



isip

**Mga Kwent-O ng Sarap:
Exploring Orgasms
as Sexual Pleasure in an
Undergraduate Human Sexuality Course**

Eric Julian Manalastas
University of the Philippines - Diliman

Abstract

One of the most concrete instances of pleasure is orgasm – the intense subjective experience of sexual pleasure brought about by masturbation, sexual intercourse, and other forms of erotic behavior. To explore this, 47 Filipino students in an undergraduate human sexuality course conducted orgasm interviews – face to face conversations with 87 women and 101 men about their first and most recent experiences of orgasm. This chapter discusses the process, outcomes, challenges, and potentials of orgasm interviews as a learning tool for exploring and analyzing Filipino sexual pleasure that can be used in courses in gender, sexuality, and psychology. The psychological and political value of creating open discursive spaces about sexuality and sexual pleasure is emphasized, particularly in the context of Filipino sexual culture.

No exploration of the psychology of the happy life, of *ginhawa* and *ligaya*, would be complete without an analysis of sarap, or pleasure. And no analytic journey into pleasure would be wholly satisfying without touching upon the pleasures of the erotic - the subjective experience of sexual pleasure.

This chapter focuses on one of the most concrete and compelling instances of sexual pleasure - orgasm - as explored in an undergraduate social science course in sexuality. Drawing upon current theorizing and research in the areas of human sexuality and positive psychology, I start with an outline of pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, as a psychological experience, followed by the specific phenomenon of orgasm, including its physiological, behavioral, and social dimensions.

Sarap: Pleasure as a Positive Subjective Experience

Pleasure, in general, refers to a family of positive affective states that are associated with the body's sensory systems (Peterson, 2006; Salazar, 2008). Pleasure or sarap, is often felt during situations that stimulate one or more of the body's senses, for example, the thirst-quenching pleasure of drinking ice-cold buko juice on a hot summer afternoon, or the tactile pleasure of a lover's hands massaging one's back after a long day.

Similar to other individual states like joy, interest, or pride, pleasure belongs to the first pillar of contemporary positive psychology called positive subjective experiences (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), making it a key ingredient in the pursuit of the pleasant life. Though often confused because of their shared hedonic quality, situational nature, and common co-occurrence, pleasure is analytically and empirically distinct from related states like positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004). Pleasure is highly dependent upon stimulation

of the physical body, often in fulfillment of a need (e.g., satiation of thirst by water, cooling of an overheated body by a bath), whereas positive emotions often take place even without physical stimuli (e.g., saya upon receiving good news, interest in thinking of a novel idea, pride in remembering the past accomplishments of a fellow Filipino). This difference is recognized in Filipino culture, according to Salazar (2008), via the semantic distinction between sarap (a positive affective state related to the sensory dimension of embodied behaviors such as eating, e.g., sarap ng pagkain, or respiration, e.g., sarap ng simoy ng hangin) and ligaya (a positive emotion related to complex, often abstract social contexts beyond the individual self, e.g., ligayang dala ng kalayaan, ligayang dulot ng pagmamahal).

It is this sensory, embodied nature of pleasure that gives rise to one of its specific, highly sought-after, and sometimes contested forms: that of sexual pleasure.

Sexual Pleasure: Positive, Personal, and Political

Sexual pleasure can be defined as the positive subjective experience arising from erotic stimuli (Rye & Meaney, 2007). This form of pleasure flows from a large range of erotic stimulation that a person subjectively finds “sexy” or “naka-kalibog”, including the visual (e.g., the sight of an attractive half-naked model, a video of two people passionately making love), auditory (e.g., songs with rhythmic tempos and sexually suggestive lyrics), and perhaps most importantly, tactile (e.g., halik from one’s lover, haplos from touching one’s own erogenous body parts, the acts of foreplay, romansa, pakikipagtalik, and afterplay, etc.).

As any other affective state, sexual pleasure possesses motivational properties. Research by psychologists and biologists has shown that though human sexual behavior is complex and multifaceted, pleasure stands as its single most

important motivator (Diamond, 1997; Meston & Buss, 2007). Rather than for procreation, humans mostly have sex for “recreation”; in other words, we have sex for fun. Sex feels good – *masarap ang sex*. Or, more accurately, sex can make us feel good – via erotic behaviors, we can experience sexual pleasure. This feel-good state is not only limited to sexual intercourse or *pakikipagtalik*, however, but can be elicited by various situations and acts that are subjectively interpreted as erotic, including masturbation (which gives rise to its synonym “self-pleasuring”), sexual fantasy, and the many instances of sexual interactions between two or more individuals.

However way it is lit and stoked, I argue that sexual pleasure can be furthered analyzed along a number of features that characterize the various experiences of human, and Filipino, sexuality: as a phenomenon that is embodied, socially constructed, subjectively experienced, gendered, and politically contested. First, sexual pleasure is, by definition, an embodied state (Jackson & Scott, 2007). Sexual pleasure is grounded in the body, including the neurophysiological processes that link activations in sensory systems like touch and sight to the brain’s affective and interpretive centers. Second, beyond its physical nature, sexual pleasure, like any other aspect of human sexuality, unfolds and is imbued with meanings within social, cultural, and historical contexts (Tan, 2005). Culture helps define what may be considered erotic or even pleasurable – as well as not pleasurable – for its members via processes like social representation and socialization. Third, though considered universally accessible by nature and shared in meaning by culture, sexual pleasure is an individual experience, subjectively felt, personal and intimate (Tan, 2005). This condition of subjectivity means that individuals possess access to their inner states, including sexual pleasure, and have the ability to reflect on and express them externally, for example, through discourse and language (even though the subjective reports of sexual states

and objective physical measures may not always converge; see Nobre et al., 2004). This subjectivity makes possible sexual agency (Schalet, 2009). Fourth, gender organizes the pathways and processes of sexual pleasure, the same way it does many other facets of human sexuality. Filipino men and women are often differentially positioned with respect to access and power in matters of sexuality, especially within the matrix of heterosexuality (Aguiling-Dalisay et al., 2000; Estrada-Claudio, 1996; Ong, this volume). Finally, sexual pleasure is not simply a personal state but a political nexus (Richardson, 2000) – a contested domain where social agents like religious institutions, family, school, medicine, and the state vie for the regulation, control, and “discipline” of bodies and their meanings and experiences of pleasure (Foucault, 1976/1998; Holland et al., 1992).

