



## **Engaging Pillow Talk: The Challenges of Studying Communication After Sexual Activity**

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“Oh, have I got a story for you” is a phrase I’ve grown accustomed to hearing. As a researcher of relationships, such a response is not unexpected, but it was not until I started studying communication that takes place after sexual activity that this reaction became commonplace. Despite the increased visibility of sex in American life (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1997), opportunities for people to talk about sex remain uneven. For example, the sex lives of celebrities are frequent fodder for tabloids, but talking about sex for educational purposes in a classroom setting is often frowned upon. Thus, we live in a society where people learn conflicting ideas about what is and is not appropriate to discuss when it comes to sex.

When I began studying communication after sexual activity, or “pillow talk,” I imagined it would be difficult to get others to open up about their post-sex communication. I had assumed that these conversations, often taking place at intimate and vulnerable times, may not be communication episodes that people were openly willing to share, especially with a researcher. Early in my study of pillow talk, though, it became clear that many people *wanted* to talk about their post-sex communication. I had expected uncomfortable conversations and awkward glances upon mentioning my research, but what I instead found was that many people were relieved to find someone who they could talk to about sex. Experiences such as these led me to reflect upon the many assumptions people have about doing sex research in the field of communication. This analysis addresses how such assumptions both shaped and challenged my own research exploring communication after sexual activity. More specifically, I detail the process of designing and implementing my studies on communication after sexual activity, as well as the communication that happens around the study, from planning the project to presenting the findings of the study. Ultimately, although doing research on this topic has revealed unexpected challenges, it has also led to new insights about the research process and the ways that individuals communicate about sex research.

### **Background on Pillow Talk**

To understand the methodological challenges of studying communication after sexual activity, it is first necessary to provide a brief background on pillow talk and the research that serves as a basis for this analysis. In 1979, James Halpern and Mark A. Sherman wrote a book called *Afterplay: A Key to Intimacy*. In their short, provocative book, they emphasized the importance of couples’ post-sex communication. They argued that “next to sleep, intercourse and orgasm are the most profound changes

in consciousness most human beings ever experience" (Halpern & Sherman, 1979, p. 13). Despite their strong arguments for investigating the influence of post-sex communication on couples' relationships outside the bedroom, until recently little research investigated behavior after sexual activity. There is a long history of research investigating the lead-up to sexual activity, but far less work has explored what happens after the sex is done, particularly from a communication perspective. Halpern and Sherman (1979) use the analogy of entering and exiting sleep to explain the importance of post-sex behavior. They explain that

we know a lot about these entrances: how to fall asleep, how to initiate lovemaking. But we are primitive in our knowledge of the exits. We don't know the best ways to awaken and are perhaps even more ignorant in our knowledge of how to emerge from orgasm and intercourse. (p. 13)

A few years ago, however, a science of post-coitus (Ryder, 2012) began to emerge with research such as Kruger and Hughes's (2010, 2011; Hughes & Kruger, 2011) work on the post-coital time interval (PCTI). In their line of research, Kruger and Hughes (2010, 2011; Hughes & Kruger, 2011) investigate the many behaviors couples engage in post-coital (e.g., sleeping, snacking, cuddling) and the evolutionary reasons they may be doing so. Although their studies have looked at "bonding and communication" as one behavior couples engage in after sexual activity, questions still remain regarding the specific ways that individuals communicate during the PCTI.

Only one known study has looked at the communication behaviors individuals engage in post-sex (Denes, 2012). This study found that positive relational disclosures (i.e., expressing feelings of affection and liking for one's partner) after sexual activity were related to orgasm: women who orgasmed engaged in more positive relational disclosures after sexual activity than both women who did not orgasm and men who orgasmed (Denes, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the study found that positive relational disclosures after sexual activity occurred more often in monogamous/committed relationships than in open/casual relationships. Last, individuals in monogamous/committed relationships were less regretful of their disclosures and more satisfied in their relationships than individuals in open/casual relationships.

