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A thematic analysis of a sample of partnered lesbian, gay, and bisexual people's concepts of sexual satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Sexual satisfaction is an important component of sexual health. There are few proposed conceptual definitions of sexual satisfaction and operational definitions are significantly limited. Those that exist were developed with heterosexual people. In this study, we performed thematic analysis on 60 Portuguese, partnered, sexual-minority people's written answers to the question: "How would you define sexual satisfaction?" The results revealed a sex positive definition that includes intersecting individual and dyadic dimensions with social discourses relating to sexual minority identity and dominant patterns of relationships and sexuality. Findings highlight the need to consider LGB specific experiences in both research and clinical work.

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Sexual satisfaction; sexual minority; qualitative

Sexual health is a component of overall health and well-being as well as quality of life. It is a multidimensional construct that includes sexual satisfaction (Byers & Rehman, 2014; Edwards & Coleman, 2004). Although sexual satisfaction is a growing topic of empirical research, there is little research on lay-people's understanding of this term (Sánchez-Fuentes, Santos-Iglesias, & Sierra, 2014). This limited knowledge is even greater for sexual minority people (i.e. lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations; LGBs) (McClelland, 2010). A better understanding of sexual satisfaction generally, and specifically for LGB people, will improve research, clinical services, and socio-political advocacy (Anderson & Zou, 2015). In this study, we aimed to contribute to the research on sexual satisfaction by examining the definitions of this concept according to a self-identified sample of Portuguese LGB people in an exclusive amorous relationship.

Sexual satisfaction

Researchers have found that sexual satisfaction is a component of people's health, well-being, relationships, and quality of life (Heiman et al., 2011; Metz & McCarthy, 2007; Penhollow, Young, & Denny, 2009). At the individual level, researchers suggest that sexual satisfaction is related to people's state of physical and psychological health (Scott, Sandberg, Harper, & Miller, 2012), overall well-being (Dundon & Rellini, 2010), and quality of life (Davison, Bell, LaChina, Holden, & Davis, 2009). At the interpersonal level, researchers consistently have found that greater sexual satisfaction occurs with greater relationship satisfaction, quality (e.g. intimacy, self-revelation, quality of communication, conflict), and stability (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Greef & Malherbe, 2001;

McCabe, 1999; Rosen-Grandon, Myers, & Hattie, 2004; Trudel, Turgeon, & Piche, 2010). Despite the consistency in findings, researchers have not used consistent conceptual or operational definitions of sexual satisfaction.

Research based on unclear conceptual and operational definitions of constructs generates problems. Most researchers have based their choice of research measures (i.e. the operational definition) on their own conceptualization of sexual satisfaction (Pascoal, Narciso, & Pereira, 2014; Stulhofer, Busko, & Brouillard, 2010). Depending on the theoretical approach taken, different core concepts are stressed in either conceptual definitions or their quantitative counterparts. Consequently, several measures to assess sexual satisfaction have been produced that focus on distinct aspects of sexual satisfaction, such as the absence or presence of clinical criteria for the diagnosis of sexual dysfunctions (Rust & Golombok, 1985), the quality of communication and conflict management (Hudson, Harrison, & Crosscup, 1981), relationship closeness and global satisfaction with sexuality (Wiegel, Meston, & Rosen, 2005), the integration of individual and relationship correlates of sexual satisfaction (Stulhofer et al., 2010), affective responses resulting from a subjective evaluation of several sexual dimensions of a relationship (Lawrance & Byers, 1995), and gender specific aspects of sexuality (Meston & Trapnell, 2005; Pinney, Gerrard, & Denney, 1987).

Despite the existence of several measures of sexual satisfaction, to the best of our knowledge, only one is linked to a theory and model of sexual satisfaction: the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction. In this theory, sexual satisfaction is defined as "...an affective response arising from one's subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one's sexual relationship..." (Lawrance & Byers, 1995: 268). The model proposes that sexual satisfaction is the result of a balance of perceived sexual rewards and costs as well as the perception of reciprocity within sexual contexts. However, the development of this conceptual and operational definition of sexual satisfaction was theoretically driven from a heteronormative standpoint. A recent study aimed to validate the IEMSS with a sample of 898 sexual minority women in an exclusive relationship with a woman (Byers & Cohen, 2017). The results suggested that sexual minority women have high sexual satisfaction, report low sexual costs, and overall present a pattern of responses very similar to those of heterosexual women reported in previous studies. Despite this initial validation information, the suitability of the definition of sexual satisfaction that is integrated into the IEMSS for LGB samples has not been fully explored.

Recently, the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale-Short Form was developed and its psychometric properties examined in multiple Spanish samples, including an LGB sample (Strizzi, Fernández-Agís, Alarcón-Rodríguez, & Parrón-Carreño, 2016). Although the original authors of the measure (Stulhofer et al., 2010) developed a multidimensional measure of sexual satisfaction informed by theoretical and therapeutic literature, this measure is not clearly associated with a specific theory of sexual satisfaction. Moreover, it was developed without knowledge about LGB people's common understanding of the concept of sexual satisfaction. This is problematic because researchers have found that participants' understanding of sexual terminology that is used in self-report measures often do not reflect researcher's conceptualizations of the same term (e.g. Shaughnessy, Byers, & Thornton, 2011).

