency and subjectivity can free us from inhibitions towards each other and allows for true communication and receptivity through a deep trust. A loss of subjectivity during sex is frequently "accompanied by an intense concern for the subjectivity of the partner at other moments, because the lover is intensely focused on the moods and wishes of that one person, whose states mean so much for his or her own." (Nussbaum, 1999: 230). Furthermore, Nussbaum (1999: 231) emphasizes that someone's bodily parts are actually a part of the person and have some individuality to them, so that focusing on them doesn't negate the person the bodily parts belong to. So, although Nussbaum (1999: 231) agrees with MacKinnon that sexuality is not free from social influences of our society and pornography does play a harmful role in this when it shows the treatment of women as mere instruments, she believes that there is and should be some space for harmless objectification.

However, according to Nussbaum, certain types of objectification aren't harmful, as long as there's a deep care for the other agent's experience or whole embodied being. Then, LeMoncheck's and my criticism of MacKinnon applies here as well: if the subjective experience of the other person is integral to the act, it is not objectification. It even seems that we would end up in a regressus ad infinitum with the claim that it is objectification, because we more or less use everyone as an instrument in our lives. We might find our friend intrinsically valuable as a person, but being their friend also entails using them instrumentally, because having good friends makes us happy. So it seems that if treating someone instrumentally isn't combined with at least some more of the objectifying items on Nussbaum's list, we should be hesitant to call it objectification. Otherwise, the term objectification loses its moral weight. One might wonder, then, how we should define instances of sex in which a person puts a lot of emphasis on their desire towards the other person's bodily parts, if not objectification. After all, it seems that many people do view this experience as being objectified in a manner that they find appealing. My answer is that this is a mere *play* of objectification. This can become clearer by considering the argument that Shrage (2005) adds to Nussbaum's take.

Shrage (2005: 60-61) argues that even though there is a lot of violence and violation of women in pornography, this doesn't imply any harmful objectification of women, because it is quite clear that in pornography with sadomasochistic elements, it is just a simulation. To compare, when we watch violent movies, we also understand that it is not real, otherwise we would probably not enjoy watching it (Shrage, 2005: 60-61). There are actually a lot of

established rules in sexual sadomasochism that protect the persons engaging in it. Conversations on this happen off-screen in the case of pornography, which is well-known by most viewers. And if that is the case, this type of pornography does not “‘represent women as meant for abuse and humiliation’ (Nussbaum, 1999: 249)” (Shrage, 2005: 61). Shrage is quite right here, but her description itself actually offers us an argument as to why such objectification is not only harmless, but not real objectification at all: what she describes, “a simulation”, is a mere *play* of objectification. This means that although Nussbaum and Shrage are wrong to claim that there is unproblematic objectification in pornography, they are right to claim that pornography that involves a *play* of objectification is not inherently morally objectionable. But that doesn’t mean that the instances of pornography that they talk about are harmless altogether. It might nevertheless misrepresent women’s sexuality and sex itself more generally, and contribute to epistemic injustice:

Although consumers might know that pornographic scenes are staged, they also know that the sex in pornography *is* real. So, even if it might be clear that these porn actors are playing out a storyline, it is much less clear what parts of the sexual acts, interaction, communication and pleasure during the sexual activity are not real. This is especially true for mainstream pornography that holds less clear rules than sadomasochistic pornography and reaches broader audiences, including young people that might not have their own sexual experiences or proper sex education to contextualize it. Therefore, it might reinforce the epistemic injustice that women like to be treated this roughly and even violently. But even if it is completely clear that certain violences or mistreatment are a play that the actors consented to, it might still involve misrepresentation of women’s sexuality. That is because (even in a play of objectification that is supposed to look like there’s no attention to the wishes of the submissive agent) in order for the sex to be pleasurable for women, it does need to contain acts that are actually pleasurable to women’s bodies. So when the sex scene lacks any attention to the clitoris, but shows (or implies, because as Shrage argues, viewers know that the woman actually consented to sadomasochistic pornography) a woman’s enjoyment of mere rough penetration¹⁰, there’s still reinforcement epistemic injustice. Therefore, my account of epistemic injustice (combined with Srinivasan’s emphasis on mainstream pornography) strengthens MacKinnon’s argument that pornography is a special type of