Orgasm as a Form of Sexual Pleasure

One of the most prototypic forms of sexual pleasure is orgasm, the subjective experience of peak intense pleasure and tension release due to sexual stimulation (Dousma, 2006). In Filipino sexual culture, orgasm can be referred to as *rurok* (‘peak’, referencing the buildup to its high intensity). Another Filipino term, *nilabasan*, frames orgasm as an emission process from within oneself to the outside, usually taken to mean ejaculation in men.

The association of orgasm with male ejaculation is not without physiological basis, as the two typically co-occur. Because of this, the release of semen is often taken as an externally observable indicator of orgasm among men (Scott & Jackson, 2007). For women, the subjective experience of orgasm is usually accompanied by a series of internal rhythmic contractions in the genitals and pelvic muscles, as well as swelling of the breasts. Both women and men also experience increased heart rate, rapid breathing, increased blood pressure, and flushing of the skin. Apart from these

anatomical bases, much less is known about the neuroscientific dimensions of orgasm and exactly how our neurons fire and function during this peak pleasurable state (Strong et al., 2006).

Behaviorally, orgasm can be experienced in the context of a variety of sexual acts, including masturbation, oral sex, penetrative sex, sometimes even nongenital contact like stroking of the nipples and breasts, and possibly even purely psychological arousal states as in the case of having an orgasm during a sexual dream (Rye & Meaney, 2007). Clearly, there are many possible pathways to sexual pleasure and to orgasm.

However it is achieved, orgasm is imbued with social meanings. Researchers from Western cultures have documented how orgasms are socially construed and represented variously as: a defining, sometimes essential, feature of “sex” (Bogart et al., 2000; Sprecher, Barbee & Schwartz, 1995), an indicator of one’s “normality” as a fully functioning sexual being especially among women (Nicholson & Burr, 2003), the ultimate goal of all sexual activity (Lavie-Ajayi & Jofee, 2009), a mystical and transcendental spiritual experience (Potts, 2000), a fungible resource that is given and exchanged especially by men to women in heterosexual contexts (Dousma, 2006), a “mystery” and problem area in women’s sexuality (Jackson & Scott, 2007), and a self-evident and unproblematic event in men’s sexuality (Lorentzen, 2007).

Because of its richness as a psychological, subjective moment of pleasure, as well as its analytic location at the intersection of biological and constructivist discourses, orgasm is an interesting topic of discussion and study in the context of the psychology of sexuality – including the Filipino cultural psychology of sexuality (Manalastas & Macapagal, 2005).

Problem

How is orgasm experienced and construed as a form of sexual pleasure among Filipinos? And how can these experiences of sexual pleasure be accessed and explored discursively by others in a university classroom setting? The goals of this study were two-fold: first, to explore lived experiences of orgasm and provide initial insights into these pleasure-moments in Filipino sexual culture, and second, to test the potentials and constraints of a learning exercise designed to provide access to these accounts – an activity I call orgasm interviews, or *mga kwent-O ng sarap*, where Filipino students enrolled in an undergraduate course in human sexuality interviewed two women and two men about their first and most recent experiences of orgasm.

Method

Classroom Context

I designed the orgasm interview activity as a learning exercise in an undergraduate course titled Social Science 3 (“Exploring Gender and Sexuality”) at the University of the Philippines Diliman. Social Science 3, or SocSci3, is a 16-week, one-semester general education lecture course open to all undergraduate UP Diliman students as part of a broad liberal arts curriculum. It aims to introduce students to broad social science perspectives in gender and sexuality studies, including topics like sexual politics, sexual rights, feminism and identity politics, men and masculinities, transgenering, love and romantic relationships, body esteem, HIV/AIDS, masturbation, coming out and LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) identities, heteronormativity and the gender binary, diversity in human sexual behaviors, and sexual pleasure. The course attracts both female and male students across different year levels and, though not a

requirement for graduation, is one of the most subscribed and sought-after courses on campus.

Participants

As part of a class requirement, 47 undergraduate students from UP Diliman (31 women and 16 men) enrolled in SocSci3 conducted orgasm interviews, i.e., looked for four participants to ask about their lived experiences of orgasm. Students were from all year levels of university (freshmen to seniors, ages 16 to 21) and came from a wide range of majors, including education, biology, engineering, chemistry, journalism, sports science, film studies, physics, and psychology. Interviewees had to be Filipino and not be enrolled in SocSci3. One hundred one men and 87 women (total N = 188), with ages ranging from 16 to 56, agreed to participate and tell the students their various *kwent-O ng sarap*. Interviewees included other college students from UP Diliman and other universities, professionals, parents, other family members, Internet-based acquaintances, and referrals from previously interviewed respondents.

Procedure

During a discussion on experiences, contexts, and pursuit of sexual pleasure (Rye & Meaney, 2007), students were tasked an integrative, active learning exercise: to conduct orgasm interviews, that is, to have face to face conversations with two men and two women about their: (1) most recent experience of orgasm, and (2) first experience of orgasm. Students' reflection essays reporting on the process, outcomes, and personal thoughts about the activity, two to three pages in length, were collected after two weeks and analyzed for this study. Essays were first-person accounts of how the students sought potential respondents, the actual process of interviewing, the outcomes of the interviews (including, whenever possible, direct quotes from interviewees whose

names were kept confidential in the papers), and their own assessments of the orgasm interviews. Students were also allowed to share their own accounts of most recent and first orgasm, if they wanted. Majority of the essays were in English, with quotes in Filipino; a few were entirely written in Filipino.

