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**Speaking through the Silence:
Narratives, Interaction, and the Social
Construction of Sexual Selves**

David W. Wahl

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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In

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**Speaking through the Silence:
Narratives, Interaction, and the Social
Construction of Sexual Selves**

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Chapter One

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to study the construction of sexual selves. The research entails understanding how sexual selves emerge, develop, alter, sustain, transform or deconstruct. I examine the process by which sexual selves are fashioned through the lens of the symbolic interactionist approach using a study grounded in qualitative research methods.

At the outset, I am met with a difficulty. If I am to look back to what other sociologists have written regarding the construction of sexual selves, I find myself at a loss and a disadvantage. I propose that the construction of sexual selves has not been approached to any viable measure of satisfaction in sociology; or perhaps not any other of the social or *humanist* sciences, for that matter. Sociological works on sexuality tend to begin from the starting point of a sexual self already in existence. I argue that works on sexual selves often presuppose a static object which is inconsistent with the vast majority of interactionist concepts and theories of self which overwhelmingly hinge on an active, fluid conception that exists in multiplicity.

Despite my claim that theoretical studies into the construction of sexual selves have been sparse. This is not to say that they are non-existent. An understanding of how sexual selves are created, I believe, is most effectively approached by symbolic interactionism. It is symbolic interactionism that undertakes “the process of becoming sexual - something that is learnt and negotiated in a complex sequence of events” (Walby, 1990:114). In symbolic interactionism, the construction of sexual selves becomes less about biological, animalistic instincts and more about meanings of sex and how we *do* sex. It is also more complex than it seems when Tisdale says, “I

am who I am sexually because of who I was and all that has happened to me and all that has not” (1994:299).

In all cases of sexuality, sex is something we, as active agents, *do*. It is for this reason that I adhere, in this work and otherwise, to the tenets of symbolic interactionism as this activity involves; (1) active agents who are composed of many different categorizations of selves including sexual selves, (2) the reflexive nature between the individual and the social realm wherein sexuality, in causal terms, takes the position of a dependent variable, and (3) the consistent attachment of meaning to social symbols. Sexual meanings come from social, cultural, and historical contexts (Brickell, 2015). In symbolic interactionism, sexual selves are looked upon as ‘actively doing sex, not only in terms of sexual acts but as making and modifying sexual meaning...’ (Jackson, 2007:4).

An Essential Question

Before delving into the mechanisms of sexual selves, the question needs to be answered: What is sexuality? For this, I refer to a litany of questions posed by Plummer (1975):

When a child plays with its genitals, is this ‘sexual’? When a person excretes is this sexual? When a man kisses another man publicly, is this sexual? When a couple are naked together, is this sexual? When a girl takes her clothes off in public, is this sexual? When a lavatory attendant wipes down a toilet seat, is this sexual? When a boy has an erection climbing a tree, is this sexual? When a morgue attendant touches a dead body, is this sexual? When a social worker assists her client, is this sexual? When a man and a

woman copulate out of curiosity or out of duty, is this sexual? The list could be considerably extended; but the point I hope is made. Most of the situations above could be defined as sexual by members; they need not be. Sexual meanings are not universal absolutes, but ambiguous and problematic categories (31).

Plummer (1975) answers these questions rather succinctly: “*nothing is sexual but naming makes it so*” (30, italics in original). Either the object or act is named as sexual by a social consensus or it is so named privately by an individual. When an individual names something as sexual while a social collective does not, as in the case of a person having sexual love for buildings (objectophilia), then conflict arises over sexual meaning and preference, most often resulting in the stigmatization of the minority. Plummer disagrees with the Freudian idea that our being is determined by sexuality, rather, Plummer argues that it is the meanings that members of society place on sexuality that affects sexuality. The management of these sexual meanings, over the span of a lifetime, is what Plummer refers to as our *erotic career*.

Weeks (2010) claims that sexuality is made-up of varying and contradictory social accounts, what it is not is biologically determined and fixed. Weeks, like Plummer, has a list of questions concerning sexuality as well; but Weeks’ questions are more immediately based in theory and philosophy. With regard to what sexuality is, Weeks asks (1) what is the process by which sexuality is shaped? (2) what is the symbolic significance of sexuality in western culture? and (3) what is the relationship between sex and power? Weeks finds the answers to his own questions when he contends, “Sexuality [...] is a ‘fictional unity’ that once did not exist, and at some time in the future may not exist again. It is an invention of the human mind” (2010:7). Weeks asserts that sexuality is shaped in the synthesis of personal subjectivity and society.

Gagnon and Simon (2009) maintain that human behavior can be explained through *scripts*, the blueprint of rituals, customs, rules, and norms in society, and, thereby, sexuality can be defined and explained through scripts. In sexual scripts “meaningful sexual practices are produced according to socially determined scenarios, rules, and sanctions, which make possible certain understandings of the sexual world while excluding others” (Corrêa, Petchesky, and Parker, 2008:110). Sexual scripts make sexual interaction consistent and often predictable. And yet, sexual scripts are not performed the same from person to person, thus simultaneously being a socializing and individualizing agent.

While human sexuality is secured to specific biological processes, Gagnon and Simon note that it is also “subject to sociocultural moving to a degree surpassed by few other forms of human behavior” (2009:198). It is for this reason they point out that, while human sexual activity may have limitations in regard to the human body, sexual meanings are socioculturally unlimited. Furthermore, Gagnon and Simon propose that anything can hold sexual significance in the right social context when it is understood that nothing is intrinsically sexual.

What sexuality is, is the end product of the negotiations between individuals and other members of society over meanings of sexual activity; be it in thought or action. Sexuality is, therefore, ever changing as meanings become reexamined, questioned, challenged, or denounced as part of the negotiation process. If sexual meanings are negotiated in social interaction, it is not too bold a leap to suggest that sexual selves are constructed in the same manner.

On Sexual Selves

It is important to note two aspects with regard to selves; first, the distinction between *self* and *selves*, and secondly, the differentiation of self and identity. In the case of the former, pragmatist William James observed that, “Man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their head” (1890:294). This statement made by James has a direct connection to conclusions made by Mead, who notes, “A multiple personality is in a certain sense normal [as] there is usually an organization of the whole self with reference to the community to which we belong, and the situation in which we find ourselves (1934:142-143). If I portray myself differently in a myriad of situations to a surfeit of people, I don’t accept that it is rational to regard myself as having a singular self. I am not referring to one who is manipulating various people in different times, places, and situations. I am referring to the end results of processes within social interaction in which a variety of selves develop and emerge. It is for this reason that, in this work, I will more often use *selves* instead of *self*. If I do use *self*, I do so because either (1) I am making reference to the complete embodiment of one’s current collective selves or (2) I am referring to a specific self; such as the use of the identifier of one’s homosexual self apart from the collective sexual selves of the individual.

As to my second point of this section, it is imperative that there is an explanation, albeit meager, of the distinction between the self and identity. While there is similarity and an understandable mistakenness between the two, O’Brien (2006) draws the line of distinction with identities, in and of themselves, being subject to constant change. These changes are dependent upon audiences and situations. Selves, on the other side of the line, are organized and stable. Selves surface from our actions, which make sense of who we are.

Identities are always linked to social roles and statuses; selves may be related to social roles and statuses, but not necessarily. The key difference is that we occupy social roles and statuses by which we then either claim an identity or distance ourselves from the identity assumed by the role or status. In contrast, self is neither something we occupy or claim; it is always something that we *do*. It is for the purpose of this project that I simplify the matter and hold the topic to that of selves rather than identities.

Defining Self

While there is overlap in the definitions provided by the symbolic interactionist thinkers, there are also progressions and variations between the definitions. For George Herbert Mead (1934) selves are embedded in social engagement. On both a phenomenological and an epistemological level, the self is a reflexive entity. The self, in Mead's contribution to reason, is simultaneously the *knower* and the *known*. In other words, self is that which knows itself as both an object and a subject, and it is that which is known by itself. Therefore, the self is defined as an object in and of itself.

For Herbert Blumer (1969), the definition of selves is reliant on the activities expressed through human agency. The self is, in and of itself, an object, but it is an acting object that communicates with itself and propels itself to action through that communication. The activity of the self is in social interaction. It is through interaction that the self is a *self-object*. The self is, in Blumer's words, "an object of his own action" (1969:12). Blumer makes it quite clear that

the self cannot be housed within structures. It is necessary for there to be a purely reflexive nature of the self for it to exist.