¹⁰ One might object that I am denouncing penetration too much, since many women do find penetration pleasurable. My claim, however, is not that penetration cannot be pleasurable, my claim is that the penetration that we see in pornography isn’t (optimally in terms of orgasms) pleasurable, because of the focus on men’s pleasure: there’s often immediate penetration without “foreplay” or any built arousal in women at all, and it shows rough and fast penetration that does not stimulate women’s bodies optimally, because they are just going in and out of women’s vaginas in terms of depth and speed, instead of moving the penis and their bodies in contact with the clitoris, such as the g-spot and the tip of the clitoris.

medium that can worsen the societal views towards women and sex – she was just wrong to explain it through a concept of objectification alone.

3.3 Epistemic harms to porn actresses

We have established that the message that pornography sends to its viewers is often not one of objectification but misrepresentation. But pornography producers know – and often even ask - porn actresses to use drugs to endure sex scenes and ask for their fake portrayal of pleasure and orgasms. That raises the question whether porn actresses *are* often sexually objectified.

Shrage can offer us more clarity here. Shrage (2005: 55) argues that in other economic relationships, we can also expect that people might be treated in thing-like ways, and that using someone's body in a way that isn't optimal for them isn't inherently wrong. Governments may regulate these relationships to protect people from harmful use of their bodies. Pornography may therefore be regulated as well, but only in the same way as other markets (Shrage, 2005: 55). However, as MacKinnon mentions, porn actresses often do not choose to do these sex scenes because of the sex, but because they don't mind their work for the money they make (except for porn actresses who were coerced into their work, obviously). The instrumentalization of these women's bodies, then, is not unjust because they are objectified, but it is unjust that they – as opposed to male sex workers - are withheld a much better experience in their work, because of the perpetuation of epistemic injustice: they are asked to perform sex scenes that aren't beneficial and often even uncomfortable to them.

Furthermore, I think MacKinnon is right that we shouldn't ignore the realities of coercion of porn actresses. Shrage (2005: 61-62) explains that Nussbaum has already correctly argued in her discussions on prostitution that we should then destigmatize sex workers and not further challenge their work, because stigma on women's sexuality and sex work is causing harm to sex workers, not sex work itself. Feminists should therefore focus on enhancing the economic autonomy and personal dignity of women in sex work. Shrage (2005: 61-62) argues that sex workers are already showing their power to counter the image of them as mere instruments of others, by publishing books, organizing conferences, producing artworks and pornography from different viewpoints that challenge stigmatization of the LGBTQIA+ community, (black) women and disabled people (Shrage, 2005: 62-63). Shrage is

quite right about unhelpful stigmatization and the importance of porn actresses worker's rights, but as I have shown, these are not the only harms we should consider.

3.4 Bridging the gap between anti-porn and sex positive views

When we acknowledge the problem of epistemic injustice, we can actually see an additional reason why Nussbaum's and Shrage's call for the empowerment of sex workers is so important: not only does it improve their working conditions and patriarchal norms on women's sexuality, it allows for the possibility to include women's perspectives on sex in pornography, so that we can move towards pornography that represents sex from a feminist objective view, in terms of Haraway. If we don't understand the importance from a viewpoint of epistemic injustice - which makes us see that sex workers need to be able to show their genuine sexuality, we might miss out on solutions for the epistemic harms in pornography, so that anti-porn feminists remain right to claim that we shouldn't normalize pornography. In other words: we cannot fully be sex positive and pro-normalizing sex work towards pornography, without the perspective of epistemic injustice and the acknowledgement that pornography is harmful under patriarchy, as MacKinnon argued.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the identification of objectification as the harm in pornography cannot account for the harms of misrepresentation of women's sexuality, while epistemic injustice and its consequences can. The theory on epistemic injustice as an addition to objectification helps to bridge the gap between sex positive views such as Nussbaum's and Shrage's, and anti-porn feminists such as MacKinnon: it acknowledges the structural harms but at the same time offers a distinction between different types of harms, which leaves more space for nuance and sex positivity. It also offers a perspective for solutions that celebrate women's sexuality. So, we should take an anti-patriarchal sex positive viewpoint towards pornography.