Recent research suggests that lay-people's definitions of sexual satisfaction are varied and different from researchers' definitions. Pascoal et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study with heterosexual people in exclusive dyadic relationships about their own conceptualizations of sexual satisfaction. The results revealed that, at least for heterosexual people, sexual satisfaction is a bidimensional concept defined by the intersection of individual (e.g. pleasure) and relational aspects (e.g. mutuality). These findings were similar, but not identical, to how researchers operationalize sexual satisfaction. However, as the authors themselves noted, this study did not include people involved in same-sex relationships or diverse relationship structures. McClelland (2013) conducted a Q-sort study with a gender, sexual, and ethnic diverse sample of young people in New York to examine what aspects were important in their evaluations of their own sexual satisfaction. The results revealed four distinct factors that represented groups of people who

prioritized similar components of sexual/emotional experiences in their concepts of what makes them sexually satisfied. Two of the four factors included mostly LGBT identified people; one only had heterosexual participants, and one included only one LGBT person. These results suggested that LGBTQ people likely define sexual satisfaction in different ways from heterosexual people. To improve research and theory on sexual satisfaction, these differences require further exploration.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual people's sexual satisfaction

There is a small body of research focused on factors that predict lesbian, gay, and bisexual people's sexual satisfaction. These studies tend to confirm a bio-psycho-socio-cultural approach to sexual satisfaction, in which individual, relationship, and cultural/social factors are associated with sexual satisfaction. For example, recent findings demonstrate that women in same-sex relationships who report greater sexual satisfaction also report greater sexual functioning (Henderson, Lehavot, & Simoni, 2009) and men in same-sex relationships who report greater sexual satisfaction also report an absence of sexual difficulties (Carvalho & Costa, 2015). In terms of relationship factors, people in same-sex relationships with greater sexual satisfaction also report greater emotional intimacy, greater relational well-being, and greater relationship satisfaction (Carvalho & Costa, 2015; Henderson et al., 2009; Holmberg, Blair, & Phillips, 2010; Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014). These findings are consistent with results from mixed-sex relationships (e.g. Mark, Gracia, & Fisher, 2015; Šević, Ivanković, & Štulhofer, 2015).

Researchers also have found that LGB specific factors such as high levels of minority stress and internalized homonegativity contribute to lower sexual satisfaction (e.g. Henderson et al., 2009; Kuyper & Vanwesenbeeck, 2011). This finding is not surprising because same-sex amorous partners develop their relationship while managing minority stressors (Meyer, 2003). Managing one's own and one's partner's level of internalized homonegativity and sexual orientation self-concealment (e.g. agreement about public expressions of affection; partner's self-identification as a lesbian/gay/bisexual person) are markers of LGB close relationships that do not exist for heterosexual close relationships (Cohen, Byers, & Walsh, 2008). This unique component may influence relationship processes and outcomes such as sexual satisfaction (Mohr & Daly, 2008), including the conceptualizations that LGB people have about these processes and outcomes.

At the same time, LGB people may have access to a broader range of positive sexual experiences to contribute to their sexual satisfaction than do heterosexual people. For example, Cohen et al. (2008) found that lesbian women and gay men had a broad perspective of activities or experiences that related to their sexual satisfaction (e.g. inclusion of community support). In evaluating the list of sexual rewards and costs developed with heterosexual people, these sexual minority men and women added experiences to both the cost and reward lists; however, they added many more items to the list of sexual rewards. Researchers also have found that self-identified bisexual men and women report many positive aspects to their bisexual identity, including freedom of sexual expression (Scales Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010).

Taken together, the findings suggest that LGB people's experiences with and their definitions of sexual satisfaction are both similar and different from those in mixed sex relationships. These similarities and differences may be explained from a social constructivist approach, such as sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). This theory postulates that the ongoing intersection of cultural scenarios (sequence of behaviors and roles expected in certain sociocultural contexts), interpersonal scripts (resulting from the dyadic process of co-creating behaviors according to each person's expectations), and intrapsychic scripts (individual desires, motives, wants) influence the enacted sexual behaviors. Moreover, in sexual script theory there are different scripts for men and women based on gender binary cultural norms derived from anatomical differences. The result is a fairly rigid gendered framework for sexuality: man as active and dominant (e.g. always ready for sex, taking the initiative, involved with multiple sexual partners, focused on physical pleasure over

emotional involvement), women as passive and submissive (e.g. ready to pleasure men, centered on emotional involvement rather than their own pleasure) (Simon & Gagnon, 2003).

Cultural scenarios are an important component of sexual script theory. Cultural scenarios differ not only at the broad level (e.g. Traditional Sexual Script in North America versus the Love Script in Scandinavian countries; Kvaalem & Træen, 2000), but also at the subgroup level. For example, research has demonstrated a recent shift towards greater sexual conservatism in sexual scripts among emerging adults in North America (Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, & Lachowsky, 2014, p. 529). Sexual minority people's sexual scripts may parallel or exaggerate heterosexual scripts (particularly when in same-sex partnerships), or may be a completely different sexual script (see Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2017; Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994; Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003 for an introduction to these possibilities).

Researchers also have found evidence of sexual scripts in people's definitions of sexual terms. For example, university students tend to define "having sex" by including interpersonal scenarios (Trotter & Alderson, 2007); heterosexual men and women tend to define sexual dysfunction from a cultural scenario perspective (Alarcão, Machado, & Giami, 2016); and LGB adults tend to define "sex" based on both cultural scenarios and their intrapsychic scenarios, that is, their experiences (Sewell, McGarrity, & Strassberg, 2017). Together, these findings suggest that LGB people's conceptualizations of sexual satisfaction may reflect their unique sexual scripts and experiences as well as internalized aspects of dominant sexual scripts.

Rationale for the current study

There are a number of limitations to the existing research on LGB people's sexual satisfaction. First, there is little research on LGB people's amorous relationships that include sexual components, particularly positive aspects such as sexual satisfaction. For example, recently researchers have compared heterosexual and same-sex couples on marital satisfaction across cultures (Antonelli, Dèttore, Lasagni, Snyder, & Balderrama-Durbin, 2014) and on predictors of relationship instability (Khadouma, Norona, & Whitton, 2015); but, they did not include sexual aspects of the relationship.

Second, overall there are few studies about sexual satisfaction with sexual minority people. Some of the existing research suggests that the sexual aspects of same-sex relationships may differ from those of mixed-sex relationship. For example, women in same sex relationships report the lowest sexual frequencies, while the duration of their sexual encounters is longer than men and women in mixed-sex or male same-sex relationships (Blair & Pukall, 2014).