After an initial reading of all the essays, I coded the data in two waves. The first analytic pass focused specifically on the accounts of orgasm, including basic descriptive information such as situational and developmental contexts, as well as themes like subjectivity and gendering. The second analytic pass examined the orgasm interview process more generally, including students' reports of challenges, learning and insights in the course of conducting the activity as well as their overall evaluations of the exercise. After a final reading of the entire dataset to check consistency of coding, exemplary quotes were selected.

Prior to in-class submission, I emphasized that papers would be analyzed as part of an evaluation study of the Soc-Sci3 course. All who submitted the written component of the assignment were automatically given full marks for the activity. An equivalent alternative requirement was made available for students who wished to not participate in this particular assignment; none of the students chose this option.

Results and Discussion

This section begins with some findings from the orgasm interviews as mediated and expressed in the submitted reports, including interviewees' awareness and meanings of orgasm, the social and behavioral contexts for their first and most recent orgasm, and their accounts of orgasm's affective dimensions. This is followed by an analysis of the orgasm

interview, from the perspective of students, in terms of its potentials and limitations as a learning tool for exploring the pleasures of Filipino sexuality.

Orgasm: Awareness and Definitions

All students were able to find individuals who were willing to share their experiences of orgasm. When asked how they personally defined the term, most respondents, men and women, correctly associated orgasm with sexual pleasure, especially as the peak, intense moment of positive affect during sexual stimulation. As one respondent remarked:

“Orgasm? Alam ko yun yung tawag pag nilalabasan yung isang tao. Kahit babae o lalake. Basta yung culminating point kung saan parang naa-achieve mo yung satisfaction dun sa sexual activity.” (male interviewee, F01-M21)

Other meanings invoked more metaphorical definitions of orgasm, including the notion of ultimate pleasure:

“Orgasm yun yung tinatawag na point kung saan narating yung heaven ng sexual pleasure.” (female interviewee, F01-F1)

A handful of potential respondents were apparently unfamiliar with the term orgasm, even the Filipino terms. So instead of continuing with the interview, this led to a mini-lecture (led by the SocSci3 student) about the basics of orgasm and sexual pleasure, as we had discussed them in class.

Orgasm as a Situated Pleasure Experience

Students asked interviewees where their first and most recent orgasm took place, at what age, how, and with whom. The most common locations for both first and most recent

were private places such as one's bedroom or a bathroom.

“When asked where their first orgasm happened, all four of them had the same answer: in their own houses, their own bedrooms in particular. I joked they were all boring – all sex escapades conducted in the familiar four corners of their bedrooms. All of them also share the same feeling of surprise, relief, and enjoyment.” (female SocSci3 student, F12)

Filipino men reported having their first orgasm during grade school (ages 7 to 12), usually while watching porn videos, reading erotica, or self-touching without particular sexual intent (as during a bath). A few had their first orgasm during high school, via masturbation, after being urged by male peers who had experience with masturbation and wanted them to try it for themselves. After those initial experiences with orgasm, men continued their engagement with the sexual pleasures of their body via masturbation up till adulthood.

Filipino men shared having their latest orgasm quite recently, most a few days before the interview, some even earlier in the same day of the interview itself usually via masturbation, or sometimes during sex with a partner, as in the case of one male respondent:

“Guy #2 was a bit hesitant [to be interviewed] at first since he is married and middle-aged but I told him there was no age limit. He shared that he had his first orgasm when he was seven years old in his house. His feelings at the time were: ‘Wow! Gotta do that more often’. His most recent orgasm was with his wife in their bedroom. There was more romance and love compared to his first orgasm. He mentioned that there was that consciousness of how to give pleasure to his partner.” (female SocSci3 student, F15-M2)

In contrast, many women reported having their first orgasm

later on during their mid to late teens or even twenties, often during interpersonal sexual activity with a boyfriend or girlfriend.

“My last respondent was one of my high school teachers. She first experienced orgasm at age 27 with her boyfriend, two years ago.” (female SocSci3 student, F04-F2)

“Her first experience was when she was 19 and had her coital debut with her boyfriend, which was done in his house while his parents were away. ‘It was that feeling when you just can’t stop and it happens,’ she related.” (female SocSci3 student, F22-F1)

“My first female respondent is a 16-year old bisexual. She first experienced orgasm induced by intimate kissing (cheeks, lips, and neck) with her female partner in her fourth year in high school.” (female SocSci3 student, F31-F1)

Many Filipina women were first acquainted with orgasm in romantic relationship contexts, with the company of intimate partners. These contexts offered safe spaces to experience pleasure, while at the same time reinforcing notions of female sexuality as highly relational, socially interdependent, and, at least within the heterosexual matrix, subordinate to male sexuality (Estrada-Claudio, 1996).

On the other hand, a few women experienced their first orgasm on their own, often unexpectedly, even accidentally, and in the process discovered the pleasures of self-stimulation.

“My first was nung grade six. Funny story, actually. Eh di ba may bath tub kami and kapag weekends, dahil nga walang pasok at di kailangan magmadali,

nagre-relax ako sa tub. One Saturday morning, eh di yun na nga. I was leaning over to reach for the faucet. Tapos the running water splashed all over my X. Pag ginagamit ko ang tub, I can't resist the urge. Naging trip na.” (female interviewee, F01-F2)

And while some men reported having their first orgasm in the context of masturbating while watching porn or reading explicit erotica, a few women tasted their first orgasm via masturbation after being turned on by reading romance novels.