Chapter 4: Consent

Most philosophers (e.g. Mappes, 1992) have argued that we should hold an account of consent as free and informed consent. They argue that only then, consent can truly be an autonomous choice (Miller, 2022). This might seem simple, but when we look at the ambiguous case that Srinivasan (2021: 24-27) presents, we will find that it is quite complicated.

In 2014, two university students, Bonsu and a girl, were just hanging out, smoking weed. They ended up kissing each other. The kissing got more intense and the girl realized that he might be expecting sex now. So she told him she didn't want to have sex, and he said they didn't have to. The girl, however, moved her hand into his pants and because he then moved onto the bed, she started to give him a blow job. After she felt a wart, she proceeded with a hand job. She then realized she was very high. She told him that she was uncomfortable, but he didn't say anything, and she couldn't stop because she felt like she had to wait for his permission. Eventually she said that she was really uncomfortable and high and needed to leave. But he sat back down and so they kissed some more. Finally she stood up and said she was leaving. He then said: "Yeah, you said that. But I think I should get the next two minutes to convince you otherwise." (Srinivasan, 2021: 25). He then kissed her again and a few times that she tried to leave, he pulled her back to kiss her again. They finally exchanged numbers and left. The girl later explained that she didn't feel threatened by Bonsu and knew that she could leave, but couldn't bring herself to do so because the student culture of her university holds that women owe it to men to follow through once they start something sexual. So even though Bonsu might not have actually assaulted her - or at least not knowingly, because she initiated most of the sexual acts, she did feel violated and wanted to hold him accountable for the part that he did play in this situation, that she felt in her bones wasn't right (Srinivasan 2021: 25).

From Srinivasan's example and the perspective of my account of epistemic injustice, we can identify some fundamental problems with such free and informed consent theories: if both men and women have limited knowledge, views and communicative capabilities on sex and women's sexuality, how can they properly communicate consent? How could it ever truly be free and informed consent if we might not know certain things? How can we know that there's free and informed consent if we do not know that we don't know these things? And how far does the epistemic responsibility to know go? And relatedly, if agents bear an epistemic responsibility to make sure they know, does that mean that they are guilty of rape

when they didn't know? In other words: does non-consensual sex equal rape? Even if they didn't know because they didn't know that there is something they didn't know? The main question I will therefore answer is: How can we account for the injustices and harms in unwanted sex when there's epistemic injustice towards women's sexuality involved?

Shaun Miller (2022) and Rebecca Kukla (2018) both seem to acknowledge that there's a difficulty with the concept of consent, for reasons related to autonomy and epistemic injustice. However, they do not address this as an epistemic injustice and therefore fail to give a proper account of autonomy and consent in sex. My account of epistemic injustice sheds some light on problems that they are both struggling with, and offers a solution that includes and corrects both accounts.

In this chapter, I will argue that we should view the injustices and harms in sex through a combined model of consent, negotiation and epistemic injustice. I will argue that in doing so, we can account for rape, other epistemic responsibilities and societal injustices that the agents bear no personal responsibility for.

4.1 The (in)sufficiency and (un)necessity of free and informed consent

In this section, I will use Miller's arguments to show that most accounts of consent end up being either too lenient – by allowing injustices in sex that are related to epistemic injustice – or too strict – by rendering almost all sex impermissible, again, for reasons related to epistemic injustice.

Miller (2022) analyzes the relationship between autonomy and consent, and argues from there that an account of “procedural sexual autonomy and consensual minimalism” is insufficient, but an account of “substantive sexual autonomy and consensual idealism” ends up being too strict. He therefore proposes “a weak substantive account of autonomy and consensual realism” as a solution.