Extending from this line of research, a more recent study (Denes, in progress) tested the theoretical mechanisms that may be underlying the relationship between orgasm and post-sex communication found by Denes (2012) by testing whether risk-benefit assessments mediated this relationship. Many disclosure models (e.g., Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Altman & Taylor, 1973; Omarzu, 2000; Petronio, 2002) explain that individuals weigh the risks and benefits of disclosing before making the decision to share information. More specifically, Denes (in progress) used communication privacy management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002) to argue that individuals' privacy boundaries may become more permeable after experiencing orgasm. It was predicted that individuals who orgasmed would have more permeable privacy boundaries and would therefore perceive the risks and benefits of

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<sup>1</sup> Orgasm was assessed through a self-report survey in which participants were asked whether or not they experienced orgasm during the sexual activity. Issues involving the measurement of orgasm are discussed and problematized later in this analysis.

disclosing differently than individuals who did not orgasm. This hypothesis was supported, as individuals who orgasmed perceived significantly greater benefits and fewer risks to disclosing after sexual activity than those who did not orgasm. Risk-benefit assessments also mediated the relationship between orgasm and positive relational disclosures after sexual activity. Additionally, Denes tested the link between positive relational disclosures and relationship satisfaction. Denes found that the more positive feelings individuals disclosed for their partners after sexual activity, the higher their reported relationship satisfaction after sexual activity, even after controlling for relationship status. It is important to note that this finding is correlational in nature. Although it is possible that positive relational disclosures contribute to relationship satisfaction, it is also possible that more satisfied partners engage in greater positive relational disclosures. A study designed to test potential causal pathways is currently underway.

These studies and others currently taking place on post-sex communication have presented methodological challenges and lessons for studying sex and communication. What follows is a detailed account of various aspects of the research process—talking through ideas with colleagues, designing the study questionnaire, obtaining ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), recruiting participants, and presenting findings—and how these play out when studying sexual behavior in interpersonal relationships. Although many of these parts of the process are surprisingly unchanged in the context of sex research, others present unique challenges.

### **The Early Stages: Talking Through Ideas**

Many research projects begin with conversations with colleagues and peers about the ideas in the proposed study. Such conversations generally involve running thoughts by colleagues, generating feedback on the proposed hypotheses and research questions, and inquiring whether any important variables have been overlooked. In past studies that did not involve topics related to sex, I have found that such conversations usually remain focused on the project at hand. However, when conducting sex research, these conversations seem markedly different in that there is often a sense that the people I converse with are imagining their own experiences as a way of generating feedback on the project. When discussing such an intimate topic, there seems to be a sense that all related communication is also personal. Sometimes these experiences are unspoken, but many other times they are directly referenced. Often, conversations regarding my studies have evolved into personal accounts of individuals' experiences, and how their experiences may suggest other factors that need to be considered in the study. This is not always the case—not every person I discuss my research with is compelled to share the details of their sex lives—but I have noticed a difference between this area of research and other topics I have studied that are not related to sex. I believe that this difference links back to my earlier point that many people do not have a space to talk about sexual behavior. For some people, it seems that meeting a sex researcher is an opportunity to discuss an otherwise taboo topic.

Of course, it is important to recognize other factors that influence this dynamic in my own research process, such as where the conversations took place (i.e., in a liberal part of the United States) and who the conversations took place with (i.e., usually trusted others with whom I had a pre-established relationship, even though many of those relationships did not involve prior communication about sex-

related topics). Despite these contextual factors, I do believe that there was a difference in how these conversations played out compared to other research projects.

Although in many ways the conversations leading up to my research and their often-personal nature were beneficial to the research design process, they also presented an unexpected challenge. A struggle that often arose during my pillow talk studies was deciding how much to engage others in personal conversations. It was sometimes unclear where the boundaries of appropriateness lie and whether engaging in such conversations would be considered unprofessional. However, these conversations also presented the possibility of gaining important new insights and ultimately, many of them played a pivotal role in the research development process.