“Una niyang naranasan ang orgasm noong siya’y nasa ikatlong antas nang hayskul habang natutulog na ang lahat at binabalikan niya ang erotikong mga pang-yayari na nabasa niya sa isang Tagalog romance pocketbook. Sa madaling salita, sinabi niyang nangyari iyon noong nagsariling-kayod o masturbate siya isang gabi dahil sa mga nabasa niya sa pocketbook. Sinabi rin niya na huli niyang naranasan ang orgasm noong huling linggo ng Hulyo habang mag-isa siya at iniisip niya ang pagtatalik ng mga bida sa nabasa niyang pocketbook.” (female SocSci3 student, F10-F1)

Other contexts that led to orgasm for women included sexual intercourse with a husband, hugging a pillow, and even breast-feeding. Most had their most recent orgasm weeks or even months prior to the interview; some even reported their first orgasm to be their latest (that is, they had experienced orgasm once and only once). This was especially true for women who did not engage in masturbation, a practice which appeared to be associated with more frequent and regular orgasm experiences:

“My second interviewee told me that it was arousing and stress relieving. Her latest was the morning before my interrogation, while masturbating in her room. She even told me that if she doesn't experience it at night,

it's hard for her to fall asleep.” (female SocSci3 student, F06-F2)

The contexts, both behavioral and developmental, of first and most recent orgasm suggest that this experience of sexual pleasure is indeed highly gendered. As the global sexuality literature (e.g., Lavie-Ajayi & Joffe, 2009) and Filipina feminist psychologists (e.g., Estrada-Claudio, 1996; Ong, this volume) have argued, women including Filipina women are afforded less access to the pleasures of their own individual bodies, thus they start their engagement with sexual pleasure much later on in life compared to men and usually in contexts that already involve interpersonal interaction (e.g., being touched by a sexual partner) instead of in contexts of personal discovery and learning (e.g., exploration and touching of one's own body).

Orgasm: Pleasure and Ambivalence

As expected, orgasm was a highly pleasurable embodied experience, as reported by the interviewees. Orgasm involved sensations of delight coursing through one's body, of intense enjoyment that seemed to be captured only through metaphorical language, or sometimes, was a feeling altogether beyond words:

“She was very eager to tell me that her first orgasm was all by herself. She describes it like this: ‘Parang may kuryenteng dadaan sa buong katawan tapos bigla mo na lang mararamdaman na para kang nasa langit.’” (female SocSci3 student, F14-F1)

“She described it as: ‘parang nag-iba lahat, nasa mas mataas kang lugar, pero yung feeling hindi ko talaga ma-describe, para kang naka-float on air.’” (female SocSci3 student, F14-F2)

“I felt exhilarated. All this pressure buildup finally released. Orgasm takes you to a different place you’ve never been before.” (male interviewee, Fo8-M2)

Note the description of being carried away, upward, to a place of bliss – almost like an altered state of consciousness with sarap as the predominant feeling.

The intensity of pleasure during orgasm was also marked by a profound sense of relief and relaxation that warmly enveloped the body immediately after the tiring intensity of the climax point.

“My first male interviewee experienced his first orgasm when he was 12 years old through masturbation. He felt extremely relieved, yet sleepy at the same time. He told me, ‘Para bang nawala lahat ng stress mo. In fairness, nakakapagod! Talagang gusto kong matulog pagkatapos’. His most recent orgasm was in mid-July when he had sex with his current boyfriend.” (female SocSci3 student, Fo9-M1)

“I started interviewing my 56-year-old uncle at the prompting of my cousin. ‘Heaven’ was his description of the experience. ‘Ang sarap’ and ‘nakakapagod’ were his other descriptions. The last time was when he had sex with my aunt.” (female SocSci3 student, F29-M2)

This relaxation was an enjoyable prelude to the bodily pleasures of sleep, which was considered to be more restful and deep after the exhilarating highs of orgasm.

“It feels like you’re going to pee really really bad. Then you reach a point where a feeling goes down from your vagina to your legs and all the way up to your back. It’s like sensation overload. I can understand why people say they can’t stand because you feel so relaxed after.”

If you fall asleep, it's so blissful and calm.” (female interviewee, Fo8-F1)

This orgasm-repose link interestingly links two forms of sarap – one sexual and intense, another tranquil and restorative – both involving the gratification of important bodily needs.

Other positive feelings associated with orgasm were pride and even gleeful surprise (after the first orgasm).

“Almost all of their emotional responses were positive. When I asked what he felt after having an orgasm, one even answered, ‘Success!’” (female SocSci3 student, F18-M1)

“The second guy respondent experienced his first orgasm when he was 13 years old. I asked him, ‘How did you feel?’ He replied, ‘It felt nakakagulat. So-brang gulat ako, kinuwento ko agad over the phone sa friends ko. Amazing!’ His most recent was just two days before I interviewed him.” (female SocSci3 student, F13-M2)

Overall, the accounts collected by students supported the core idea of orgasm as a meaningful and compelling positive subjective experience. Orgasm was found to be enjoyable and satisfying experiences by Filipino men and women, whether in the context of self-pleasuring or masturbation, or as a result of socially intimate acts like sexual intercourse. Orgasm was pleasurable, masarap in and of itself, and could provide a feeling of being spent, leading to the experience of masarap na tulog.

Not all orgasm experiences were so uniformly positive, however. Some male interviewees reported initial confusion and fear despite the enjoyment of having an orgasm, when it was

their first time and it happened unexpectedly.

“Not everyone enjoys the first orgasm. There was one who said that his first orgasm was confusing. At the same time that it felt good, it also scared him because of the unexpected circumstances that it occurred. He was in Grade 3 then and didn’t know what he was experiencing.” (male SocSci3 student, Mo4-M1)

Here the negative affect accompanying or following orgasm was brought about by a lack of prior knowledge about it. Given its intensity, experiencing an orgasm for the first time while not knowing what is happening to one’s body was cause for some alarm.

On the other hand, some women reported guilt after having their first orgasm. This was related to having internalized religious ideologies that construed sexual pleasure – and sexual acts – as forbidden and morally incorrect.

“One of the female respondents felt guilty after she had her first orgasm. She’s a Christian and felt like she had committed a sin.” (female SocSci3 student, F18-F1)

Interestingly, the proscription against sexual pleasures and acts likewise opened up other possibilities for pleasure – including the pleasure of knowingly transgressing these very prohibitions.