Erving Goffman (1959) emphasizes the performances acted out by social actors. With Goffman, it is in the performances of social actors that selves are defined. In Goffman's dramaturgical approach, selves arising from self-presentations that are either credited or discredited by others.

O'Brien articulates the common thread that runs through the definitions of self in symbolic interactionist thought, "[...] the self is [...] a social construction that takes shape through interaction" (2006:240). The second chapter of this thesis will continue to flesh out these definitions of selves and explain the processes by which, according to symbolic interactionists, selves emerge. These more detailed definitions and processes will be presented with the focus being on *sexual* selves.

Conclusions

The sexual world is not a unified, objective reality. Plummer (1975) strongly asserts this point despite the appearance of such an objective reality. We are, after all, born into a pre-existing world with institutions, such as the church and families, which have been constructed, by consensus, with guidelines for acceptable sexual conduct. This, in turn, presupposes that sexual selves are constructed in such a way as to adhere to these guidelines that are justified and mutually reinforced in social institutions. Within these institutions the individual is confronted. The institutions are there, "external to him, persistent with the reality whether he likes it or not. He

cannot wish them away” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:77-78). For the very reason that we derive meaning through social interaction, we have the agency to modify these meanings, deny pre-accepted meanings by others, or even be unaware of existing meanings (Plummer 1975). What is important to remember is that sexual meanings are never fixed and we are actors that are instrumental in their change. The same can be said of our sexual selves. It is the construction of sexual selves within this social realm with all its constrictions, expectations, and varying meanings that necessitates examination.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Sexuality is something that we actively *do*. It is only because we possess sexual selves that doing sexuality is possible, and, necessarily, in turn, it is because we do sexuality that we possess sexual selves. For the reason that we actively do sexuality, the study of sexual selves is justified, as is the study of what others have said before me about the acquisition of selves; sexual or otherwise. I aver that it is symbolic interactionism that provides the most significant framework, heretofore, in understanding the acquisition and development of sexual selves. It is with this theoretical perspective that I will center my review of the literature.

The Process of Construction of Sexual Selves

The theoretical positions of symbolic interactionists explain how social interaction is the most significant component in the process of the emergence of selves. In this section, I place the lion's share of my focus on Mead's role-taking, Cooley's looking-glass self, and Goffman's dramaturgical approach, all of which I believe to be instrumental in understanding how sexual selves are acquired.

George Herbert Mead

Mead (1934) concludes that the process of self-acquisition begins after birth. This is a basic premise in symbolic interactionism. Selves emerge only with the interaction of a child in the social world. Likewise, it is through interaction in the social world that sexual selves emerge.

Mead designates three phases in the development of selves; imitation, play, and game. All three phases are dependent on the acquisition of language. With language, participants communicate with others putting forth their gestures, words, sounds, and phrases, participants develop their emotions, opinions, and thoughts, and meaning is derived through symbols found in the back and forth of language and gestures in social communication. Language is an essential tool in the displaying of selves in the public realm where, through language, selves are developed in the two-way process of communication; in speaking, we both necessarily hear ourselves talk and we necessarily imagine how others are interpreting and judging what we say. The emergence of selves is not possible without this fundamental basis of reflexivity. The acquisition of selves, then, according to Mead (1934) is directly connected to the acquisition of language in that language bestows the capacity for “mind” and, hence, thought, which, in turn, bestows the capacity for the emergence of selves. Language permits us to name what is sexual and convey our desires. In naming and conveying sexual desires publicly, our sexual selves emerge in the social realm.

In imitation, the subject is beginning to learn about herself through the mimicry of others. When a baby imitates the sounds, gestures, and actions of the parents, this is the first step to self-learning and discovery. The play and game phases are a refinement in our ability to take on the role of the other with increasing sophistication. The primary distinction between play and game is that in play one is able to take on the role of the significant other (parents, friends, teachers...), whereas in game one has the ability to take on the role of the generalized other (all others we encounter in the everyday; such as baristas, taxi drivers, and passersby). In play, according to Mead, roles are taken on and tested momentarily (the course of time that play is active). Play is

an opportunity for the participant to pretend as well as an instrument for a child in which roles can be taken on through imagination without concerns of being stigmatized or condemned. Roles, in play, can be as easily discarded as they are donned. Children sometimes partake in “playing doctor” with one child taking on the role of the doctor (an imagined role) while the other takes on the role of the patient (such as a mommy - a real role). Often “playing doctor” is an innocent act of playing with the child-doctor administering toy vaccines and taking the temperature of the child-patient. There is a reason that “playing doctor” has taken on sexual connotations. Children of different sexes have also used these roles to explore the body of the other in order to attempt to satisfy curiosity. This exploration of curiosity is done in the framework of play.

Games take on a higher level of sophistication with the inclusion of the ability to take on the role of the generalized other and learned rules. Mead (1934) uses the example of baseball where participants take on baseball positions rather than persons. In taking on positions, there are mandatory rules, duties, and obligations that must be learned. Without the ability to learn these rules, the game is not possible. In the “game” phase, the participant not only internalizes their role but all the other roles; for example, staying with baseball, one would not only internalize their role as shortstop, but also understand the other fielding positions in order for the game to be properly played. In the “game” phase, selves develop as rules are learned and adopted. Learned rules are instrumental for selves in that participants have more knowledge of the expectations of others before they present themselves in the social realm. While children are involved in games, it is important to note that this is a process that we all go through each time we acquire a self throughout our lifetime. According to Mead:

What goes on in the game goes on in the life of the child all the time. He is continually taking the attitudes of those about him, especially the roles of those who in some sense control him and on whom he depends. He gets the function of the process in an abstract way at first. It goes over from the play into the game in a real sense. *He has to play the game.* (1934:160, emphasis in original)

In applying games to sexual normativity, sexual selves are developed through the learning of sexual norms, scripts, and rules imposed by the consensus of members of society such as in the rules of sexual consent.

Another way to look at Mead's distinction between "play" and "game" is to consider a child *playing* with his genitals. This is play and not masturbation. The child is reacting purely to physical sensation. He does not understand sex for he has not acquired the proper language and scripts. According to Mead, "Our bodies are parts of our environment; and it is possible for the individual to experience and be conscious of his body, and of himself — without, in other words, taking the attitude of the other toward himself" (1934:171). The child is in the play stage until he has an understanding of the word *masturbation* and consciously *does* masturbation with purpose, at which time it is the "game" phase. Even if a male child ejaculates before the "game" phase, he does not have the adequate scripts to understand what occurred and the experience will end up being a confusing or even frightening one.

One last illustration of the distinction between "play" and "games" involves girls and dolls. Girls often display a rudimentary understanding of sex when they play with their Barbies. This is because they are involved in the "play" stage and do not possess the necessary scripts that

structure sexual meaning for their activity to be a game. Tisdale (1994) highlights playing with Barbies when writing about her sexuality:

When I was eight and nine, I played Barbie in the bedroom with my best friend, Janet.

We lay on my bed together with our naked dolls, and wrapped their rigid plastic limbs around each other as well as we could manage, banging them together in our best guess at intercourse - which, vague as the notion was, was all we knew of sex (21).

Here again, the “play” stage is demonstrated. Once the young Tisdale and her friend, Janet, are equipped with the proper sexual scripts they can enter the “game” stage where their sexual selves become developed. Mead (1934) contends that it is only through interaction that games can be played and selves can emerge. Cooley (1902) supports the necessity of interaction in his looking-glass process.

Charles Horton Cooley

The process of self-acquisition and development for Charles Horton Cooley (1902) is found in his landmark theory of the “looking-glass self.” The looking-glass self serves to demonstrate how selves are constructed from both perceptions of one’s self and imagined reactions of others. From this reflexive perspective originating with the imagination, the social participant first considers how she appears, and chooses to appear, to others. Next, following a presentation of self through interaction in the social realm, she imagines the judgements of others based on her presentation, and finally, she reflects on the judgements she imagines and reevaluates the presentation, making changes she deems necessary. In the final stage, what Cooley marks as important is the adoption of pride or shame based on the judgments, which become no-

table aspects in the evaluation and reevaluation of selves; particularly so with sexual selves. It is through this process that looking-glass selves are developed.