Third, the development of models as well as conceptual and operational (i.e. measures) definitions of sexual satisfaction predominantly occurred in a hetero-normative context (e.g. Lawrance & Byers, 1995). As such, the sexual satisfaction studies with lesbian women, gay men, and bisexual people start from a heterosexual understanding of sexual satisfaction. There is very little research that indicates whether the existing conceptual definitions, theoretical models, and measures of sexual satisfaction are consistent with LGB people's perceptions and meanings of the concept. This limitation puts into question the validity of empirical and theoretical knowledge on sexual satisfaction for LGB populations. Overall, these limitations are consistent with researchers' calls for studies with same-sex couples that test the generalizability of theories about close relationships (including sexual relationships), and deconstruct negative stereotypes to provide an improved scientific basis for public policy (Anderson & Zou, 2015; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2006).

Current study

The purpose of this study was to explore LGB partnered people's meanings of sexual satisfaction to contribute to and improve the sexual diversity represented in research on sexual satisfaction. Specifically, Portuguese LGB people who were in exclusive amorous relationships provided subjective definitions of sexual satisfaction as part of a larger project on sexual satisfaction of people currently in an exclusive dyadic relationship (both with and without sexual difficulties). We used a qualitative

approach to explore themes and content in the subjective definitions of sexual satisfaction provided. We then used these results to discuss the key components as well as the similarities and differences with conceptualizations and theoretical models based on heterosexual relationships.

Method

Procedure and measures

The qualitative data in this study were collected as part of a larger online survey study about sexual satisfaction of people in dyadic exclusive cohabitating relationships. The study was approved by the first author's institution's research ethics board. Portuguese adults were recruited online using snowball sampling methods. Participants were invited to participate in a study on sexuality and relationships for partnered people currently in an exclusive dyadic relationship. We used an online method to increase access to LGB people from different areas of Portugal to improve our sampling. The authors shared the invitation to the study in two ways: 1) they asked acquaintances, colleagues, and students to disseminate the invitation and link through their social media feeds, and 2) they posted the invitation and link in special interest groups online and blogs that focus on LGB related issues. Eligibility criteria for the present study included: (a) over 18 years old; (b) first language and nationality was Portuguese; (c) self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; (d) be in an dyadic exclusive amorous relationship for at least one year; and (e) be cohabitating with their partner.

First, participants indicated their consent by actively selecting consent (or not consent) at the end of an online consent form. The consent form described the anonymous nature of the study, the focus on dyadic exclusive committed relationships, and the lack of compensation for participation. Consenting participants were redirected to the online survey. Next, participants completed the background questionnaire (e.g. Where do you live? For how long are you involved in the current relationship?), and answered the open-ended question "How would you define sexual satisfaction?". Finally, participants completed self-report measures related to relationship satisfaction, emotional closeness, and sexual satisfaction that are not reported in the current manuscript. Participants were not allowed to move backward to change their definition of sexual satisfaction after starting the self-report measures.

Participants

There were 65 eligible participants who provided an answer to the open ended question; five participants did not provide a meaningful answer (e.g. "it can be a lot of things") and were removed from the sample. The final sample consisted of 60 cisgendered people: 38 men (63%) and 22 (37%) women; no participants identified as transgender. Twenty-five men identified as gay (42%), and six women identified as lesbian (10%); 10 men (17%) and 7 women (12%) identified as bisexual. Among the self-identified 17 bisexual people, there were eight (47%) men cohabitating with women and five (30%) women cohabitating with men; the remaining 4 people who identified as bisexual (23%) were living with same-sex partners. The sample represented people from all regions of Portugal. The majority of participants lived in urban areas ($n = 48$; 80%), most in the Greater Lisbon Area ($n = 38$; 63%); the areas from which the fewest participants lived were the Azores and Madeira Islands ($n = 2$; 2% each). The mean age was 36 years ($SD = 7.91$) and ranged from 19 to 55. The sample was predominantly non-religious ($n = 33$; 55%), and had a university education ($n = 51$; 85%). Participants' reported being in their relationship an average of 6.22 years ($SD = 3.4$); six (10 %) had children.

Data analysis

We used QSR International's NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis Software to store, explore, and organize the qualitative material. Two researchers independently identified themes in the written

definitions of sexual satisfaction and built a thematic map using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. We used their six-phase method to describe how patterns of meaning in the definitions combined into broader conceptualizations or themes, taking an inductive approach to the data. That is, we identified and derived meanings from the data.

There were three thematic levels: main themes, subthemes, and codes. The first level of analysis was the codes that were identified across the dataset. The second level was the subthemes that comprised multiple codes that contained shared underlying patterns of meaning. Subthemes were then compiled into main themes, which were the third and highest level of analysis. The main themes are global and abstract ideas that capture the meaning of multiple subthemes, which in turn capture the meanings of multiple codes.

To arrive at these three thematic levels, the researchers first familiarized themselves with the data. Next, they coded extracts from each participant's definition, ensuring that the codes, subthemes, and main themes represented multiple participants' responses. Following, the researchers completed an iterative process of re-reading written definitions, while paying particular attention to patterns, contradictions, and ambiguity across and within participants' definitions. The re-reading occurred alongside examining and re-examining the codes to eventually derive the final set of subthemes, and the main themes.

After developing an initial proposal of a thematic map, each researcher once again re-read all the definitions and coded extracts to assure the thematic map captured and illustrated all the definitions. Each time the map did not capture all definitions, a new process of coding and aggregating information into patterns of meaning occurred, and a new thematic map was proposed. Additionally, when a disagreement in the codes, subthemes, or main themes occurred, a specialist in qualitative methodology assisted in finding consensus. Specifically, the specialist examined the thematic map for potential overlap in codes or subthemes, proposed aggregating these when discovered, and verified the data to ensure that the thematic map comprehensively accounted for the concepts found in the responses. The agreed-upon thematic map was shared with the second author to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency before being finalized.