### **"Sex" and "Orgasm": Complex Terms**

After soliciting feedback and talking through the study ideas with colleagues, the next phase involved designing the study survey. An important aspect of the survey involved asking participants about the sexual acts they engaged in before the pillow talk, as well as the experience of orgasm. A long line of research exists investigating definitions of what "having sex" constitutes. Early research by Sanders and Reinisch (1999) found that 99.5% of participants considered penile-vaginal intercourse "sex," while 81% considered anal sex and 40% considered oral sex "sex." Extending this line of research, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) investigated definitions of sex as well as the relationship between definitions of sex and predicted outcomes of applying such definitions, which they call *motivated definitions*. They link this process back to one identified in Sanders and Reinisch's (1999) work: the assessment of the costs and benefits of labeling certain behaviors.

In their study, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) asked individuals to identify various experiences that they would label as "not quite sex," "just barely sex," and "unsure." They found that "whether respondents regarded the behavior as sex relied heavily on whether there had been penile-vaginal penetration," (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007, p. 259) and that labeling an experience as "not quite sex" was usually related to a lack of penile-vaginal intercourse occurring. Similarly, reporting that an experience was "just barely sex" usually meant that penile-vaginal penetration took place. However, they do note that several participants reported oral sex as "just barely sex." They also found that individuals (particularly women) who reported that their experience should be labeled "not quite sex" were more likely to predict a negative outcome when asked to imagine what the outcome would be like if they did have sex. This finding supports the motivated definition in that individuals may be defining what is and is not sex based on the outcomes of such labels. For example, if having sex would have brought about a negative outcome or feeling, then an individual may be more likely to label the behavior as "not quite sex."

Such definitions, though, may also be a product of one's culture and sexual orientation. For example, Faulkner (2003) found that Latina women's definitions of sex linked to other aspects of their identities, such as cultural identity, religious beliefs, and distinctions between being a "good girl" versus a "flirt girl." Beyond cultural distinctions of what constitutes sex, sexual orientation may also influence one's definitions of sex. Several studies have asked participants to rate the extent to which various sexual

behaviors constitute "sex." Research on gay men has found that they rate anal sex as more likely to constitute sex than vaginal intercourse (Hill, Rahman, Bright, & Sanders, 2010). Additionally, Horowitz and Spicer (2013) found that lesbians were more likely to rate "other genital contact" (i.e., "oral and manual stimulation, plus stimulation by sex aid") (p. 144) as constituting sex compared to heterosexual males and females.

These many definitions of what constitutes sex played a role in the creation of the questionnaires used in the pillow talk studies. Because of the varying definitions of sex, the decision was made to include various forms of sexual activity after which pillow talk may occur. Additionally, participants were always provided with an open-ended space to explain any other sexual practices that may not have been captured in the survey items. The survey was also designed to avoid using the term "sex" and to instead refer to "sexual activity," thus making clear to participants that the survey was meant to assess *any* communication that occurred after *any* sexual activity. The initial pillow talk studies only included open-ended spaces, so as not to assume or privilege any one sexual practice over another. However, for ease of data analysis, future iterations included a number of sexual behavior options in addition to the open-ended question. The sexual behavior options included in the survey were anal sex, hand-stimulation as giver, hand-stimulation as receiver, oral sex as giver, oral sex as receiver, and penile-vaginal intercourse. Participants were presented with these options in a checklist format so that if needed they could indicate multiple forms of sexual activity occurring.

Although an array of behaviors was included in the study, there is the possibility that self-presentation bias may have hindered accurate reporting of sexual behavior. Catania et al. (1990) explain that some participants are threatened by questions involving sexual behavior, which may link back to specific cultural or subcultural values. Several studies suggest that participants' refusal to answer questions about sexual behavior linked to their own uneasiness about sexual questioning (see Catania, Gibson, Chitwood, & Coates, 1990). Catania et al. also point to other studies that find greater sensitivity in reporting some sexual behaviors over others, such as vaginal versus anal intercourse for heterosexual women (Boiling & Boeller as cited in Catania et al., 1990). In the pillow talk studies, the primary form of sexual activity that participants reported engaging in was penile-vaginal intercourse. However, it is possible that individuals engaged in other forms of sexual activity that they may have chosen not to report. To help increase the likelihood of accurate reporting, an online survey design was used so that subjects could participate in the comfort and privacy of their own homes (additional reasons for using an online survey are discussed in greater detail later).