Cooley theorizes that ‘the social self is simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own’ (1902:147). Weigert and Gecas recapitulate Cooley’s warning with regard to this process in that “self-concept dependent primarily on the reflections of others [is] weak and incomplete” (2003:276); or, as Cooley states, “it is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves” (1902:152). This process is fueled by the imagination of the participant. It is an imagination that could only have been learned and emerged through social interaction. “We always imagine,” states Cooley, “and in imagining share, the judgements of the other mind” (1902:153).

In the preparation and act of any partnered sexual encounter, participants engage in each of the elements of Cooley’s “looking glass”; they imagine how they appear to their lover, they imagine how their lover judges their appearance and actions, and they reflect on those perceived judgements and make a conclusion based on that reflection. This is the reason partners dress in sexy attire, shower, put on perfume, shave, set romantic atmospheres, and perhaps ask (if not wonder) the hackneyed question “Was it good for you?” Sexual selves not only emerge out of interactions with others (both real and imagined), but that same reciprocity is equally fundamental to sexuality itself. In other words, perceiving one’s desirability is as fundamental as desire itself.

While this is the bare framework of Cooley’s theory, Franks and Gecas (1992) suggest that the scope of Cooley’s work has been too limited in its understanding, study, and application, primarily where self-formation is concerned. The aforementioned process lies at the core of the

notion of the looking-glass self but, unfortunately, this is where people tend to stop and consider that to be the looking-glass self theory as a whole. Franks and Gecas further the explanation of Cooley's ideas by drawing out the importance of making a distinction between the actual judgments made by others and perceptions of those judgments by the one presenting the self.

Another crucial aspect in this vein, for Franks and Gecas, is whether or not the other is a "significant other." This consideration is important when the third stage of the looking-glass self comes into play. Just as it is in Mead's (1934) ideas, the significant other, in Cooley's theory, refers to a person who possesses attributes that are of vital importance to the participant who is reflecting upon themselves; such as, in the case of sexual selves, a lover. The attributes of the other are considered in the imagination of the reflecting person. In the reevaluation of the self, the boundaries of the self are expanded to include the desired attributes. If the behaviors of another are admired, the participant will learn the behaviors through vicarious experience and may choose to refashion the self with those behaviors. In the case of sexual behavior of significant others, one may choose to adopt the behavior of their significant other, thereby further developing their sexual selves. Cooley expects that a balance must exist between autonomy and the influence related to the other, because of this, emotions and values are significant in self-formation.

Yet, desires are not contained in a committed relationship as sexual acts may be; the dynamics inherent in this fact are weighty in relation to significant others. Judgements made by significant others weigh more heavily on sexual selves and thereby there is a greater potential for shame when what is desired is judged harshly by the significant other; or, at least, is imagined to be something that will be judged harshly. A person who imagines that his partner will not be receptive to his desire for a particular sexual act also imagines the resulting shame. This may push

the person to seek out the fulfillment of his desire from an anonymous, non-significant other. In the anonymous other he has no emotional investment toward the other and little accountability for his desire for there is no ongoing relationship. If he wishes to never see the other person again, that option is available. In this environment he has the ability to act on desires that would be considered taboo by his significant other without fear of reprisal or shame. Redmon (2003) studied the acting out of sexual desires with anonymous others at Mardi Gras. In one interview, a male respondent discussed the sexual dynamics behind his secret self:

Male: You see, I'm married to my wife in California and we never do anything like this. But I've always wanted to. It's just a part of me that I can never express or show.

Interviewer: Does she know what you're doing here?

Male: She doesn't know what's going on, and I don't think she'd like how I'm acting. She wants nothing to do with Mardi Gras. She doesn't even know I'm gay! I've never told her that I'm attracted to men. It's the secret me. If she found out, I'd be embarrassed, I'd disappoint her. But here, I can be me. I don't have to keep it a secret (33-34).

Throughout Cooley's work, a great deal of emphasis is placed on imagination. Imagination is a critical factor in how the value placed on a significant other and their judgements may drive a person to seek fulfillment of sexual desires elsewhere from a non-significant other while still holding to the "commitment" of the relationship. The male respondent in Redmon's study is able to adhere to the commitment of his marriage while still living the life of a gay man from time to time. The existence of this secret self is driven by the imagination he has of his wife's judgments; imagination being a hallmark of Cooley's theory.

In terms of self-development in childhood, which is a process that continues into adulthood, Cooley (1902) discusses the idea of *appropriation*. This idea, as highlighted by Franks and Gecas (1992), focuses on the development of the self as an action wherein one acts to possess something as their own. To possess something, such as any external object or, even, a thought or feeling, is a foundational attribute of the self. The strongest example of this is found in a child's attribution of the attention and love of her parents. For sexual selves, the attribution desired is that of sexual attention by others or a deeper understanding of sexuality. The addition of these points, brought forward by Franks and Gecas, serves to broaden the work of Cooley's looking-glass self exponentially.

Erving Goffman

In a similar manner that Blumer connects self-acquisition to what we *do*, Goffman (1959) places the importance on self-emergence in performances. Such performances are displayed by social actors on various social stages. I must note that Goffman's contributions to notions of self and interaction are varied and widespread. For the purpose of this study, however, I will contain my focus, in relation to Goffman's work, primarily on his dramaturgical approach, as I find its contribution to my purposes to be most significant and necessary, for, as Goffman notes in regard to presentations of self, "what ought to be stressed... is that the very structure of the self can be seen in terms of how we arrange for such performances..." (1959:252)

Goffman's performances are utilized in a similar manner to how Cooley uses the imagination in the looking-glass self. The stage is divided between the backstage and the front stage. In the backstage areas, the social actor prepares the presentation of self that she intends to display to her audience in the public sphere. This preparation includes how she talks (dialogue),

what she wears (costume and make-up), and well-rehearsed gestures (staging); these are the *rehearsal* elements that actors assemble in unique ways; which is similar to Mead's role-taking. Once the actor is satisfied with her preparation, she moves from the backstage to the front stage. The front stage is where the performance takes place before an active audience. In the front stage, social actors offer distinct performances. It is the performance that Goffman claims to be the most crucial aspect. With respect to performance and the roles taken on in the performance, making a distinction between *theater* and *drama* becomes necessary:

Roles are often decidedly theatrical—patterned, scripted, situated, and performed before an audience in accordance to social norms. Roles are also necessarily dramatic — performed by people who creatively play in a manner that persistently introduce elements of indeterminacy and chance. Thus the structure of theater and the creative indeterminacy of drama represent twin processes that, not by accident, mirror Mead's (1934) classic distinction between the "I" and the "me." One takes on a role theatrically ("me"), one enacts that role dramatically ("I")—neither necessarily subsumes the other, nor is the whole of one's self found in one or the other (Waskul and Lust, 2004:352).

Either during the performance of the social actor or immediately afterwards, the audience either accepts or discredits the performance. If the performance is discredited, the social actor must make necessary changes to the performance or, to keep the theatrical metaphor going, change plays all together. As Weigert and Gecas poetically reference Goffman's process, "The fit between presentation and response is the dance of life" (2003:272).

Goffman bisects the individual into two parts; the individual as performer and the individual as character. The individual as performer has the ability to fantasize, train, and learn as

she rehearses for roles. With the latter division of the individual, Goffman considers the character the individual performs and the performer's self to be equated:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation — this self — is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited (1959:252-253).

The ritual practice of *face-work* is essential to Goffman's (1959) presentational process of selves. Goffman defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes..." (1959:5). Continuing on with face-work, "By face-work I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Face-work serves to counteract "incidents" — that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face" (12). Face-work is employed in order to provide consistency to the performances given by the social actor. Impression management is used by the actor to provide consistency to the presented face and guard against unanticipated flaws with the performance. The audience may also choose to aid with impression management by using face-saving techniques, such as not taking note of flaws or excusing inconsistencies, for the purpose of diminishing the embarrassment on the part of the performer. However, Goffman emphasizes that face-work is primarily an individual endeavor through the avoidance and corrective processes.