4.1.1 The minimalist account: insufficient

Miller (2022: 248) explains that an account of procedural sexual autonomy holds that there's sexual autonomy if the agent can make sexual choices and has real options to choose from. This definition of autonomy corresponds to consensual minimalism, which holds that consent is only invalid if there's coercion, deception or incapacitation (Miller, 2022: 249). But according to Miller (2022: 249-250), this account is insufficient, because for example, many women consent to sex when they do not desire it, because they are either afraid of the reaction of their sexual partner or are motivated by societal norms. They might even have adopted "adaptive preferences" or "deformed desires" by the influence of oppressive societal norms (Miller, 2022: 249-250). This means that her autonomy is undermined, so that her choice is not completely free, even if she did have options to choose from without coercion, deception or incapacitation (Miller, 2022: 248-250).

Miller is right, but the problem might run even deeper: when we analyze this from the perspective of epistemic injustice, we might find that many cases that are considered genuine and valid consent - possibly even in Miller's view - might not be completely free and informed, because their decision might still be formed by the concept of sex that we commonly use, and therefore might still not be optimal for women or even both parties. This raises the question whether an account of consent should cover such issues, so that the account is insufficient as long as it doesn't, or that covering such issues would make the account of consent too strict. Miller offers some arguments against too strict accounts of consent.

4.1.2 Too strict accounts of consent

Miller (2022: 251-252) explains that an account of substantive sexual autonomy holds that autonomy can only be valuable if it contributes to the agent's flourishing. Otherwise there is no reason to value autonomy. When applied to the sexual realm, this means that only sexual choices that contribute to the sexual flourishing of the agent are autonomous, thereby excluding choices that are made as a result of societal inequality. According to Miller (2022: 251-252), substantive sexual autonomy corresponds to a consensual idealism: the agents involved should be concerned for and attend to the other agent's sexual needs, desires, feelings and wellbeing. Miller (2022: 252) emphasizes that this means that the agent bears an epistemic responsibility to figure out what the other person wants, so that there must be thorough communication, though not necessarily verbal. So, the substantive account includes a lot stricter conditions for free and informed consent. However, Miller (2022) argues that this might be too strict.

First, Miller (2022: 252) argues that a substantive account might be problematic because people might not always know what they want in sex, for example when they are new to sex or feel uncertain about it. In those cases it isn't necessarily bad that they and their sexual partner don't know what they want. Therefore, he argues that such an account would set the bar too high. However, people might also not truly know what they want in sex and how to communicate about it because of epistemic injustice, which *is* problematic. This means that substantive accounts on consent are not only too strict in the sense that they qualify morally permissible sexual acts as immoral, but also because it sets the bar too high for morally permissible sexual acts: although the consequences of epistemic injustice are harmful, I wouldn't say that they necessarily lead to something that we should qualify as non-consensual sex (which is generally argued to be rape), if the agents involved didn't experience it as such and cannot be fully held accountable for it. Otherwise, we might end up concluding that almost all sex is non-consensual under patriarchy.

Furthermore, Miller (2022: 255) argues that a substantive approach might also be oppressive or paternalistic: it might lead us to conclude that many instances of sex are wrong, even though the agents involved do not feel like it was. We shouldn't ignore how people feel about a situation by claiming that we know what's best for them (Miller: 2022: 255). Miller (2022: 256-262) tries to solve this problem by proposing an account that allows for different degrees of autonomy and consent. However, we established that when we take epistemic injustice into account, we would end up calling a lot of instances of sex that people enjoyed or felt fine about, non-consensual sex. This seems wrong, even if we would call it some type of "light" non-consensual sex, because we would then end up oppressing the perspectives that we actually need to listen to in order to fight epistemic injustice, i.e. women's perspectives. Saying they are wrong about their own experience and that they were a victim of non-consensual sex shuts down conversation instead of opening up discussions on what these sexual experiences mean. It seems that we might need a different way to explain this issue than through an account of consent. Rebecca Kukla (2018) offers a related argument why we shouldn't want to explain all autonomy problems in sex through consent, and offers a negotiation model that better accounts for (a part of the) (epistemic) harms in sex. Let us consider her argument.