Methodological challenges also arose when investigating orgasm, one of the primary predictors in the pillow talk studies. In the initial pillow talk study, orgasm was assessed with the options "yes," "no," and "other (please specify)." However, conversations with colleagues at sex research conferences brought out potential issues related to orgasm, especially for female participants, such as intensity of the orgasm, type of orgasm (e.g., vaginal, clitoral, unsure), and whether an individual faked an orgasm, all factors that may potentially influence individuals' pillow talk. Thus, a follow-up survey included several items tapping into the complexity of orgasm, with certain questions being specifically addressed to female participants (i.e., type of orgasm).

Together, considerations such as these resulted in unforeseen challenges in the process of doing sex research and designing a questionnaire that would be understandable to individuals of varying cultures, religions, genders, sexes, and sexual orientations. For many of the pillow talk studies, these questionnaires were a pivotal part of the study design. The decision to use questionnaires to study individuals' communication after sexual activity was also a mindful one, and although not a perfect method, helped counter obstacles to accurately collecting research on sexual behavior.

### **Memory, Bias, and Designing the Study**

There are many issues to consider when designing a study on sexual behavior. Catania et al. (1990) provide a thorough overview of such issues facing sex researchers. Among these issues are memory-recall and self-presentation bias. Catania et al. explain that "one of the least understood areas of sex research is the effect of memory on the task of recalling past sexual experiences" (p. 345). Catania et al. seem to be referring to large-scale studies assessing peoples' sexual behavior across the lifespan, even though the issue is no less relevant when investigating post-sex communication. In the pillow talk studies, there was a concern that individuals would not be able to adequately recall their post-sex conversations, especially if other activities (such as sleep) took place between the communication episode and the completion of the online survey. To combat this issue, participants were instructed to complete the survey within two hours of the sexual activity to prevent individuals from falling asleep or engaging in other activities that might influence their memory of their post-sex conversations. In the survey, participants were asked to indicate the time that the sexual activity occurred, then, unbeknownst to them, this time was matched with the survey timestamp (collected through the survey website) to ensure that the questionnaire was completed within the two-hour timeframe. Although other scholars have made compelling arguments for face-to-face qualitative methods in sex research (such as focus groups; see for example, Frith, 2000), the pillow talk studies used an online survey design so that participants could provide feedback as close as possible to the time that the actual pillow talk occurred, in the comfort of their own homes.

Although this design seemed to meet the needs of the pillow talk studies to date, there are possibilities for more complex study designs in the future. For example, it may be possible to have individuals record their pillow talk, thus allowing researchers to compare self-reported pillow talk behavior to actual, recorded communication between partners after sexual activity. However, this method may also have limitations. For example, it is possible that partners would behave differently knowing that they were being recorded and this approach may therefore have the inadvertent effect of inhibiting their post-sex communication.

Additionally, the pillow talk studies so far have only focused on one sexual partner's experiences. Collecting surveys from both partners may provide interesting insights not only into the shared experiences between the partners but also into how their perceptions regarding pillow talk vary. Additionally, this comparative approach may help add validity to self-reported sexual behaviors. Catania et al. (1990) explain that a major issue in sex research is accurate reporting of sexual behavior: "Privacy, embarrassment, and fear of reprisals are but a few of the reasons that may motivate people to conceal their true sexual behavior" (p. 340). Conversely, they also explain that individuals may embellish their

sexual behavior as a means of bragging, or may have trouble accurately recalling the behaviors that occurred. These obstacles to accurate reporting about sexual activity may be curtailed by collecting dyadic data. Such an approach may encourage veracity because participants realize that their sexual partners will also be reporting on the sexual behavior that just took place, and thus the participant's falsification would be realized if s/he chose to inaccurately report the behavior.