The corrective process is often employed in situations where there has been a failed performance. The inability to maintain an erection for a man can be a situation that can severely discredit the performer and result in shame. Utilizing humor, a tool of face-work, the man may defuse the situation with a joke or he may blame it on something else; “It was the alcohol, not me.” Men are often noted for using confusion to minimize the failure, “I don’t understand, this has never happened before.” The insensitive man may even go so far as to blame his failure on the sexual performance of his partner to protect face. The partner, on the other hand, can aid in saving face with what Goffman refers to as *audience tact*. She may ignore the situation, if possible, or she may reinforce his explanation that it is the alcohol and not him.

Goffman is quick to note that performances are not for the benefit of the audience but the “individual’s own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself” (1959:17). It is the performer’s perceived reality of self. This perception and the related performance not only attempt to extend a reality to the audience but is instrumental when embarking on the reality of future possible selves. Such face-saving techniques further help to illustrate Cooley’s (1902) distinction between audience reaction and the performer’s perception of reactions.

Possible Selves

The idea of goal orientation comes about in the concept of *possible selves*. Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius (1986) have done extensive work on possible selves that provide a greater range of understanding of the self and the symbolic interactionist conception of it. Markus and

Nurius are concerned with stages of time of the self and how goal orientation develops the self. The primary focus in their theory revolves around self-conception, or the considerations one makes of one's self. The idea is that a participant projects, into the future, an ideal of the self one wishes to possess. This is a positive projection for one desires a positive ideal in the future. Negative possibilities are considered for the purpose of avoiding negative attributes as being part, or the whole, of a future self. In fact, one moves toward the reality of the idealized future possible self from the present actual self by narrowing the gap between the present actual self and a future negative self.

The development of the self toward an idealized future self is as follows: one evaluates the positive and negative experiences of the past that led to the present self. This includes personal judgments as well as reactions from others. The participant then considers idealized roles and attributes of self that they desire for a future self. These considerations include influences obtained from significant others, as earlier defined by Cooley (1902), and roles that the participant has experimented with or considered as part of their imagination. The participant then is motivated to move toward obtaining the idealized possible future self.

In terms of sexual selves, I suggest we can see the formulation of future possible selves with virgins. The virgin idealizes future possible sexual selves. Considering future possible sexual selves, the virgin, albeit often naively, imagines what desired future sexual selves would be like. The virgin also takes negative aspects into account hoping to forgo unsatisfactory experiences, such as the female virgin who has been told how painful sex is the first time. She may be afraid of the impending imagined pain and seek advice in how to minimize or prevent it. Either the fear or the pain may set her development back. She may also imagine steps to take to protect

herself from labels obtained by her audience such as “slut” when she becomes sexually active. The male virgin may take steps to forgo awkward initial sexual encounters that may damage his presentation. In either case, the participants are reflecting on future possible selves and attempting to avoid negative attributes and construct desired future possible sexual selves that are framed with positive attributes.

Closely related to Markus and Nurius’ idea of future possible selves is Merton’s idea of anticipatory socialization. To explain this phenomenon, Merton wrote, “For the individual who adopts the values of a group to which he aspires but does not belong, the orientation may serve the twin functions of aiding his rise into that group and of easing his adjustment after he has become part of it” (1968:319). Merton emphasizes the example of privates in the military who gain the upper hand in promotions by adopting the military values of those of higher rank.

Waskul explains anticipatory socialization as “voluntary preparations for anticipated future roles; it involves gathering knowledge, adopting necessary value sets, playing at or rehearsing required scripts, and otherwise grooming oneself — mostly in acts of mental preparedness — for the perceived expectations of future roles and identities” (2015:96). We can see this in the sexual realm if we look at people using internet pornography to seek out sexual knowledge. Waskul considers technology, such as that of internet pornography, to be instrumental in anticipatory sexual socialization. Waskul interviewed 33 young adults between the ages of 19 and 27 in his study linking the use of sexuality on the internet to anticipatory sexual socialization. In the study, one respondent, Tina (aged 20), recounts:

When I was 12-13 I used to go on aol [American Online] chatrooms and pretend to be someone else. I would have one on one convos with strangers and have “cybersex.” At

the time I found it to be fun and guilty. I liked it because I was just starting to learn and explore my sexual self. I had maybe kissed a boy and that was as far as it had gone in my real life. Cybersex allowed me to express my sexuality without any real commitment or person I knew (ibid).

The internet is used to gain knowledge and compensate for inexperience in this response by Krista (aged 22):

I think that the only time I really used technology for sexual purposes and that was when I had my first boyfriend. I was 16 and I looked [on] Google and looked up “how to” do different things. I looked up how to give head and how to have sex, things like that. I think that it was actually very helpful and helped me feel more comfortable doing different things with my boyfriend (2015:97).

Not unlike the idea of future possible selves, the respondents have considered roles they wish to take on, they have imagined the steps necessary in order to adopt that role, and been motivated to move toward that perceived ideal self.

Superimposing evaluations of past selves with future possible selves over the dramaturgical or the looking-glass theory fortifies the argument of the self being developed through interaction. Furthermore, it enhances the idea of selves being socially constructed products.

Frameworks of Sexual Selves

With regard to how sexual selves are constructed, several sociological thinkers have put the wheels in motion, such as Rebecca Plante. Plante (2007) identifies three factors that exist in the framework of the construction and development of sexual selves; (1) sexual subjectivity, (2) sexual identities, and (3) a medley of socio-cultural variables. Plante defines sexual subjectivity as the sense one has of their sexual being; including agency and recognition of sexual desires. For sexual identities Plante refers to Steven Epstein for a definition: “[Sexual identities are] all the ways in which people operate in a socially-defined sexual sphere, see themselves as sexual beings, and achieve a greater or lesser degree of consistency in their sexual relational experiences” (Epstein, 1991:827).

Adina Nack (2003), like Plummer (1975), makes a point to say that there has been a lack of theoretical consideration surrounding the notion of self-concept as it pertains to sexuality and stresses that sexual selves must be looked at as fundamentally different from both gender and sexual identities. In her study of women involved in the management of stigma of sexually transmitted diseases, she draws out that sexual selves touch on the most intimate elements of the self and comprehensively include privately felt as well as experienced components of sexuality. These components that formulate sexual selves, according to Nack, include; (1) levels of sexual experience, (2) emotional memories of sexual pleasure (or, as she points out, lack thereof), (3) perception of one’s body as desirable, and (4) perception of one’s sexual body parts as healthy (Nack, 2003:611). Plante (2007) views Nack’s listed components of sexual selves, which are all solipsistic despite sex being something usually done with others, as being “crucial” as they can play a pivotal role in the operationalization of sexual scripts.

As we are actors presenting selves in everyday life, as Goffman (1959) suggests, then those selves use the social scripts detailed by Gagnon and Simon (2009), or, in the case of sexual deviation, disregard the social normative script. As Whittier and Melendez put it, “Actors are constantly involved in producing society and sexuality” (2007:191). Returning to those ideas of Gagnon and Simon, their script theory provides the who, what, when, where, and why of social expectations. In the instance of western, conservative and religious hegemonic expectations of sexuality, this dictates one man and one women (who), engaging in acceptable, vanilla sex practices (what), once they are married (when), in the privacy of their homes (where), for purposes of procreation (why).

In public, a couple may adhere to an appearance that is in alignment with those conservative scripts. They act their part before their audience and, if the audience accepts the performance, the performance is successful. But this may be one of their many sexual selves. At home they may routinely engage in brutal S&M games; more sexual selves. She may often participate in lesbian sexual relationships when he is away; more sexual selves. Just as there are scripts in conservative society, there are also scripts in S&M communities and homosexual communities. Learning and following the scripts, regardless of community, aids in the development of sexual selves. Gagnon explains further:

In any given society, at any given moment, people become sexual in the same way as they become everything else. Without much reflection, they pick up directions from their social environment. They acquire and assemble meanings, skills, and values from the people around them. Their critical choices are often made by going along and drifting. People learn when they are quite young a few of the things that they are expected to be,

and continue slowly to accumulate a belief in who they are and ought to be through the rest of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Sexual conduct is learned in the same way and through the same processes: it is acquired and assembled in human interaction, judged and performed in specific cultural and historical worlds (1977:2).