4.2 Kukla's negotiation model

In this section, I will argue that Kukla's negotiation model solves some of the issues mentioned above: it helps us distinguish between rape and other types of communicative injustices, so that agents have a responsibility to communicate in a manner that prevents epistemic injustices insofar that they have control over it, without every harm being reduced to rape.

4.2.1 Accounting for harms beyond rape

According to Kukla (2018: 94), we shouldn't try to account for all the harms involved in sex through a concept of consent, because

"then the only sexual harm or ethical misfire we have the tools to discuss is rape, where rape is understood as sex without consent. But if we think that rape is the only way that sex can go wrong, then this both dilutes the serious harm of actual rape and sets a dangerously high bar for what we are willing to call out as ethically problematic sex." (Kukla, 2018: 94).¹¹

Kukla (2018) therefore argues that an account of consent is necessary but insufficient to account for morally sound sex. She instead argues for a sexual negotiation model, which includes not only the requirement of consent to initiate sex (as a necessary condition for it not to be rape), but to communicate about the whole of the sexual activity, so that we can account for non-rape moral issues in sex. Kukla (2018: 71) argues that a negotiation model "can enable sexual agency, pleasure, and possibilities" (Kukla, 2018: 71). Kukla (2018: 71) thinks that this positive agency is as important to autonomy as freedom of intrusion or coercion – which we also established in chapter 1.

¹¹ Kukla basically assumes that we should consider non-consensual sex to be rape, she doesn't give a reason. However, I do agree with her, because there really isn't a better way to describe rape. The best alternative I could come up with is "unwanted sex", however, if the "perpetrator" really had no way of knowing that the other person didn't want to have sex, we cannot really blame them for rape. So that would include too many instances in rape. And if we don't consider non-consensual sex to be rape, it leaves too much space for discussions about instances that should definitely be considered rape, such as cases where victims freeze up. That is why I think Kukla is very right that we shouldn't want to account for all issues surrounding autonomy in sex through consent, which should be reserved for cases of rape.

4.2.2 The responsibility to prevent epistemic harms

Kukla (2018: 75) argues that theories of consent implicitly contribute to the narrative of one person actively seeking sex, and the other person having to let someone do it *to* [my emphasis] them or refuse. “And in practice, given cultural realities, discussions of consent almost always position a man as the active requester and a woman as the one who agrees to or refuses him doing things to her.” (Kukla, 2018: 75). That is very much in line with the narratives that we attributed to epistemic injustice. Kukla (2018: 75-76) states that she hopes that sexual negotiation can be more than that, she hopes that it will be “a dialogical activity that expresses both partners’ positive agency” (Kukla, 2018: 75-76). Kukla’s negotiation model can therefore help fight epistemic injustice by suggesting a view on sex that seems in line with my concept of sex as a social activity between embodied (and therefore active) and equal agents.

Kukla (2018: 72-73) explains that in kink and polyamorous communities, there’s a lot of careful and explicit negotiation going on about whether to have sex, how to have it and how to exit it. And this has proven to be the key to ensure sexual safety and pleasure for all parties. However, Kukla (2018: 73) argues that although these types of communication happen in traditional relationships and sex as well, it often happens

“much more abbreviated and less formal, and it is often skipped altogether. It may be that in alternative sexual communities, more explicit negotiation is the norm because there is no default, presumed understanding of shared conventional norms about what is pleasurable and what isn’t, when sex is expected and when it isn’t, and so forth.” (Kukla, 2018: 73).

Kukla (2018: 73) goes on to state that it is actually not the best idea to communicate less explicitly and more ritualized, because unspoken norms might not always work well for everyone involved. Therefore, Kukla (2018: 73) thinks “a rich discourse of sexual negotiation is generally good for everyone” (Kukla, 2018: 73).