Results

The thematic analysis of all the written responses resulted in three main themes: Interpersonal Experience, Intrapersonal Experience, and Primary Discourses. These themes were often interconnected, as participant's definitions were rich and included more than one theme in the same definition. The first two themes included two subthemes each. In total there were 17 codes across the three themes. [Figure 1](#) depicts the thematic map, and [Table 1](#) summarizes the themes, subthemes, codes, and provides examples of each code (please note that all examples and verbatim quotes depicted in the table and in text were translated from Portuguese to English by the first author and are thus not verbatim responses). Whenever quotes are provided, we also indicate the participant's self-identified gender, sexual orientation, and age.

The answers received were diverse in both semantic richness (e.g. some used metaphoric language, others were very straightforward) and length (some were very short and generic, whereas others were elaborated and presented examples). Most participants' definitions were rich and most clearly pointed to the interconnectedness of the codes presented. Many definitions were a single but often very long, sentence. Definitions often included a narrative, linear progression that pointed to the existence of different intra- and interpersonal processes involved in sexual satisfaction as in "*Frequent sexual relationships with full partner involvement; including adventure and innovation and ending in orgasm*" (bisexual woman, 33 years). However, some participants wrote a single word, an expression, or several synonyms as the definition (e.g. "*reaching orgasm*", lesbian woman, 32 years; "*to give and receive pleasure*", gay man, 29 years; "*sharing, openness, intimacy, pleasure*", bisexual man, 32 years). This use of single words seemed to be related to orgasm or pleasure (two separate codes); some participants' responses presented components of this code as

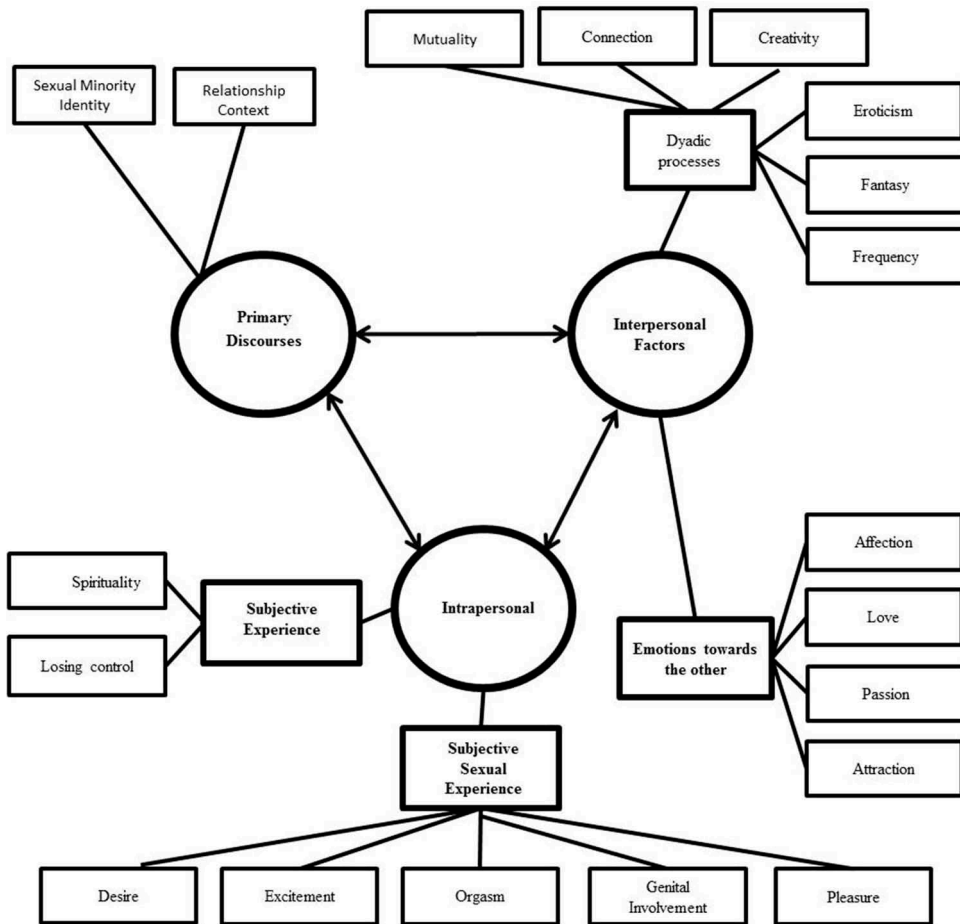


Figure 1. Thematic map of written definitions of sexual satisfaction by partnered lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

a straightforward synonym for sexual satisfaction (e.g. “sexual satisfaction is to have pleasure”, lesbian woman, 32 years). To account for the richness in most responses, we over-coded complex definitions, giving these more than one code (e.g. “Full pleasure for both”, gay man, 37 years -coded in both pleasure and mutuality). Below, we describe the subthemes and the codes that they aggregate.

Sexual satisfaction as intrapersonal experience

This main theme included the subthemes Subjective Experience and Subjective Sexual Experience, both related to the individual emotions, cognitions, and behaviors that were evident in the definitions of sexual satisfaction. The subthemes and codes in this main theme were not necessarily related to the context of a relationship and appeared independent of relationship characteristics.

The subtheme Subjective Experience included spirituality, and losing control, both of which refer to people’s sensations or experiences that are not specific to sexual stimuli or activities. Specifically, spirituality referred to the experience of transcending bodily sensations as in “To reach the point where I leave my body” (lesbian woman, 39 years). Other participants specifically noted a spiritual feeling in their definitions or connected sexual satisfaction with feeling spiritual. Losing control referred to the ability to let oneself go, such as in the inclusion of “The feeling of going with

Table 1. Description of emerging themes, subthemes, and codes including example answers.