Gagnon and Simon (2009) supply three classifications of sexual scripts: (1) cultural, which exist in macro frameworks in society, (2) interpersonal, existing as social patterns, and (3) intrapsychic, which I will explain in a moment. Gagnon and Simon provide the following utility of sexual scripts: “Scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses, and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience” (13).

In regard to the intrapsychic western tradition, referring to psychological inner processes of the individual, Simon expounds:

Intrapsychic scripting thus becomes a historical necessity as a private world of wishes and desires, experienced as originating in the deepest recesses of the self, must be bound to social life: the linking of individual desires to social meanings. Desire, in a critical sense, is not really desire for something or somebody though is often experienced that way, but rather what we expect to experience from something or somebody (1996:43).

And yet, there is much more to consider than scripts and direct social factors. According to Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata (2002), beyond the biological factors, there are also

beliefs and attitudes to consider; “If sexual behavior were a completely independent force, not subject to conscious thoughts but controlled instead by hormones, or whipped up by drives, then it should matter little what a person’s attitudes are” (371). In a 1994 study, Michael, et al., found that it was underlying attitudes that predicted the type of private sex individuals had and how they thought about sex.

If we look at what we mean by “society” we find that in practice all social theory confirms the complexity of social relationships, the “multiple realities” through which we negotiate our everyday lives. “Society” is not a whole governed by a coherent set of determinants, but an intricate web of institutions, beliefs, habits, ideologies and social practices that have no necessary *a priori* unity and whose actual relationships have to be unravelled rather than taken as read. If we transfer this view of “the social” to sexual activities, we will see that far from “society” moulding “sexuality”, in any straightforward way, what we describe as sexual is constructed through a complexity of social relations, each of which has a different view of what constitutes sex and appropriate sexual behavior (Weeks, 2010:62).

As sexual meanings are negotiated in social interaction, sexual selves are constructed in the same manner.

Intrapsychic scripting contains the feelings that one has about their desires and sexual selves (Plante, 2007). This is more fleshed out in interpersonal scripts and ossified in the stories we tell about sexual desires, actions, and selves. It is through interpersonal scripts and the stories people tell about their desires and sexual actions that Plante sees sexual selfhood as being “socioculturally” constructed.

Irvine (2000) and Mason-Schrock (1996) argue that selves are a narrative accomplishment. In doing so, both Irvine and Mason-Schrock articulate Mead's idea of the "generalized other" wherein selfhood is established in the stories we tell to ourselves and others about ourselves and others. Irvine claims that selves are better understood as narratives in progress rather than the roles that actors take or performances that actors present. "The self is both the premise," Irvine states, "and the result of the stories people tell about themselves — especially those they tell *to* themselves" (1999:1). Sexual selfhood, then, is reinforced in the individual through the ongoing recapitulation of sexual stories told to both the self and others. Of course, the performance of telling those stories must be accepted by both storyteller and audience. In Irvine's study (1999) of persons attending a Co-Dependents Anonymous support group, Irvine notes that persons in the program reinforce selfhood by generating revisions of their stories and that selfhood hinges on the individual believing their own narrative more than persuading others to believe it.

Mason-Schrock cautions against neglecting the interactive process that constructs self-narratives. For Mason-Schrock, "To fashion a biographical story imposes a comforting order on our experience, but how do we arrive at stories that feel right, that point to authentic selfhood?" (1996:176). Mason-Schrock studies narratives provided by transsexuals who have the desire to change from one gender to another. According to Mason-Schrock, "Transsexuals used self-narratives to convincingly invent a differently gendered "true self," but they didn't invent or use self-narratives in isolation. Subcultural involvement, at some level, was essential." (1996:189) He concludes, "As the case of transsexuals shows, interacting with others gives us what we need to make the self as real and true as it can ever be" (1996:190).

The Significance of Emotion on Sexual Selves

While cognition plays an essential role in the construction and understanding of selves, some thinkers such as Hochschild (2012) and Weigert and Gecas (2003) view emotions as having as vital a role in the composition of selves as cognition, just as both Cooley (1902) and Goffman, (1959) emphasize the significance of emotions and sentiments. The reason for this is that the self is not only that which knows itself as an object but also knows itself, through emotion, as a feeling object (Weigert and Gecas, 2003). Therefore, I suggest, in extending Mead's idea, we can add that the self is both *feeler* and that which is *felt*. Denzin made the connection between self, emotion, and society when he wrote, "Emotion socially places the person in the real or imagined company of others. It is moved by other emotions. While felt, emotion constitutes a reality, or a world, unique and solely contained within itself. *Emotion is self-feeling*" (2009:66). Self-feeling is indispensable in the construction of selves and the experience selves have with their social environment.

It bears mention that *feeling* refers not only to emotions but somatic experiences as well. Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk (2012) claim that the senses, like emotions, are essential in the development of selves. Vannini, et al., elaborate, "Through the senses and sensations we can establish feelings of attachment and unity, and at times even contest the sensory orders that structure our experiences and constrain our actions, affiliations, and preferences" (2012:89). Certainly a good deal of the appeal in sex is the pleasurable, physical sensations, therefore, part of the framework of sexual selves must include the somatic elements. In establishing the importance of the senses in the development of selves, Vannini, et al., conclude that "not only do we routinely derive a sense of self by establishing what we like and dislike; we categorize others on the ba-

sis of whether and why we like or dislike them” (2012:102). The senses also play a part in determining what it is we like sexually and how we present ourselves to others, for example, a woman may apply perfume prior to sex to entice the olfactory senses of her partner.

Hochschild (2012) places a great deal of importance on emotions as she argues that we use emotions as defining indicators of our selfhood. Hochschild likens this importance to a person who is without the ability to feel through touch. That person lives in danger of touching a hot stove or a fire and, without the warning of touch-feeling, will harm themselves. In the same vein, the emotionless person would live an arbitrary existence in which the self is irrational. Using this reason, sexual selves, sans emotion, run the risk of irrationality.

The topic of guilt and shame is necessary to any discussion of the emergence of sexual selves as it plays a part in the decision-making process of which sexual stories we tell others and which stories we hide and it can have repercussions in our sexual interaction with others - both of which affect our acquisition of sexual selves. Scheff and Retzinger (2001) emphasize the product of shame in interaction:

In all interaction, either the social bond is being built, maintained, or repaired, or it is being damaged. Distinct emotional responses occur in different states of the bond. The building of bonds is accompanied by pride. When bonds are being damaged, anger, shame, and/or grief ensue. These responses mobilize the persons involved to attend to the bond (64, emphasis in original).

Waskul, Vannini, and Wiesen (2007) find instances of shame in their study on women and their clitoris. As one participant in their study recalls:

One of my friends bought me a cheap vibrator as a joke for my birthday, and it ended up being the best thing she could have done for me! I decided one night that I would give the new toy a whirl, and I had never been so sexually satisfied. I would say that I masturbate 2–3 times a week now. If I didn't rediscover masturbation I probably wouldn't have such a good sex life. I figured out what I liked and what I needed to be satisfied both alone and with my partner (168).

Waskul, Vannini, and Wiesen find that narratives like this are common for the women in their study, “negotiating the shame and guilt associated with masturbation is a common experience, as women acquire knowledge of and about their own body, desires, and claiming ownership of their clitoris and sexuality” (ibid).

Goffman (1959) raises the subject of shame in hints of his dramaturgical approach placing the social actor before an audience of *normals*. But Goffman, despite the subject matter of his work *Stigma*, only mentions shame a few times, and even then it is barely a mention. Hochschild (2012) criticizes Goffman, arguing that he does not give the subject matter of emotions a wide enough focus. While Goffman does address emotions in terms of the social actor standing before her audience, he does not, according to Hochschild address emotions in terms of the private self and what Scheff (2014) refers to as the hidden or deep self. Emotion is a mandatory subject to address, for Hochschild, especially when considering shame, guilt, or embarrassment. I extend that understanding emotion is even more important in terms of sexual selves. As Weigert and Gecas claim, “Shame and guilt are functioning aspects of the moral order, but they are also common features of human tragedy” (2003:278). In regard to sexual selves, such human tragedy can be found in instances of confusions over sexual orientation, imposed shame over

sexual fetishes, or in the sexual double-standard in which women are shamed for being too promiscuous while men are praised. But, I do not concur with Hochschild that Goffman wholly ignores that private self with regard to emotions and shame. Shame, I defend, is addressed by Goffman, apart from the social realm, in the private backstage of the actor:

Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing. The immediate presence of normals is likely to reinforce this split between self-demands and self, but in fact self-hate and self-derogation can also occur when only he and a mirror are about... (Goffman, 2009:7).