“She told me that her first orgasm was when she was about 15 years old while having intercourse with her boyfriend. She told me the feeling of orgasm was unlike any feeling, and it felt so wrong but felt so right.” (male SocSci3 student, M16-F2)

Such was the intrinsic pleasure of orgasm that even higher-order cognition, such as an internalized belief that sexual pleasure and sexual acts are somehow inappropriate, could not sufficiently overcome orgasm's delights. Even those interviewees who reported confusion and uncertainty during their first acknowledged the sheer pleasure of the experience of orgasm.

Overall, as told in the students' accounts of the outcomes of orgasm interviews, Filipino subjective experiences of orgasm were marked by the intense positive affect of sarap, of a welcome mixture of sarap and pagod, or for some, a blend of sarap and negative affect like confusion or guilt. The developmental pathways to orgasm appeared to be highly structured by gender, such that Filipino men engaged the sexual pleasures of their bodies at relatively younger ages via acts such as masturbation continuing to the present, while Filipina women tended to access these pleasures later on, often in relational contexts, and with less frequency.

Orgasm Interviews: Confronting Sexual Pleasure's Construction as "Private"

As a learning tool for exploring sexual pleasure as a positive subjective experience, conducting interviews about orgasm presented an initial challenge, as reported by students: worries about securing participants' accounts of something so "private" and personal.

"When this assignment was given to us, I have to admit I was surprised, amused, and nervous – the last because I wasn't sure if I'd be able to interview anyone willing to divulge personal things such as their orgasm record." (female SocSci3 student, F16)

A number of students wrote about initial apprehension in inviting respondents to tell their stories, saying that such

sexual experiences would be highly personal, not something easily shared to others, and indeed “nakakahiya”. By deploying this construction of sexual pleasure – and sexuality in general – as a private matter that should not cross over into the public sphere (including interpersonal discursive spaces such as interviews and conversations), students reproduced cultural notions of personal sexuality as something to be hidden and even be ashamed about (Iverson, 2007; Tan, 2005). Unlike other positive subjective experiences like the pleasures of food and eating or the pleasures of music and auditory stimulation, the pleasures associated with sexuality and eroticism were seen as somehow distinct and separable from everyday life, extraordinary and particular, provoking wariness and even anxiety (Jackson & Scott, 2004).

Another effect of construing orgasms (and telling stories of them) as strictly individual and confined within a tight private-public boundary was the creation of negative expectations for the task at hand. A few students who expressed pessimistic apprehension reported delaying the interview task until the last possible moment, mentally discounting potential participants without even trying to invite them, and failing to prepare followup questions which only came to mind in hindsight when it was already time to write their report.

More often than not, this apprehension was unfounded, and reassurance came with repeated practice such that by their third and fourth interviews, students felt more confident and self-assured in what they were doing and in the value of the learning activity. In a few cases, the reassurance came from unexpected sources such as the interviewees themselves.

“As I was conducting the interview with my first girl respondent, she didn’t feel any hesitation while telling her first experience. She even sensed that I was ner-

vous and uneasy. She even said, 'Huwag ka na mahiya! Isipin mo na lang na parang ate mo ako.' (female SocSci3 student, F13-F1)

Having enthusiastic interviewees who were very open and eager to tell their personal stories helped students confront and conquer the dominant prohibitive construction of sexual pleasure as a highly private form of pleasure. It even led to some respondents themselves to seek out students in order to share their stories, when they heard such interviews were being conducted:

"I interviewed a family friend (52 years old) who came from Baguio. It was from her that I got the most interesting answers. Of all the interviews, she was most open to the topic. I sensed it when she told me that it is really about time for me to know about these things. She had eye contact with me for the whole interview. Her hand gestures also showed her confidence and openness. A few days later she told my other aunt about the interview I did with her. To my surprise, my aunt also wanted to be interviewed the next time around. She found the topic interesting." (female SocSci3 student, F29-F2)

This student's experience with her aunt who wanted to volunteer to be interviewed is a good example of how negative expectations about the task are not necessarily based on a fixed, essentialist feature of sexual pleasure – the belief that any open discussion of sexual pleasure would be malicious or even uncomfortable. For this student, creating the discursive space with the family friend led to further sharing and participation of others, in this case, an older female relative.

Orgasm Interviews: Confronting Sexual Pleasure's Construction as Gendered

The “privacy” of sexual pleasure was not the only constraint faced by students. The gendering of sexuality and of opening up discursive spaces dedicated to it was the second other challenge students mentioned. The gender hurdles came in two related forms. The first involved the apparent difficulty of male students in interviewing women but not other men:

“Asking my fellow men about their experiences of orgasm was an assignment that gave me little trouble. I actually asked more than two. In fact, I asked my whole barkada. Approaching the opposite sex was more difficult. After picking who to ask, I could not just ask the question directly. For the assurance of my safety, ‘This is for school’ was the necessary line I had to say before asking about their orgasms.” (male SocSci3 student, M07)

A number of male students reported ease in finding and interviewing other men, but expressed concern and apprehension about conducting the same conversations with women. In the previous quote, the student had to steel his will by reminding himself of the academic nature of the activity.

This perceived difficulty of men interviewing women about their sexuality was explained by the cultural notion of *respeto* (and its converse, *pambabastos*) constructed within a heterosexual matrix of gender. Women, according to gender norms in Filipino sexual culture, stand as objects of desire to be admired, valued, and respected by men, following a kind of benevolent sexism (Glick et al., 2000). For a man to talk to a woman about her sexuality and experiences of sexual pleasure apparently possessed the potential to be considered as *bastos*, therefore the academic requisiteness of the activity had to be emphasized. This explanation was likewise

invoked by one male student who wrote:

“The hardest and at the same time nakakatakot na part was interviewing a girl. Kasi baka isipin ng girl, binabastos ko siya at ma-OASH pa ako.” (male Soc-Sci3 student, M13)

For this male student, talking to a woman about pleasures related to sexuality had the possibility of being construed as offensive – but no such negative value was ascribed to talking to men about the very same topic, clearly indicating an asymmetry in terms of gender. His concern extended even to the scenario of being personally reported to OASH, the university’s Office of Anti-Sexual Harassment, which processes cases of sexual harassment among students and faculty (even though structured purposeful learning activities such as the orgasm interview with consenting adult respondents would not be considered sexual harassment).