### **"How Did You Get This Past IRB?"**

Once the questionnaire was designed, the next step involved submitting a research protocol for ethics approval to the Institutional Review Board, or IRB. One of the most common questions I receive after giving presentations on my research is, "How did you get this past IRB?" There is an assumption that research on sex or sexuality must raise a red flag among Institutional Review Boards and Human Subjects Committees because of the often-sensitive nature of the questions being asked. I believe this to be one of the most widespread myths about sex research—the idea that gaining approval to conduct such research is extremely difficult or nearly impossible. The goal of an IRB is to ensure the safety and protection of research participants. Part of this process means monitoring and approving research studies. As a former member of an IRB, I saw the review process firsthand and quickly came to understand the obstacles to gaining approval and the common issues in research protocols that can make the process of approval difficult. One of these obstacles involves studies that do not provide full information about the nature of the investigation or that involve deceiving participants. Oftentimes, deception is necessary because researchers cannot reveal the purpose of their studies without influencing the responses of the participants. However, the pillow talk studies did not involve such deception.

Because these studies lacked deception, they were not considered problematic by the IRB's standards. Given that all other aspects of the protocol were completed thoroughly and accurately, the process of approval was fairly simple and straightforward. Despite the ease of this process, the belief still persists that such research must be held up in months of IRB deliberations. The assumption that most individuals do not feel comfortable speaking about their own sexual behavior may lead many researchers to believe that IRBs would stop such studies from being conducted to prevent discomfort to participants. While it may be true that some individuals do not feel comfortable speaking about their sex lives, those individuals can simply choose not to participate in the study. When the study does not involve deception and participants are informed about the content and nature of the study prior to participation, the IRB does not seem to take issue with sex studies. Although I have not had personal experience with sex research involving deception, it is important to note that there are also ways to conduct such research and gain IRB approval. Studying sexual behavior without disclosing the full purpose of the study is not reason enough to reject a protocol. Rather, these studies simply involve a more complex process of approval with additional safeguards to ensure that participants do not experience discomfort or harm.

One interesting constraint that did arise, however, when conducting the pillow talk studies, was the necessity that participants were already in a sexual relationship. Because many participants were undergraduates receiving research credit or extra credit in their courses in exchange for participation in the study, it was important that individuals did not go out and engage in sexual activity just to complete the course requirements or get extra points in a class. For one of the studies that involved a lab

component, participants were first asked to confirm that they were in a sexual relationship before beginning the study. One participant, upon arriving at the lab, explained that s/he was not currently in a sexual relationship, but insisted s/he would find one at some point during the study's two-week time span. A very bold and confident assertion, but for IRB reasons, that individual had to be turned away. Thus, for ethical reasons, participants were required to already be in a sexual relationship with another individual to participate in this study.

### **The Terms of Recruitment**

Once IRB approval was obtained, the process of recruiting participants began. During this portion of the research process, a challenge arose involving the terminology of the recruitment materials. When recruiting participants for the pillow talk studies, the euphemism "below the belt" was used. Recruitment flyers listed the following criteria: "Must be in a relationship that involves sexual activity (*anything below the belt*)." This phrase refers to genital contact with one's partner, and does not seem to privilege one sex or sexual orientation. It was chosen for the recruitment material because it seems to be universally understood and is descriptive, yet vague. This vagueness seemed important as it (1) gave individuals the ability to find a place for their own sexual behavior within this framework, and (2) avoided making individuals exposed to the flyer, but who were not planning to participate in the study, uncomfortable. Recruitment was approached with the awareness that not all people feel comfortable talking about, or even thinking about, sexual behavior. Using specific terminology or examples of sexual practices may have made some people uncomfortable, or, if their particular sexual behaviors were not provided as examples, imply that their sexual practices were abnormal or unacceptable.