Certainly shame is not the only emotion that contributes to the acquisition of selves. Love and affection can be powerful catalysts in self-development. In studying female sexuality in the 1970s, Hite (1976) found tell-tale links between affection, love, and sex. One respondent explains this link introspectively:

My emotions play an enormous part in sex for me — maybe too much for my liking. I'm too "particular," or selective or delicate — I have to be feeling very intensely, or in love, or overwhelmed by sexual feelings in order to enter a deep sexual encounter. Sometimes I worry about whether the man will expect too much from me, sometimes whether I will expect too much from him. Sometimes I worry about whether I won't feel enough, or will be disappointed afterwards. At times I have gone out to have a totally casual encounter just to avoid these complications (1976:381).

This response highlights several aspects of symbolic interactionism's views of self-acquisition. First, it shows the vital role emotions have on sexuality. Secondly, it demonstrates Cooley's "looking glass" in the considerations of how she feels about herself and her reflection on the imagined judgments of others. And, thirdly, it indicates the thought process involved in the taking into account future possible sexual selves.

Feelings are shaped, by an individual, in emotion work (Hochschild, 2012). Hochschild relates a story told to her by a student:

Last summer I was going with a guy often, and I began to feel very strongly for him. I knew that he had just broken up with a girl...because she had gotten too serious about him, so I tried not to show any emotion. I was afraid of being hurt, so I attempted to change my feelings. I talked myself into not caring about him... To sustain this feeling I had to invent bad things about him and concentrate on them and continue to tell myself he didn't care. It was a hardening of emotions (43-44).

In the same manner that emotions played a part in potential romantic interaction between this student and the boy she was interested in, emotions affect sexual interaction as well; and thereby, the emergence of sexual selves. Among the attributes, Goffman's (1959) individual as performer "has the capacity for deeply felt shame, leading him to minimize the chances he takes of exposure" (253). Fear of being shamed by a lover, one may choose not to reveal a sexual fetish. In projecting the assumption of judgement that will be received, they have used emotion work (avoidance) to protect themselves from shame, but in doing so, they have held back the emergence of a sexual self.

As previously stated, social interaction is a reflexive process that is foundational for the emergence of selves (Mead, 1934). Externally, the reflexive process shifts from the individual to others through role taking and, internally, this bidirectional process reverts back to the individual through the ruminating on perceived judgements by others. Emotions emitted by either the individual or others alter the dynamics in the reflexive interactions; for generalized others, emotions displayed by the social actor will affect how the performance is viewed, while, for the social actor, emotions exhibited by an audience will color how judgements are perceived. In the development of sexual selves, such emotions as affection or shame put on display will affect the performances, the judgements, and the contemplation of both. Affection may be beneficial in a more fluid emergence of sexual selves, whereas shame may be a hindrance in the development of a sexual self.

Conclusions

This project seeks to understand how sexual selves are constructed. I am not convinced that the origins of sexual selves have been addressed properly in the existing literatures and, because of this, there are many questions I have and many avenues I wish to explore with regard to the acquisition and development of sexual selves, including, but not limited to, how external forces in the environment affect sexual selves, the mechanics within the differentiation of hidden and public sexual selves, and why some sexual selves survive while others fail and die out.

Symbolic interaction has provided me with a wealth of theoretical notions regarding the processes by which selves emerge and develop. With the following research study, I intend to

advance the understanding of how sexual selves emerge, develop, alter, sustain, transform and deconstruct beyond the symbolic interactionist framework founded in this chapter.

Chapter Three

A Grounded Research Design

My purpose with this project is to understand the construction of sexual selves. To best articulate the processes by which sexual selves are constructed, my research design followed a grounded research approach. Grounded research entails constructing inductive theories through the analysis of the data in a comparative and interactive method (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical categories are constructed through the data analysis. Grounded research keeps the researcher continually interacting with the data and the ideas that emerge from it (ibid). In this project, with a grounded research design, I began my research with a more open approach than were I to begin data analysis from a deductive theoretical framework. Grounded research allowed me to focus on the reported actions of the participants in the study and the processes by which sexual selves emerge from them. Utilizing this approach, I derived additional meanings in the construction of their sexual selves and more clearly identified contributing factors of the emergence than have previously been considered. If, in fact, symbolic interactionism is the most valid theory for explaining the process by which sexual selves emerge, then this will be confirmed through data analysis and findings obtained using a grounded research approach.

Sample Collection

In order to collect qualitative data, I interviewed men and women willing to discuss their sexuality. The primary tool used for participant recruitment was convenience sampling. Conve-

nience sampling allowed for fully voluntary participation in this study without ethical issues of coercion with regard to potential respondents. I began the process with a few close friends who volunteered to participate in the study long before it was ever considered for a Master's degree thesis. Upon the conclusion of those interviews I provided those participants with my contact card and asked that if they knew of anyone who may be interested in participating in this study to give them my information card. By having the potential participants contact me through former respondents, the process is fully voluntary on the part of those potential participants. At no time did I directly approach an individual and solicit their participation.

A secondary tool for participant recruitment came from the use of convenience sampling utilizing an online survey (see Appendix A). The manner in which this worked is as follows: During the writing of this thesis, I was a graduate assistant in a sexualities course taught by Dr. Dennis Waskul. One fact to note about the students that choose to take a sexualities class is that, not only are they expressing an interest in the topic of sexuality, they tend to be open-minded on such matters. Near the conclusion of the Sexualities course offered in the spring semester of 2016, Dr. Waskul mentioned my study during a lecture and offered an online survey, I created, for the students to voluntarily partake in. I gave a brief 5 minute explanation of the study then left the classroom. During the spring semester of 2016, I was not a graduate assistant for the Sexualities class so there is no concern of pressure or undue influence on my part. I had no prior experience with the students of that particular class.

Once the students were given a link to the questions they had a choice to ignore the online survey, thereby negating their participation in the study, or they could volunteer to participate by answering the questions anonymously. There are two categories of participation in-

volved with the online method; (1) responses that answer the questions without respondent's identity being given (anonymity). As there would be no name attached, I would never know the identity of the respondent. Furthermore, implied consent is involved merely from the filling out of the questionnaire, which is completely voluntary. These responses then became transcripts I used to code and memo. With this category, the participant's involvement ended with their completion of the questionnaire; and (2) this category follows that same process as the first category but is extended should the respondent volunteer to continue on with an interview. The end of the questionnaire gave the respondent an option to volunteer for a more in-depth interview. If they had been interested in volunteering, they could have provided their email address or phone number for me to contact them or they could have contacted me directly to inform me of their wish to volunteer for an interview. These interviews would have been conducted at a place, time, and medium of their choosing; this could have included face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, email, or interviews using Skype, Scopia, or FaceTime. Only one survey participant contacted me for a face-to-face interview which did not occur due to time conflicts between the would-be participant and the researcher.

Sample and Data

The sample for this study involved 23 participants in face-to-face interviews and 19 participants who filled out an online questionnaire survey. Of the 23 respondents I interviewed in person, three respondents asked that their contribution be eliminated from the study, citing their

discomfort with their responses and the subject matter of the study on a whole. Their request was granted, per the terms of the research consent form, and both their interview audio files and printed transcripts were destroyed. It is interesting to note that all three participants who asked to leave the study, after providing responses, were male.

A demographic breakdown of the remaining participants is as follows:

Gender Identification: 10 participants identified themselves as male while 26 identified themselves as female. One respondent was a biological male who identified as a female and two respondents identified as Cis-female.

Age: The range of ages consisted of the youngest being an 18 year old female to the oldest being an 84 year old male. All decade categories in between the extremes of this range were accounted for with the exception of there being no representation of persons in their sixties.

Sexual Orientation: 23 participants in this study identified as heterosexual, 6 as bisexual, 3 as gay, 1 as pansexual, 1 as asexual, 1 as polyamorous, 1 as queer, and 1 as fluid. Two participants answered that they did not fit into any categories.