The problematics of cross-gender discussion of sexual pleasures and orgasm were not limited to men interviewing women, however. One female student explained how her male interviewees found it difficult to share their stories with her because to do so carried the risk of “disrespect” because she was a woman and they were men.

“Disclosing experiences felt really awkward for them despite my efforts in making the interview very informal and natural. The quality of the interview was not an issue at all; it was my gender. The idea of talking about this topic with a female was very uncomfortable for them because, as they said, they fantasize about girls to be sexually stimulated yet here I was, a female, asking them about it. If it were a male who asked, it would have been an easier task for them since they feel fellow males would understand and more importantly there would be no feeling of ‘disrespect’ toward the

interviewer.” (female SocSci3 student, F31)

The movement of stories and discourses of orgasm and sexual pleasure across the gender binary was said to generate tensions. These tensions were construed in terms of Filipino cultural notions of respect/disrespect, of proper ways of conducting (and maintaining) gender relations. That is, some men found that talking to a woman about experiences of sexual pleasure was tantamount to disrespect, and awkward at best, offensive at worst. Interestingly, this could apply to men talking to a woman about her experiences of orgasm, and to men talking to a woman who was interviewing them about their experiences of orgasm. Apparently, when a woman acts as an agentic sexual subject, speaking of her experience or inquiring about those of men, certain gendered boundaries are violated, generating tension.

The second gender hurdle that students conducting orgasm interviews encountered was finding female participants who had stories of sexual pleasure to tell. This was pointed out, interestingly, by women students who expressed disappointment about the discrepancy between the ease of finding Filipino men who had had many orgasm experiences on one hand and the difficulty of finding Filipina women with such same stories. One student remarked:

“Initially I thought that I wouldn’t be able to find guys to interview. But before the week even ended, my two guys were done and I even had a spare. It turns out that interviewing girls was the tough part. First, I only had a very few sexually experienced female friends who’d be willing to share their stories with me. To make it worse, some of the experienced female people I knew hadn’t even had a taste of orgasm during their sexual escapades.” (female SocSci3 student, F30)

Female students initially thought that the same-gender interviews (i.e., woman to woman) would be breezier than interviewing across gender. This was not necessarily the case, however, as one student reported:

“It should have been easier for them to face a fellow female as an interviewer, yet sharing experiences still seemed quite uneasy on their part.” (female SocSci3 student, F31)

Students’ reports of the process and outcomes of the orgasm interviews painted a picture of orgasm as a positive psychological experience that should be universal and fundamentally human, but was often structured in ways that reflect gender inequalities. Nevertheless, students keenly observed that this gendering was not necessarily reflective of an essential difference between men and women, but was constructed within prevailing social contexts of power and regulation of Filipina women’s and Filipino men’s sexualities:

“Comparing the orgasm experiences of both sexes, I can say that orgasm is not that different for males and females, except that it is more acceptable for males to have orgasm than females because of the norms that religion, society, and even family impose.” (male SocSci3 student, M09)

Orgasm Interviews: Potentials for Learning, Insight, and Vicarious Pleasure

Beyond its challenges and constraints, the orgasm interview activity offered a number of positive outcomes, as reported by students. These included: (1) learning about orgasms and sexual pleasure, (2) growth as a discursive sexual being, (3) insights about the relational value of open discursive spaces related to sexuality and sexual pleasure, and (4) the vicarious pleasure of encountering the sexual stories of others.

First, students reported learning facts and details about orgasm itself, especially when they had no personal knowledge of the subjective experience of it.

“As a sexually inexperienced person, I’ve no actual idea how orgasm really is so it was good to hear the way people see/feel/experience it.” (female SocSci3 student, Fo2)

Realizations about sexual behavior and its motivated nature were also cited as a positive learning outcome of the interview exercise. Continued the previous student:

“With this activity, I learned to be more open to see sex using different perspectives and therefore not judge people regarding their decisions about their sexuality. Some viewed sex as a form of recreation, some as procreation, others saw it as a bond for a stronger relationship, and some see it as a whole lot of fun.” (female SocSci3 student, Fo2)

A second positive result of conducting orgasm interviews was the development of personal comfort and skill in engaging others in clear and informative discussions about the pleasures of sexual life, as these three students narrated:

“For me conducting the interview comfortably was quite difficult but as the activity progressed, I managed not to use terms like ‘you know’ and ‘yung ano’ when referring to masturbation or sex. Through this activity, I learned how to talk about sexuality-related topics with ease.” (female SocSci3 student, Fo9)

“The assignment was very fun for me! It was out of the ordinary and there was the feeling of overcoming fear and embarrassment over talking about something

that was natural and part of life. The whole experience was just very enlightening.” (female SocSci3 student, F15)

“Not sure of having experienced orgasm myself, this activity was a curious and intriguing eye-opener. More than the interview content however, I pride myself for having extracted responses from obstinate respondents. Despite giggles, amid stern and suspicious looks, I persevered.” (female SocSci3 student, F12)

The initial discomfort about talking to people about something as “private” as orgasms and sexual pleasure set the stage for personal growth as a discursive sexual being, from being awkward or embarrassed, to being confident and at ease.

Related to the personal nature of the interviews, a third positive outcome was the insight that having open discussion about sexuality-related subjective experiences revealed an interesting angle to interpersonal relationships. Students enjoyed finding out about the orgasm experiences and perspectives of friends and family, saying that it was a novel and exciting topic that involved sharing and disclosure.