The common responses to advocates of consent illustrate Kukla’s point: Amnesty International The Netherlands started a campaign about consent in 2019. When we look at the comments on its social media outings, we can find a lot of men and even a few women claiming that always asking for consent is ridiculous, because it would take out all spontaneity and passion in sex. Therefore, they believe that women should bear the responsibility to say no when they don’t want to have sex, because there’s no space for

verbal communication in positive experiences of sex. From the perspective of my account of epistemic injustice, we can see why people would feel this way: the idea that sex should be spontaneous without clear (verbal) communication, seems to fit with a male-oriented concept of sex. Miller (2022: 257) explains that 75% of men experience spontaneous sexual arousal, while only 15% of women do. This means that men are more often “ready to go”, while women still need to build their sexual desire, both physiologically (as mentioned in chapter 1) and often psychologically. Furthermore, Michelle Anderson (2004: 106) mentions that study after study has shown that men “consistently misinterpret women’s nonverbal behavior. They impute erotic innuendo and sexual intent when there is none.” (Anderson, 2004: 106). So men might believe that women have the means to communicate to them when they want to have sex without explicit conversations about consent. But men’s lack of understanding of women and their sexuality leaves them to misinterpret them, and the lack of common knowledge on women’s sexuality obstructs communication, all while societal gender norms put pressure on women to just go along with what men want.

So Kukla’s acknowledgement that unspoken societal norms do not work well for everyone aligns perfectly with my understanding of the epistemic injustice towards women’s sexuality and the one-sided perspective on sex as reproduction. With her comparison between mainstream and non-mainstream sexual encounters, she exposes the epistemic injustice at hand: in mainstream sex, there’s the assumption that everyone involved holds the same perspective on what sex is, which is why there is little to no attention to communication. Because if we all know what we are doing and want the same thing, what is there to talk about, right?

Kukla’s negotiation model, then, emphasizes the epistemic responsibility that agents have to communicate about the needs, desires and boundaries of the person they are having sex with. It therefore accounts for part of the epistemic harms, because communication can correct faulty assumptions and understandings, without immediately reducing all unjust behaviors to rape, because she distinguishes between consent and other communicative issues. However, as we have seen, epistemic injustice obstructs proper communication. This raises the question to what extent we should hold agents epistemically responsible for knowing certain things, if their knowledge is obstructed by epistemic injustice outside of their control.

4.2.3 A new model: consent, negotiation and epistemic injustice

In this section, I will argue that Kukla's account is incomplete, because we need to account for epistemic injustices separately, outside of the control of the agents involved, so that we should adopt a combined model of consent, negotiation and epistemic injustice.

With structural epistemic injustice in place, there might be things that we cannot be held responsible for to know. If for example, a man properly communicates about both consent and negotiation more broadly, and tries to discover the woman's genuine needs and desires, but she is unknowingly influenced by societal norms, or more deeply, by the problematic concept of sex as reproduction, they both cannot (fully) be held responsible to know. That would set too high a bar and would be punishing the victims of epistemic injustice for something that is out of their hands. What this means, then, is that we should be able to account for unjust sex outside of the epistemic responsibility of the agents as well. Only then can we account for all injustices and harms towards autonomy in sex, and attribute blame accordingly. So we should hold a model that combines consent, negotiation and epistemic injustice more broadly. But we are still not quite there yet: this in turn raises the question where the thresholds for epistemic responsibility lie, both between consent and negotiation more broadly, and between the negotiation model and epistemic injustice more broadly. Unfortunately, this falls outside of the scope of this paper, and we would need extensive research on this discussion. But it does show the importance of considering epistemic injustice in the philosophical debates on sex.

Let's consider Srinivasan's example again. It seems that Bonsu is not guilty of rape, because the girl consented by taking initiative. But that doesn't mean that she wasn't wronged. We can find Bonsu guilty of communicative misconduct (in line with Kukla), because he didn't take up his epistemic responsibility to figure out and communicate why she was consenting while giving other signs that she wanted to stop. However, the fact that the girl felt that she had to go on and Bonsu's lack of knowledge of her perspective that left him unable to see through this, is at least in part a result of epistemic injustice. Their inability to properly communicate, is at least in part a result of epistemic injustice as well. The combination of Kukla's epistemic responsibility for communication and my account of epistemic injustice, might also explain why in many situations like this one, women feel like they have been wronged but do not blame the men they had sex with, or at least not for rape. In some of these cases, these men truly aren't to blame, or at least not as someone who raped someone else, maybe just as someone who communicated poorly due to epistemic injustice