Location: Although only a few participants were born in Minnesota, all participants currently live in Minnesota with the exception of two participants living in California, one participant living in Tennessee, and one participant living in Washington D.C. Two participants now live in the United States having moved from Europe; one from England and the other from Germany.

Race/Ethnicity: All participants answered that they were white or Caucasian with the exception of three participants answering Hispanic and one participant answering African-American.

Occupation: There was a large scope of occupations listed including a wide range of incomes; including university students, business executives, chefs, Hollywood actresses, military personnel, musicians, grocery store clerks, political lobbyists, fast food workers, correction officers, bartenders, and sex toy salespersons.

Religious Affiliation: 18 participants in the study claimed to have no religious affiliation, 14 identified as Christian, 3 as Lutheran, 1 as Agnostic, 1 as non-denominational, 1 as Jewish/Spiritual, and 1 as “Christian/Agnostic”.

Ethical Considerations

All persons who chose to participate in this study did so voluntarily and without pressure or coercion, yet I took care to exercise proper ethical techniques. After all, the subject matter of the interviews conducted focused on the respondent’s sexuality and, at times, were of a sensitive nature previously kept private. The Institutional Review Board at Minnesota State University - Mankato regards any questions of a sexual nature to be “sensitive questions.” I agree with this and, because of that, I was cognizant of the sensitive nature of my questioning and the answers that came forth from that questioning.

First, I obtained consent from each participant and informed consent with a signed document from the interviewees. The research consent form detailed the study itself and informed the participant of their rights (see appendix B). Once the research consent form was signed, a copy was provided to the participant. Each person I interviewed was also shown the list of introductory questions prior to the interview. Participants were told that they have every right to refuse to

answer any question they do not wish to. Furthermore, they were informed that they could stop the interview at any time and withdraw from the project. Should they wish, they could refuse to allow me to use any material gathered up to that point; a request I honored. At the time of a person's withdrawal from the project, consent forms were immediately destroyed along with any recorded or written material from the interview.

Unless there were barriers for the respondent, all interviews were digitally recorded, the participants were notified of the recording. If, however, they had been uncomfortable with being recorded, I would write their answers in shorthand without the use of a recording device. Any transcript that came about from my shorthand notes would have been shown to the participant for their approval. When the interviews were recorded, I provided a confidentiality statement to the participant explaining how the recordings were to be stored so that they would not be available to others. Both recordings and shorthand notes were destroyed or deleted immediately following transcription.

Transcribed interviews are stored in a locked file cabinet in the office of Dr. Dennis Waskul in 113 Armstrong Hall at Minnesota State University - Mankato, along with informed consent forms, and will remain there for a period of three years (after which they will be destroyed). No materials were saved on my computer. All data files, notes, and all transcriptions from any electronic source were saved on portable flash drives which are stored in the same locked file cabinet in 113 Armstrong Hall.

Respondents were asked to select the location of the interview to better ensure their comfort and safety. They were given the option to have others present, if they wished, during the in-

interview. When a participant did not wish to meet in person, or could not, I suggested using Skype, Facetime, Scopia, email or telephone interviews as an option.

The participants were guaranteed that the writing of the thesis that came from the interviews would be done in such a way as to not lead a reader to be able to identify the interviewee; participants were given a pseudonym. Locations, as well as any other determiners of their actual identity, were deleted. Pre-defense copies of the thesis would be made available to each participant at their request and I explained that I will withdraw any direct quotes in the paper that I am requested to by the participant that the quote originated from. This was an action I offered to do up to the time of final preparation for defense of the thesis.

With the aforementioned measures in place to protect the respondents I interviewed, I did not foresee any ethical problems arising. My interview format demonstrated that I am dealt with sensitive material and every precaution was taken into account to make the interviews safe and comfortable. Upon the conclusion of the interviews, no ethical concerns arose.

Interviews

I conducted the interviews in whatever setting the participants believed was most conducive to their feeling safe and comfortable. As I utilized a grounded research design, I was making the questions as open-ended as possible (see appendix C). It was important for the respondents to speak freely without being limited by questions that anticipated answers with a narrow scope. Easy and non-threatening opening questions were demographic in nature to put the participant at ease. Afterwards, the next series of questions that pertained directly to the sexual

nature of the study asked participants to talk about their earliest sexual recollections whether it be thoughts, activities, or observations. These questions included their childhood. What I was not interested in asking were questions that are narrowly specific as I did not wish to pigeon-hole any of the respondents into any pre-designed categories. All contributing factors brought up with regard to the emergence of sexual selves, I wanted to be brought up by the respondents as part of their open answers. I did this in order that previously unrecorded, or lesser known, contributing factors could emerge.

Transcription and Coding

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, unless handwritten notes were requested. Every effort was made for the transcription of recordings to be completed within seven days of the interview. For the most part, this was accomplished except in cases where interviews were excessively lengthy; as in the instance with one interview that lasted 3 1/2 hours. Names were immediately changed and all identifying information was eliminated.

Proper coding of the transcripts is one of the most important aspects of the process. It is through coding that contributing factors in the emergence of sexual selves came to light. Line-by-line coding techniques were used once the interviews were transcribed. Coding allows for definitions to be formed of what the data describes; this technique is further explained by Charmaz:

Coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data. Your codes show how you select,

separate, and sort data to begin an analytic accounting of them. [...] Coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations. We aim to make an interpretative rendering that begins with coding and illuminates studied life (2006:43).

Gerunds (the turning of a verb into a noun using -ing endings) were used in the coding of each line; for example, “*fucking* their partner”, “*masturbating*”, and “*going* through puberty.” Once the line-by-line coding was complete, I looked for gerunds that identified contributing factors in the construction of sexual selves. What I was looking closely for was the emergence of gerunds that identified contributing factors that may not have been previously noted. I employed three types of coding in the process; (1) open coding, in which I collected and organized the data, (2) axial coding, in which I created and connected categories, and (3) selective coding, in which I selected a main category and analyzed it against other categories.

Once analysis of my coding of the transcripts was complete, I began memoing. With memoing I wrote my reflections of my analysis from the coding of my transcripts. Memoing fleshed out my analysis and solidified my thoughts before I moved on to comparative analysis. “Memoing,” according to Miles and Huberman, “helps the analyst move easily from empirical data to a conceptual level, refining and expanding codes further, developing key categories and showing their relationships, and building toward a more integrated understanding of events, processes, and interactions in the case” (1994:74).

Constant Comparative Analysis

With my transcripts, coding, and memos in hand, I turned to constant comparative analysis of my data. Constant comparative analysis, according to Thomas (2013), involves analyzing the data repeatedly and comparing each element of the data (sentences, phrases, paragraphs, bits of dialogue) with all the other elements of the data. Constant comparative analysis in a grounded research design permitted me to confirm, enhance, or discredit emergent theories. The identification of contributing factors of the emergence of sexual selves was compared between interviews and important notes of analysis from one interview was compared to other interviews I conducted to see where similarities emerge. Such a comparison as this supports data and conclusions I make with my findings. Constant comparative analysis is instrumental in the development of grounded theory in that it clusters data that can serve as base social units in the inception of theory.

Using a grounded research design, I began with a question, “How are sexual selves constructed?” By obtaining qualitative data and using coding, memoing, and constant comparative techniques, I had the ability to substantiate previously recognized contributing factors to self-construction as well as possibly discovering previously unnoticed contributing factors. This, I am confident, aided in understanding how sexual selves are constructed and emerge.

Chapter Four

Sexual Selves in Narratives: Findings

The narratives provided by the participants in this study furnish an invaluable foundation to how sexual selves are constructed. For this reason, I will rely heavily on the words of others in this chapter to highlight the sexual experiences, behaviors, and attitudes that aid in our understanding of the acquisition of sexual selves. The narratives I obtained in over 29 hours of face-to-face interviews and through an online survey were richly textured in emotion, yearning, humor, bravery, pain, and hope. Judith Roof (1996) observed that ideas of narratives and sexuality inform one another. For these reasons, it is crucial that I allow the words of the respondents to speak for themselves as much as possible for their narratives are an insight into the lives of their sexual selves.