“I learned in this activity that it’s fun to have this kind of topic being talked about with other people. You get to know different things and you are able to know that person in another way, a more interesting manner.” (male SocSci3 student, M02)

“Overall the experience was fun, interesting, challenging, and different. It was fun and interesting because you get to know about the more sexual aspect of people’s lives. I also found out that I am not the only one who masturbates.” (male SocSci3 student, M15)

“It was very enjoyable knowing the sexual side of people especially your friends.” (male SocSci3 student, M01)

Finally, a fourth positive outcome was the sheer pleasure experienced in hearing people tell their own stories of pleasure, a kind of shared and vicarious enjoyment. Watching a respondent relive and recount her or his past experiences of orgasm was pleasurable in its own right.

“In the end it was fun and memorable. It was a very horny task. Every time you hear them talk about ‘it’, you can’t help but imagine what they feel and what they look like after having their orgasm.” (male SocSci3 student, M01)

This point indicates that aside from the political function of challenging a sexuality-negative social order (Plummer, 1995), the opening of discursive spaces related to sexuality offers a very particular psychological benefit: it can be a source of positive affect in itself (Byers & Demmons, 1999). This can be true for both the discloser and the target, the story-teller and the audience (Plummer, 1995).

Orgasm Interviews: Overall Evaluations

“More than it was hard and even quite uncomfortable at first, it turned out to be fine and fun. The whole process of making this paper was enjoyable and educational. After all, communication is the best tool for learning.” (female SocSci3 student, F20)

As the quote above suggests, the orgasm interview was considered to be, overall, a challenging yet rewarding active learning activity. Initial misgivings about the task were

common, especially when notions of privacy and gender-based propriety were salient. However, in the process of talking to two Filipino men and two Filipina women about the first and most recent experiences of orgasm, students reported encountering the concept of pleasure, particularly its sexual forms, come alive – or at least via their interviewees, recalled and relived. Orgasm and sexual pleasure were no longer simply highly subjective, technical psychological concepts, but actual lived experiences of friends, family members, and strangers that could be related, shared, and accessed discursively via sexual stories. As one student explained:

“This task made me see real-life happenings [related] to what we discuss in class. It made me find good reasons for studying sexuality. This task definitely wrapped up the past lessons into something that made good sense. I realized that I still have a lot to learn about sexuality and the world’s sexual behaviors. This task definitely fuelled my interest and opened my mind in realizing that there is so much happening under the sheets that I’m not aware of. I am intrigued and I want to know more.” (female SocSci3 student, F29)

Insights were not limited to the positive experience of orgasm, but extended to the subjectivity involved in human sexuality, as well as the ways Filipino, and human, sexual lives may be contested politically and constrained socially. Some even linked their insights explicitly to the course’s objectives.

“Through this activity I learned that sexual behavior is a very subjective topic and to some is still very sensitive or even forbidden. During this assignment, I felt like a true sexual scientist and felt the true purpose of our class. This is what sexuality exploration is all about.” (male SocSci3 student, M17)

By the end of the activity – interviewing four people and writing a reflection essay – students came to appreciate the challenges, potentials, and pleasures of discussing and talking about sarap and sexual pleasure, particularly about Filipino experiences of orgasm, in part because of the interactive nature of the exercise, a feature which tends to be highly engaging for many Filipino learners studying sexuality (Manalastas & Macapagal, 2005).

“This four-page paper is not enough to tackle all the juicy details, emotional content, realizations, and lessons that I gathered and learned in the whole process of accomplishing this paper. I guess one summary statement that would wholly describe how I felt and assess this activity is: more interview activities please!” (female SocSci3 student, F20)

Summary, Limitations, and Further Pleasurable Directions

Findings from this learning exercise-based exploration of orgasm as a form of sexual pleasure indicated that orgasm was indeed a significant, positive psychological Filipino experience that involved the senses and the body. Orgasm was considered pleasurable, a variety of sarap, that could be linked to other sensory pleasures like restful sleep, even when sometimes it was experienced with affective ambivalence in the form of confusion or even guilt. The behavioral contexts of orgasm were shaped along developmental and gendered dimensions – with Filipino men reporting early and more frequent engagement with orgasm and sexual pleasure, often via solitary explorations like masturbation, and Filipina women reporting later encounters with orgasm, often in relationship-situated sexual moments.

These findings were accessed and explored discursively us-

ing a learning exercise that asked students enrolled in an undergraduate course in human sexuality to interview two Filipina women and two Filipino men about their first and most recent experiences of orgasm. Student reports suggested that the activity was a useful and enjoyable learning tool to access and explore some of the subjective, embodied, socially constructed, gendered, and contested aspects of Filipino sexual pleasure. Despite some initial apprehensions and the challenges encountered in investigating a phenomenon that was construed to be “private” and gendered, the orgasm interviews were evaluated positively, with potential to be a useful tool for learning about Filipino sexuality and positive psychology.

As is probably true for any learning exercise and the results of such an activity (e.g., De Welde & Hubbard, 2003), some caveats should be kept in mind. First, because the data sources in this study were the reflection essays of the students who conducted orgasm interviews, the sexual stories and accounts of first and most recent orgasm were necessarily mediated by the students’ own perspectives and subjective views of the activity (Starks & Morrison, 1996). Further research that looks directly into Filipino men’s and Filipina women’s experiences of orgasm and sexual pleasure are needed to verify and validate the observations made in this study, including the developmental and gendered dimensions of Filipino sexual pleasure.

Second, the orgasm interviews were conducted in the context of an undergraduate human sexuality class. Although student reports supported its usefulness and enjoyment value, I recommend the use of this exercise in other classroom contexts. Interviewing people about sexual pleasure and orgasm may be a potentially worthwhile activity to be tried out in undergraduate and graduate courses in survey research methods (see Illo, 1997, and Tungpalan, 1997, for similar examples), as well as in *sikolohiyang Pilipino*, devel-

opmental psychology, biopsychology, the psychology of gender, and of course, positive psychology.