and/or as someone who contributes to the patriarchy and its oppressive understanding of sex, or maybe not at all. But that doesn't mean that there are no injustices in such sexual instances. There are still epistemic injustices.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that epistemic injustice leads to issues for accounts of autonomy and consent in sex through some arguments made by Miller: it makes them end up either too lenient or too strict. I have argued that part of these issues can be solved by adopting Kukla's negotiation model that distinguishes between issues of consent and issues of negotiation: it places an epistemic responsibility on agents to communicate in a manner that they will obtain morally relevant knowledge about their sexual partner's wishes insofar that they can obtain this knowledge. However, we need to understand that epistemic injustice affects their ability to know and communicate properly, so that we should consider epistemic injustices as a separate category that causes injustices in sex, without placing the full responsibility for this on the agents involved in a sexual encounter.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the common ignorance on women's sexuality is an epistemic injustice that limits women's sexual self-knowledge, communication, freedom, pleasure and comfort in sex, while being denied as knowers of their own experiences. I have also shown that this epistemic injustice has led to a one-sided perspective on sex of sex as reproduction and therefore vaginal penetration that serves men's pleasure. This concept of sex that is taken to be the objective truth of what sex is, further cements the epistemic injustice into our societies, because all knowledge on women's sexuality that does come forward, is then explained within this concept of sex. Because the epistemic injustice and its structures reveal far-reaching harms in sex towards women, I have argued that we should review the feminist debates on sex to see whether they have overlooked these harms and how that affects the conclusions in the debate.

In the review of the debate on the harms in pornography, I have argued that my account of epistemic injustice reveals that objectification is not the only harm in pornography and that in mainstream pornography, the problem is rather that women's sexuality is misrepresented, so that it reinforces epistemic injustice towards women's sexuality. Here, we have also seen that anti-porn and sex (work) positive philosophers need not be so opposed: we can acknowledge structural harms in pornography and at the same time acknowledge that the solution lies in empowering sex workers, because sex work and pornography itself are not the problem, patriarchal injustices are.

In the review on the debate of consent, I have argued that my account of epistemic injustice reveals that an account of free and informed consent inevitably ends up being too lenient or too strict, and this can in part be solved by a negotiation model that acknowledges the epistemic responsibility that agents hold to prevent harms that follow from epistemic injustice. However, we also need to account for epistemic injustice as a separate problem that limits our ability to properly communicate about our boundaries and desires in sex, for which the agents involved in sex bear no direct responsibility.

I realize that this thesis will not offer a complete answer to the main question, because there's so much more to it - such as intersectional inequalities for People of Color, disabled people, the LGBTQIA+ community and socio-economically disadvantaged people; or other ways that societies influence women's sexual freedom such as via beauty standards and

narratives around mothers' sexuality. Furthermore, there are more feminist debates on sex that should be reviewed, such as sex work more generally. Unfortunately, this falls outside the scope of this paper, but it should definitely be researched further.

However, the main project of this thesis was to prove that there is a structural injustice to the ignorance on women's sexuality that runs deep in our society and affects the conclusions of our philosophical feminist debates on sex. My conclusion is therefore that there is no clear and easy solution, dismantling epistemic injustice is extremely hard. But we should constantly realize and emphasize that what is hard here, is dismantling the structures that keep epistemic injustice intact. What is not hard, is women's sexuality itself (except for the clitoris when a woman is aroused, that is). And we should not forget that progress is already being made. I have suggested that we should move towards a concept of sex as a social activity between equal and embodied persons who consent to sex, so that all perspectives can be included respectfully and rape and objectification can be excluded of our concept of sex. Such a concept would then form an argument against the testimonial injustice that appears when women try to contribute to the common pool of social meanings and concepts. Further investigation of epistemic injustices in sex and alternative understandings of sex are now needed to bring this project of dismantling epistemic injustice further.

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