Main Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Description	Examples
Intrapersonal	Subjective Experience	Spirituality	Transcending the bodily sensations.	"To feel good about my sexual relationships; physically and spiritually"
		Losing control	To lose control of one's self.	"I am very rational and therefore the full satisfaction is when the brain stops controlling sexual activity"
	Subjective Sexual Experience	Desire	Explicit references to sexual desire.	"To feel pretty desired, at least once a week, mutual willingness to be together sexually."
		Excitement	Explicit references to excitement during sexual relations.	"To feel excited/arousal; sexual stimulation responding to my expectations and to reach orgasm."
		Orgasm	Explicit references to orgasm in sexual relations.	"Frequent sexual relationships with full involvement with the partner; that includes adventure and innovation and ends in orgasm."
		Genital Involvement	Explicit references to genitals, sex, and penetration.	"It is not only the genital pleasure (although it is implicit and is important); but it is a group of factors on which the relationship is laid and which evaluate the relation itself; sexual satisfaction is desire; love; tenderness; comprehension and genital sexuality."
Interpersonal Factors	Dyadic processes	Pleasure	Pleasure associated with sexual relationships, as a pleasant feeling associated with sex.	"To feel sex with the maximum pleasure"
		Mutuality	Feeling of sexual fusion with the other person; desire and will to please the other sexually.	"When there is sharing of desires and preferences; with dialogue and consequent practices; knowing that the biggest satisfaction comes from being able to provide satisfaction to the other"
		Connection	Feeling emotionally close and embedded with the other, direct references to intimacy.	"(...)when partners trust each other and offer themselves until they become one" "Sharing intimacy"
		Creativity	Innovation in the relationship, variation in the relational sexuality between partners.	"Variation, creativity" "Avoid the routine"
		Eroticism	Captivating and attracting the other through seduction and romance; referring to eroticism in the relationship with the other person.	"Includes desire; excitement; seduction; courtship rituals; originality; romance and (lots of) orgasms".
		Fantasy	The ability to share positive sexual cognitions and eventually perform them in the relationship.	"Sharing intimacy and fantasies" "In my opinion, it is linked to the couple's ability to undress themselves of taboos and exercise their fantasies."
		Frequency	Reference to the number of times one has sexual relationships, without describing sexual practices.	"To feel quite desired, at least once a week. To exist a mutual willingness to be sexually together."
	Emotions towards the other	Affection	Positive emotions and affection.	"It is tenderness; involvement and finally pleasure" "We can just play around and be tender"
		Love	Reference and description of the love feeling.	"Being able to live the sexuality with the person who you wish and love"

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Main Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Description	Examples
Primary Discourses		Passion	Intense passion.	"To feel extreme pleasure and willingness to be with the other person, when we close our eyes and we can even feel the smell of the other person (...); this is the ideal pleasure that even hurts because of its intensity."
		Attraction	Physical, sexual attraction for the other.	"It can also be to have sex with anyone as long as they are physically attractive. I don't even care about their name."
		Relationship Context	References to exclusivity in relationship or to open relationships with multiple partners.	"The feeling that we belong to and that we complete each other"
		Sexual Minority Identity	References to acceptance of one's and/or the other's sexual orientation and identity or to same-sex or one's preferred sexual activity.	"To realize we are both happy with our sexual orientation." "To have same sex sexual activity as part of an open life to the world"

Examples are full citations translated from Portuguese to English by the first author and reviewed by a native speaker; responses were over-coded such that examples provided likely were coded in more than one way, but that includes the code described.

the flow, let yourself go with and within the experience" (gay man, 40 years) in one participant's definition.

Complementarily, the subtheme Subjective Sexual Experience aggregated codes that emphasized the role that positive sexual dimensions have in definitions of sexual satisfaction. These included codes to capture when participants explicitly mentioned experiencing sexual desire (either feeling desire or feeling desired), excitement, orgasm, and pleasure in their definitions. For example, one participant's definition was "*It involves desire; excitement/arousal, seduction rituals, originality, romance and (lots of) orgasms*" (lesbian woman, 34 years); and another "*Every time there is sharing of desires and preferences*" (lesbian woman, 22 years); as well as "*Both partner's ability to feel pleasure in sexual relationship; even if that pleasure is not only proved in orgasm*" (bisexual woman, 47 years). Under this subtheme, there also were specific references to genital involvement. However, some participants' definitions indicated that genital involvement was important, and others' seemed to emphasize an absence of genital involvement [e.g. "*The experience of pleasure during intercourse, while we lose control of our minds and the genitals take over*" (lesbian woman, 24 years) and "*It is more than just getting your genitals turned on, of course*" (bisexual man, 26 years, in a relationship with a man)].

Sexual satisfaction as interpersonal experience

The interpersonal main theme included subthemes that were directly related to sexual satisfaction in the context of a relationship and, to a certain degree, involved the partner's own dimensions. Within this main theme, we have two subthemes: Dyadic Processes and Emotions Towards the Other.

The Dyadic Processes subtheme included codes that referred to processes that emerged and occurred in the context of the current relationship. Participants included a number of different dyadic processes in their definitions of sexual satisfaction. Mutuality as a code referred to when participants emphasized both partners involvement, sharing in the experiences, and giving pleasure to the other; for example, "*Full pleasure for both*" (gay man, 40 years). The code connection highlighted the experience of immersion or connection and intimacy with the other person as in "*It*

is the full concretization of pleasure, with someone we love; so that we create a total communion" (lesbian woman, 34 years) and "Personal and joint accomplishment" (bisexual man, 26 years in a relationship with a man). Creativity is a code that captured the emphasis of novelty and innovation in some participants' definitions such as: "Frequent sexual relationships with full partner involvement; including adventure and innovation and ending in orgasm" (bisexual woman, 41 years); eroticism referred to common, non-specific sexual descriptions of sexual satisfaction such as: "To feel we are living an erotic life" (gay man, 37 years) and "To experience the ideal sexuality; namely in the frequency of erotic encounters and the kind of erotic encounters" (lesbian woman, 29 years); and fantasy referred to the ability to share positive sexual cognitions and eventually perform them in the relationship. Finally, some participants specifically referred to the frequency of sexual encounters in their definitions, focusing on greater frequency or a minimum number of sexual encounters such as described in "To receive and give pleasure in sexual relationships; with a high frequency" (gay man, 38 years) or "It is the type and quality of the sexual act and the frequency it happens" (gay man, 51 years).