Finally, though in the exercise and in this study my focus was primarily on orgasm as an exemplar of sarap and sexual pleasure among Filipinos, this is not to say that orgasm is the only important form of sexual pleasure. The pleasures of Filipino sexual lives and experiences no doubt extend above, beyond, and before orgasm – for example, the erotic tactile pleasures of halik and haplos, the giddy romantic chills of kilig – and deserve no less attention and analysis, in order to build a more complete Filipino psychology of the happy life.

REFERENCES

- Aguiling-Dalisay, G., Mendoza, R. M., Mirafelix, E.J. L., Yacat, J. A., Sto. Domingo, M. R., & Bambico, F. R. (2000). *Pagkalalake: Men In Control? Filipino Male Views on Love, Sex & Women*. Quezon City: Pambansang Samahan sa Sikolohiyang Pilipino.
- Bogart, L. M., Cecil, H., Wagstaff, D. A., Pinkerton, S. D., & Abramson, P. R. (2000). Is it “sex”? : College Students’ Interpretations of Sexual Behavior Terminology. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 37, 108-116.
- Byers, E. B., & Demmons, S. (1999). Sexual Satisfaction and Sexual Self-disclosure Within Dating Relationships. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 36, 180-189.
- De Welde, K., & Hubbard, E. A. (2003). “I’m glad I’m not gay!”: Heterosexual Students’ Emotional Experience in the College Classroom with a “Coming Out” Assignment. *Teaching*

Sociology, 31, 73-84.

Diamond, J. (1997). *Why is Sex Fun? The Evolution of Human Sexuality*. London: Phoenix.

Dousma, J. (2006). Was it as good for you as it was for me? Experiencing orgasm within heterosex in contemporary Dutch society. Unpublished MSc thesis, Universiteit van Amsterdam.

Estrada-Claudio, S. (1996). Isang panimulang pagsisiyasat sa konstruksyon ng pagkababae sa kulturang Pilipino. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of the Philippines Diliman.

Foucault, Michel. (1976/1998). *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin.

Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56, 218-226.

Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences*, 359, 1367-1377.

Glick, P, Fiske, S. T., Mladinic, A., Saiz, J.L., Abrams, D., Masser, B., Adetoun, B., Osagie, J.E., Akande, A., Alao, A., Brunner, A., Willemsen, T.M., Chipeta, K., Dardenne, B., Dijksterhuis, A., Wigboldus, D., Eckes, T., Six-Materna, I., Exposito, F., Moya, M., Foddy, M., Kim, H. J., Lameiras, M., Sotelo, M. J., Mucchi-Faina, A., Romani, M., Sakall, N., Udegbe, B., Yamamoto, M., Ui, M., Ferreira, M.C., & Lopez, W.L. (2000) Beyond prejudice as simple antipathy: Hostile and benevolent sexism across cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 763-775.

Holland, J., Ramazonoglu, C., Sharpe, S., & Thomson, R. (1992). Pleasure, pressure and power: Some contradictions of gendered sexuality. *The Sociological Review*, 40, 645-674.

- Illo, J. F. (1997). Understanding sexuality through life histories. In S. H. Guerrero (Ed.), *Feminist Research Experiences: A Casebook* (pp. 7-29). Quezon City: University Center for Women's Studies.
- Ivinson, G. (2007). Pedagogic discourse and sex education: Myths, science and subversion. *Sex Education*, 7, 201-216.
- Jackson, S., & Scott, S. (2004). Sexual antinomies in late modernity. *Sexualities*, 7, 233-248.
- Jackson, S., & Scott, S. (2007). Faking like a woman? Towards an interpretive theorization of sexual pleasure. *Body & Society*, 13, 95-116.
- Lavie-Ajayi, M., & Joffe, H. (2009). Social representations of female orgasm. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 14, 98-107.
- Lorentzen, J. (2007). Masculinities and the phenomenology of men's orgasms. *Men and Masculinities*, 10, 71-84.
- Manalastas, E. J., & Macapagal, R. A. (2005). What do Filipino gay male college students want to learn in sex education? *UCWS Review of Women's Studies*, 25, 126-173.
- Nicholson, P., & Burr, J. (2003). What is "normal" about women's (hetero)sexual desire and orgasm?: A report from an in-depth interview study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 57, 1735-1745.
- Nobre, P. J., Wiegel, M., Bach, A. K., Weisberg, R. B., Brown, T. A., Wincze, J. P., & Barlow, D. H. (2004). Determinants of sexual arousal and the accuracy of its self-estimation in sexually functional males. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 41, 363-371.
- Ong, M. (this volume). Katawan, sarap, babae (hindi ito porno).
- Peterson, C. (2006). *A Primer in Positive Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds*. London: Routledge.

- Richardson, D. (2000). Constructing sexual citizenship: Theorizing sexual rights. *Critical Social Policy*, 105-135.
- Rye, B., & Meaney, G. J. (2007). The pursuit of sexual pleasure. *Sexuality & Culture*, 28-51.
- Salazar, Z. A. (2008). Sikolohiya ng sarap, ligaya at ginhawa. Paper presented at the 33rd conference of the Pambansang Samahan sa Sikolohiyang Pilipino, Angeles City, Pampanga.
- Schalet, A. (2009). Subjectivity, intimacy, and the empowerment paradigm of adolescent sexuality: The unexplored room. *Feminist Studies*, 35, 133-160.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2001). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-14.
- Sprecher, S., Barbee, A., & Schwartz, P. (1995). "Was it good for you, too?": Gender differences in first sexual intercourse experiences. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 32, 3-15.
- Starks, K. J., & Morrison, E. S. (1996). *Growing Up Sexual* (2nd ed.). New York: HarperCollins .
- Strong, B., Yarber, W. L., DeVault, C., & Sayad, B. (2006). *Human Sexuality* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Tan, M. L. (2005). *Sex & Sexuality* (2nd Edition ed.). Quezon City: UP Center for Women's Studies.
- Tungpalan, M. T. (1997). Interactive learning in feminist research. In S. H. Guerrero (Ed.), *Feminist Research Experiences: A Casebook* (pp. 103-137). Quezon City: University Center for Women's Studies.