This issue of terminology ties back to an important distinction that Catania et al. (1990) make between standard and poetic terminology in sex research. They explain that "standard terms" for sexual behavior are institutionally derived and often learned through course work, such as sexual education seminars. In contrast, poetic terms "are those that arise from one's subculture" (Catania et al., 1990, p. 349). As an example, they compare the standard term *penis* to the poetic terms *pecker*, *feather*, *shlong*, and *ding-dong*. Catania et al. point out that

in research, problems may arise (a) when instruments use standard terms for behaviors that respondents recognize only by their poetic label, (b) the respondent knows neither the standard nor the poetic term for the behavior, or (c) poetic terms are used and respondents know only the standard terms. (p. 349)

These considerations played a large role in the terminology used both in the recruitment of participants and in the survey itself. The decision was made that the recruitment material would focus on poetic terms that would hopefully tap into a wider array of behavior and prevent uncomfortable reactions from those exposed to the materials. However, the survey generally used standard terminology, with the idea that participants who self-selected into a study about sexual behavior would feel more comfortable with the terminology and that the standard terminology would also increase the professional feel of the questionnaire. Although poetic terms may increase the comfort of participants during recruitment, it has been suggested that standard terminology makes individuals more comfortable when participating in the



survey and reporting on their own behavior. As Catania et al. (1990) explain, "Some respondents report more comfort with clinical terms for sexual behavior because they find such words as *fuck* and *suck* too embarrassing" (p. 349).

### **Orgasm vs. Climax: Presenting the Findings**

Although the survey itself asked about individuals' experiences with orgasm, it is also important to mention the unexpected challenges that emerged when presenting the findings from the pillow talk studies. When I initially started presenting research on the relationship between orgasm and post-sex communication, there were several instances where audience members responded with uneasy, nervous giggles. Such reactions only occurred in contexts where sex research was not universal. For example, when I present this research at conferences for sex researchers, no one seems uncomfortable. In fact, those conferences often lead to additional questions about orgasm—the type of orgasm, the position of the individuals as they reached orgasm, and so on. However, outside of the realm of sex research and sexuality studies conferences, some individuals responded to the word "orgasm" in an unexpected, seemingly negative way.

This concern over visceral reactions to the word "orgasm" led to a discussion regarding the presentation of my research while on the job market. A lengthy debate ensued regarding whether the word "climax" should be substituted for "orgasm" to make the audience less uncomfortable. One peer insisted that orgasm be used, as this was the scientific term and the one most commonly used in studies. Another colleague voted for climax, suggesting that the vagueness of this term might be less jarring. After all, climax can refer to many things—the climax of a play, for example. Yet, another peer argued that climax was too descriptive, that the word provided more of a visual than the word "orgasm." Thus, a major challenge in doing sex research is acknowledging the sensitivities of those exposed to my research, while also figuring out whether I let those sensitivities influence my own decisions about my research and how I choose to present and explain my variables.

### **Conclusion**

Despite these challenges, those who I have spoken to outside of academic settings about my research seem eager to engage the topic of pillow talk. I began this analysis by pointing to a sometimes surprising desire by others to share their stories and experiences. Perhaps the biggest challenge of doing research on pillow talk is being prepared for the many different reactions that arise in response to sex research. Sometimes, there are awkward and uncomfortable moments, but often, I am amazed by people's openness and eagerness to share their experiences. I can recall countless instances of mentioning what it is that I study, and being met with the response, "Oh, have I got a story for you." Sometimes individuals will share their own stories, other times they share a friend's story and ask for advice, and some (who know about the findings of my studies) have told me accounts of mentioning the research to their sexual partners. Indeed, there seems to be a desire, if not to share one's own story, to at the very least engage the topic. As O'Keefe (2013) says in reference to my initial pillow talk study being used as a classroom learning tool, "If a study on freshmen's postcoitus bliss (Denes, 2012) can't focus a classroom, then we're all in trouble" (p. 5).

The process of designing and implementing studies investigating individuals' communication after sexual activity has revealed several challenges, but has also led to new insights about studying sex and communication. Although important points need to be considered when designing questionnaires, recruiting participants for the study, and presenting the research findings, these methodological challenges also bring the potential benefit of opening the lines of communication about sexual activity and creating a space for discussing sexual behavior.

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