The second subtheme under interpersonal factors was Emotions Towards the Other; it included codes that captured when sexual satisfaction was defined in the context of an emotional experience that was directed to the partner. There were four codes in this subtheme representing types of emotional experiences involved in sexual satisfaction: affection, love, passion, and attraction. This subtheme usually complimented other subthemes; for example, "To have pleasure sex as an expression of love" (bisexual woman, 43 years, coded for both "pleasure" and "love"). Some descriptions emphasized feelings of attraction or love or passion towards the other as a path to achieve sexual satisfaction as in "Feel love and sexual attraction and then getting involved with whom you love to finally reach full mutual pleasure" (gay man, 45 years). Others seemed to suggest that sexual satisfaction came from sexual activity being an expression or characteristic of a loving passionate relationship "When your bodies express through sex the love and passion one feels in heart and in the head" (lesbian woman, 34 years).

Primary discourses

The third and final main theme represented Primary Discourses that emerged within participants' definitions and in connection with the other main themes. There were two primary discourses represented in two codes: 1) Relationship Context, with definitions of sexual satisfaction including an attribute of a relationship context; and, 2) Sexual Minority Identity when references to authenticity in one's sexual identity were included in written responses.

In the first discourse, participants' definitions included both explicit references to relationships that mirror the dominant representation of heterosexual experience, that is being monogamous [e.g. "The feeling of corresponded love; monogamy" (gay man, 37 years)]; as well as references to non-dominant relationships such as open relationships [e.g. "To be in an open relationship" (bisexual men, 40 years)]. Thus, for some participants, definitions of sexual satisfaction were contained to a dyadic relationship – monogamy [e.g. "The feeling that we belong to and that we complete each other" (bisexual men, 40 years)]. These responses seemed to imply that for some people, sexual satisfaction may not occur if monogamy is not maintained. However, monogamy was not a component of definitions of sexual satisfaction for everyone; other participants seemed to define sexual satisfaction in the context of multiple consensual sex partners, that their exclusive partner was aware of and okay with – even if those participants did not always specify that their current relationship was open [e.g. "To be open to others and still be two in one" (gay man, 55 years)].

In relation to Sexual Minority Identity as a discourse in definitions, participants referred to either themselves or both members of the sexual relationship being able to express their sexual identity or orientation, being comfortable with, and feeling positive towards their sexual orientation. This subtheme included definitions that clearly pointed to sexual identity as a process that integrated

different stages (Morgan, 2013): *"The experience of being at the same path in our identity development, not having to deal with my partner's identity issues"* (lesbian woman, 29 years). Responses also seemed to imply that it was both one's own and one's partner's security and comfort in their own sexual identity that was important for sexual satisfaction. This included experiences of sexual identity anchored in personal emotional security as well as emotional security in the context of the relationship. For example, participants defined sexual satisfaction: *"To feel secure and free about my sexual identity"* (bisexual woman, 22 years, in a relationship with a man), *"To feel that we both experience balance in our coming out process"* (lesbian woman, 53 years), both of which included an aspect of sexual identity embedded in the definition.

Discussion

The current study contributes to the literature by exploring LGB people's meanings of sexual satisfaction. In line with other research on the meanings of sexual terminology (e.g. Goldey, Posh, Bell, & Anders, 2016), we found diversity in participants' definitions. However, within this diversity, our qualitative findings suggest that sexual satisfaction is a multidimensional experience that includes inter- and intrapersonal components, representing physical sensations (e.g. orgasm), feelings (e.g. love), cognitions (e.g. losing control), and dyadic processes (e.g. connection/intimacy). These results are consistent with theoretical, conceptual, and empirical research on sexual satisfaction based on heterosexual samples (Brashier & Hughes, 2012; Dove & Wiederman, 2000; Pascoal et al., 2014; Salisbury & Fisher, 2014; Schoenfeld, Loving, Pope, Huston, & Štulhofer, 2016). It expands existing knowledge by introducing LGB people's personal conceptualizations. Consistent with research that suggests satisfaction is distinct from dissatisfaction (e.g. Boes & Winkelmann, 2010), we also found that sexual satisfaction was defined in almost exclusively positive terminology. Additionally, our results extend the research on sexual satisfaction by demonstrating that LGB people's definitions frame sexual satisfaction within dominant discourses about sexuality occurring in affectionately exclusive dyadic relationships, and involving comfort and openness with one's sexual identity (Diamond, 2015). Overall, the findings suggest that researchers, clinicians, and therapists who work with LGB people need to take into account how having a sexual minority identity affects people's and their partner's experience of sexual satisfaction.

Sexual satisfaction as a positive multidimensional experience

Our findings suggest that LGB people view sexual satisfaction as a multidimensional experience that blends positive interpersonal and intrapersonal components into an overall sexual outcome. Although we found separate interpersonal and intrapersonal themes in participants' definitions, we also found that the subthemes and codes within each were complementary and highlighted positive experiences. Additionally, most definitions were marked by multiple codes, reflecting interconnectedness of components within and across intrapersonal and interpersonal themes. These interrelations are consistent with research on heterosexual people's definitions of sexual satisfaction (Pascoal et al., 2014). Together, the results of this study and those of Pascoal et al. (2014) suggest that, for most people in dyadic amorous relationships (regardless of sexual orientation), sexual satisfaction is rooted in positive sexual and non-sexual experiences that go beyond just the individual or just the dyad; sexual satisfaction necessitates positive personal experiences in interpersonally gratifying contexts marked by physical, cognitive, and emotional reciprocity.

The results are consistent with theoretical and empirical research on sexual satisfaction developed primarily in the context of heterosexual dyadic relationships. However, they do not support one theory or concept of sexual satisfaction over another. For example, the emergence of codes focused on sexual experience in the subthemes Subjective Sexual Experience and Dyadic Processes (e.g. orgasm, pleasure, frequency) suggest that sexual satisfaction includes people's needs for individually gratifying sexual experience within a relationship to feel satisfied. Additionally, most

of the subjective sexual experience codes were linked to the sexual response cycle (desire, orgasm, arousal). Thus, these findings are consistent with research that suggests that sexual functioning and frequency of sexual activities are key components in people's sexual satisfaction (e.g. Pascoal et al., 2014). They also are consistent with the finding that greater sexual functioning is linked with greater sexual satisfaction both in lesbian women (Henderson et al., 2009) and gay men (Rosser, Metz, Bockting, & Buroker, 1997). However, the Subjective Experience subtheme and other dyadic process codes point to the importance of non-physical experiences in sexual satisfaction. These findings are consistent with theories and research that elucidate the role of positive mental states and cognitive experiences in people's sexual satisfaction (Davison et al., 2009; Nobre & Pinto-Gouveia, 2008; Timm & Keiley, 2011). Together, these findings call attention to the possibility that sexual satisfaction is a process (rather than an outcome) that involves aspects of detaching from and connecting to bodily experiences and positive cognitive processes.

The interpersonal main theme emphasized the importance of positive relationship contexts in people's definitions of sexual satisfaction. This finding also is consistent with theories and research on sexual satisfaction for heterosexual people (La France, 2010; Pascoal, Narciso, & Pereira, 2013). The relationship contexts that LGB participants referred to in their definitions of sexual satisfaction appeared to emphasize reciprocity (e.g. mutuality), openness (e.g. creativity, fantasy), and positive emotions (e.g. love, intimacy). Reciprocity was apparent in many of the codes under this theme such that people expressed not only experiencing emotions, intimacy, and openness from their partner, but also showing their partner these same things. This reciprocity is consistent with research on the IEMSS for both people involved in mixed and same sex relationships (Byers & Cohen, 2017; Byers & MacNeil, 2006). This model emphasizes balance and perceptions of equity in both sexual and non-sexual rewards and costs within a relationship. Our findings highlight equity of rewards over costs. These findings also are in line with quantitative research that has demonstrated that positive relationship-related constructs, such as greater intimacy and relationship quality, coincide with greater sexual satisfaction for gay men and lesbian women (e.g. Henderson et al., 2009; Rosser et al., 1997) and that sexuality may be a means to maintaining bonds and connections among people (van Anders, Hamilton, Schmidt, & Watson, 2007; van Anders & Watson, 2007). Additionally, sharing fantasies and being creative with one's partner suggests communication about one's fantasies and desires as well as exploring novel and different sexual scripts within the relationship. Researchers and clinicians have found that communication and flexible scripts improve people's sexual relationships (Byers, 2011). By stressing the role that positive emotions have on the definition of sexual satisfaction, our findings seem to be supportive of previous research developed by Ridley and colleagues that demonstrated that positive feelings are associated with sexual experiences in close relationships of heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples (Ridley, Ogolsky, Payne, Totenhagen, & Cate, 2008). Our findings extend this research by demonstrating that relationship factors may not only influence LGB people's sexual satisfaction; but, actually be a component of sexual and amorous relationships that LGB people evaluate when considering their level of satisfaction.

Social discourse in LGB people's concepts of sexual satisfaction

Our results suggest that some LGB people incorporated heteronormative social discourses in their conceptualizations of sexual satisfaction. On the one hand, participants emphasized conformity to an affectionately exclusive dyadic relationship, suggesting that conforming to this social norm is positive and doing so leads to sexual satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the perspective that LGB people internalize the same dominant sexual scripts as heterosexual people, namely cultural scenarios that emphasize monogamy (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). On the other hand, some participants, even though currently in a relationship they considered to be exclusive, included in their definitions of sexual satisfaction the possibility of experiencing an open sexual relationship with no guilt – a deviation from socially normative relationships. This finding points to the

possibility that within an exclusive dyadic relationship, some people are not only open to consensual non-monogamy, but would consider sexual non-monogamy sexually satisfying. It is possible that in this study, some of the people who self-identified as in an exclusive dyadic relationship (given the recruitment text and criteria) also have, or previously had, agreed upon an open relationship. Perhaps for some people, identifying as being in an exclusive dyadic amorous relationship is a distinct component of their relational context from the sexual components of their relationship. Indeed, when people referenced sexual non-monogamy in their definitions, some of them also included a reference to emotional monogamy. This distinction between sexual and emotional components within definitions of sexual satisfaction is consistent with Cohen, Byers, and Walsh's (2008) finding that both emotion factors and sexual behaviours were distinct rewards in sexual relationships for gay men and lesbian women. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the possibility of experiencing non-monogamy in definitions of sexual satisfaction in this study is in line with other research that demonstrates that one of the positive aspects of belonging to a sexual minority group is freedom from social norms, and openness to sexual diversity and experience (Scales, Rostosky et al., 2010). Together, these findings suggest that sexual minority people may share sexual scripts that are distinct from heterosexual people, and that these scripts may impact their understanding of sexual satisfaction. Future research is needed to understand the extent to which sexual minority sexual scripts exist and the differences that occur between sexual minority subgroups.

Additionally, participants' definitions reflected the freedom to express and accept one's (and one's partner's) sexual orientation and/or identity openly and with comfort – an experience that is consistent with social discourse that readily accepts heterosexual expression (thus, sexual expression would be positive); yet, is counter to this discourse in that the emphasis is on sexual minority identity. Definitions that included this theme came from gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual people, suggesting that sexual satisfaction in sexual minority relationships of all types may be impacted by either member of the dyad's individual process of sexual identity development. This finding also is consistent with gay men and lesbian women's inclusion of own and partner's self-acceptance and "outness" as either rewards or costs in sexual relationships (Cohen et al., 2008). It is possible, as also suggested by Byers and Cohen (2017) that there may be interconnections between stages of identity development, coming out processes, sexual behaviours, and relationship processes that are specific to LGB partnerships and that are important to sexual satisfaction. More research is needed to better understand these connections.

The two discourses that we found, Relationship Context and Sexual Minority Identity, imply that sexual dissatisfaction could arise in contexts that do not include these social components – that is, in contexts where people are not part of an exclusive affectionate dyadic relationship (whether or not they are in an open sexual relationship), or they – or their partner – are hiding or uncomfortable with their sexual orientation. With respect to Relationship Context, our data was ambiguous, likely reflecting multiple realities. Specifically, on one hand, the definitions seemed to suggest that monogamy was part of sexual satisfaction; on the other hand, definitions also indicated the possibility of being non-monogamous sexually as part of sexual satisfaction. Previous research with men in same-sex relationships has found no differences in sexual satisfaction between gay men in a variety of relationship structures (including non-monogamous structures) (Parsons, Starks, Gamarel, & Grov, 2012). The extent to which this applies to lesbian women and bisexual people has yet to be explored.

With respect to the stage of "outness" that people in the dyad are in, the findings are consistent with research that suggests that experiencing and managing one's and one's partners' minority stressors (e.g. experience of prejudice, expectations of rejection, internalized homophobia) interferes with the experience of sexual satisfaction (e.g. Henderson et al., 2009; Rosser et al., 1997). Hiding or being uncomfortable with one's identity likely is experienced as a stressor. It is not the first time a study about people's accounts of sexual satisfaction identified stages of identity development as central to LGB people's sexual satisfaction (see Cohen et al., 2008). These findings

suggest that clinicians should take into account components of sexual minority people's identity formation and relational structures in sexual and relationship clinical practices. They also suggest that the existing conceptual definitions and measures of sexual satisfaction may not be fully appropriate for partnered LGB samples because these measures exclude indicators of the experience of negotiating dominant societal norms as well as one's sexual identity development in the context of a sexual relationship. This result highlights the need for the development of measures that consider these aspects of people's lives.

Limitations and future research

It is important to interpret the results of this first study on LGB partnered people's definitions of sexual satisfaction in light of the limits in the research design, and the country and culture of reference. First, in line with most qualitative research, this is a non-representative and relatively small sample, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the broader project was focused on cis-gendered people in cohabiting, amorous, dyadic relationships. Thus, the findings may not represent the conceptualization of sexual satisfaction among people who experience their gender and sexual identity, sexual orientation, or sexual and amorous relationships outside of this frame of reference. They also may not represent how people outside of a committed relationship, in single, dating, or consensual non-monogamous relationships conceptualize sexual satisfaction. Moreover, we were unable to examine the extent to which definitions of sexual satisfaction were similar or different across the gender and sexual identities represented given the small sample size. Previous research has demonstrated that gender socialization is linked to experiences of sexual satisfaction (Mark et al., 2015); thus, future researchers should explore how men, women, transgender, and other gender identities define sexual satisfaction differently regardless of or dependent upon their sexual identity or orientation. It also is possible that bisexual people construct satisfaction differently depending on the gender or sex of their partner, and distinctly from the lesbian- and gay-identified majority in our sample. Thus, more research with diverse samples is needed to replicate our findings.

It also is important to recognize that the study participants, and the researchers who coded the definitions for this study, live (at the time) in a country that had recently approved same-sex marriage and child adoption for LGB people. Thus, our findings may not be comparable to LGB cisgender people and experiences in other countries and cultures, particularly those in which LGB people are repressed or persecuted.

Furthermore, we examined the perspectives of one person, not both people in a couple. Thus, we could not explore whether one member of a couple's meaning of sexual satisfaction was related to or dependent on the other member's definition. Future research that includes all members of the relationship constellation (either monogamous or non-monogamous) would help clarify the ways in which sexual identity, experiences of coming out, or minority stress within relationships, influences each partner's concepts and experiences of sexual satisfaction.

Finally, we used participants' written definitions in the current study. This element of the research design and data collection limited the length of participants' definitions and prevented us from being able to elicit deeper meanings and understandings of the definitions provided (i.e. because we did not interact with participants). Thus, although our results suggest rich connections between themes, subthemes, and codes, we are limited in understanding how the various components of participants' definitions relate to one another, or if some components are more important than others. Nevertheless, we gave voice to a sample of partnered LGB's people's definitions of sexual satisfaction.

The results of this study suggest that LGB people's definitions of sexual satisfaction contain positive individual experiences of sexual response as well as spirituality and loss of control, interconnected with reciprocity, interpersonal connection, and positive emotions (not necessarily amorous) towards the other. Yet, for LGB people, sexual satisfaction exists within constraints

located in dominant discourses about sexuality and sexual expression as a construct that is legitimate for heterosexual people who are in an exclusive dyadic relationship. Our findings suggest that LGB people's social and relationship contexts are an important factor – for some even a key factor – in their experience of sexual satisfaction and subsequently sexual and global health. In both a health and research context, professionals should take into account the influence that societal discourses and negative attitudes have on LGB people's relational and sexual satisfaction and incorporate this knowledge into their clinical and/or research work.

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