Learning through Socialization

Throughout the narratives I gathered, three distinct categories emerged concerning how the participants came to learn about sexuality; (1) how they first came upon their knowledge of sex, (2) the portrayal of sex in play, and (3) sex education classes. With regard to the latter, a few respondents did not remember having a sex education class in primary or secondary school. A couple of the participants said they had no formal sex education class but they did have a brief section on it in biology. Kenneth (age 19) informed me that he attended a private Christian school “so we did not have any sex education and we were left to our own devices.” The others,

save one, reported having had a sex education class but one that was hopelessly insufficient. Adjectives used to describe their sex education classes sounded like the pickings of a thesaurus within the entry of a “jest:” “ridiculous”, “a joke”, “absurd”, “awful”, “stupid”, and “idiotic”; were just a few of the describers.

As many respondents indicated, and Judith Levine (2003) has well documented, participants in this study recall a sex education curriculum that was based on instilling a fear of sex into the students; with topics including STDs, unwanted pregnancy, and the shame of sex. As our public school curriculum requires, abstinence is the only recommended course of action for students, although a few did mention contraception. Phoebe (age 25) claimed that her sex education class was little more than “They showed us [a picture of] a penis.... they showed us [a picture of] a vagina.”

Participants in this study wished they had had a comprehensive sex education class to help them with their curiosity and answer their questions. Lauren (age 39) said, “Sex ed was very basic. It was more about health, STIs and options for [contraception]. I thought to myself at the time, I know all of this already. I think there should be more education about sex.” In most cases, parents were even less helpful than the meager and, sometimes, detrimental classes offered in school. Karen (age 22) was one of the few who appreciated the openness of her parents:

My parents were always very open about answering any questions I had about sex. My mom and I would watch Opera a lot, so she had some talks about sexuality. I remember being about five and watching a *Nightmare on Elm Street* movie when it was the flashback of Freddie’s mom and she said she was raped and that’s how he was

conceived, and I remember asking my mom what rape means so she took the time to explain to me what sex was and then what rape was and why it was bad.

Sometimes, however, parents trying to be open and helpful, talking about sex, can take things too far. Damage was actually done by having a step-parent discuss sex with Abbie (age 47):

My stepmother asked me if I knew how to French kiss. She decided to show me how using my Dad, which was bizarre. She sexualized my Dad for me. It led to my feeling uncomfortable with men for a while.

The more open nature of the dialogue between Karen and her mother is in contrast to what Amanda (age 52) experienced. As Amanda explained:

Sexuality was treated as shameful in my family. I grew up with a lot of questions about sex and instead of having someone to talk to about it, I had to simply go out and find out for myself. I did a lot of damage to my emotions, and to those of the men I was with.

Debra (age 19) wished that she would have had a sex education class that showed the different types of birth control, along with how to use them and where to get them. She wanted a sex education class that taught her much more than was provided. Debra realized:

They didn't mention lubrication, fetishes, how to talk about sex in a relationship, pain that may be involved, bleeding the first time, [or] homosexual relationships. I felt ok in the class, but I didn't know at the time how much they left out.

Of all the responses given to me, regarding sex education, only Haley (age 28) found her experience with a sex education class to be beneficial. Haley recalls:

I had a great sex education class when I went to high school in [a prominent west coast city]. It consisted of information about anatomy, sex, how to have safe sex, and diseases that you can get if you are not careful with your activities. I think that the class was very informative and helped me understand things greatly.

In a 2007 study by Waskul, et al., the researchers discovered an equal silence in sex education classes and among parents. Vicki, a participant in their study reported a curricular omission in the sex education class: “Our teacher just explained what each part of the body and girls’ anatomy was. But didn’t really tell us anything about what each thing was for” (157). As for her parents being helpful, Vicki wrote, “I was actually never told anything about it from my parents” (158). Jill, another respondent in the Waskul, et al. study, agreed: “It was never something that was talked about in my house, not even between my mom and I” (ibid).

Likewise, the participants in this study did not find sex education classes to be useful and nearly all claim that their parents were not forthcoming in teaching them about sex. What, then, was the source of their sexual knowledge? Apart from Phoebe, who claimed “I learned about sex by having sex,” a clear line surfaced dividing those over thirty years of age and those under thirty. In the under thirty category, respondents learned about sex and satisfied their early curiosity partially by watching television shows and movies, and sometimes through erotic literature, but mostly on the internet; in social media or on porn sites. Ben (age 22) extolled the wonders of

internet forums, “I use the internet almost every time [I masturbate]. It speeds up the masturbation process for me. Either that, or makes the finish all the more spectacular for me.” Haley (age 28) used the internet to learn how to masturbate:

I remember wanting to know what it was like to have an orgasm when I was in 7th grade, the year where we had sex ed in our health class. I went to my grandma’s house that weekend to spend time with her, and when she was sleeping I went on her computer and watched a porn of a girl masturbating. I tried to do what she was doing with her hands, paying close attention to what felt good and where everything was. It took me until I was a junior in high school to figure out how to have an orgasm but it was well worth it. Eventually when I turned 18, I went into the local sex shop and picked out a vibrator. By this time I had my own computer and decided to look up porn again, but this time it involved a vibrator. I found out what I like and what I don’t.

Those participants who fell into the thirty years and older category did not have luxury of the internet, useful sex education classes, or the wisdom of parents to provide them sexual knowledge. Private discussions on the back of school buses and finding their father’s stash of *Playboy* magazines were common narratives:

My friend found his dad’s stash of *Playboys* and brought them onto the school bus. That was first grade. We spent days scouring through the pages trying to make sense of it all. We learned a lot but we were left with just as many questions (John, age 43).

My dad had porn mags. We looked at them on the way to school. I had to be careful to put them back in the exact spot they were. He would have killed me. There was a lot of “Oh, that’s where that goes” [laughs]. We laughed at the cocks. I think we laughed because they scared us and we didn’t want to show we were afraid (Anna, age 33).

Apart from finding adult magazines, trial and error through experience became the standard method to learning about sex. For Betty (age 30), her upbringing left her “very naïve” about sex. She claims, “I became a sexual person once I could put names on sexual body parts and activities. The more I learned the more I changed sexually.” Betty’s response confirms Plummer’s assertion, “Nothing is sexual but naming makes it so” (1975:30).

In the tradition of Mead’s (1934) notions on play, participants in the study provided strong, well-remembered narratives concerning acting out naïve conceptions of sex in play scenarios. Mead’s concept of play allows a child to take on roles of significant others for a short period of time. Children pretend to be in those roles and, utilizing their imaginations, they begin to form ideas about the roles and the acts associated with them as part of the learning process. Haley (age 28) provided a particularly good example:

The first time I remember acting sexually with another person was when I was 5 years old. I had just watched a vampire movie with my neighbor and we were playing “Vampires” with each other. We thought something that they did was kiss open mouthed for a while then slowly kiss down to the neck and bite. That’s what we saw in the movies. So we would do that and I really liked how it felt. I didn’t think we were doing anything wrong, we were just playing around and pretending. But I do remember how

nice it felt and that I liked it when we did that. One day my mom walked in on us doing that and freaked out. We tried to tell her that we were just playing but she wasn't happy. She made me feel ashamed for doing it, she said it was wrong for little girls to act that way.

Not only does Haley recall being introduced to her first doses of sexuality through play but her mother also provided her first encounter with sexual shame. The girls were learning about sex through play and initial development of future sexual selves. Bradshaw discusses the potentially harmful influence:

All human powers, affects, and drives have the potential to encompass our personalities. Any emotion can become internalized as an identity. We say that someone is an "angry" person, or we call someone a "sad sack." [...] People can be possessed by their sex drive and become sex addicts. The feeling of shame has the same demonic potential to encompass our whole personality. Instead of the momentary feeling of being limited, making a mistake, littleness, or being less attractive or talented than someone else, a person can come to believe that *his whole self is fundamentally flawed and defective*. Such a person does not have his healthy guilt (moral shame) available to him. Healthy guilt would say, "I made a mistake or a blunder, and I can repair that blunder." When a person's guilt has become neurotic, it becomes an "immorality shame." [...] The demonic potential of shame can lead to the most destructive emotional sickness of self a person can have (1988:21).

Haley's future sexual selves could have displayed the negative effects of the shame imposed by her mother. Her mother could have taken the time to understand what the girls were

playing and opened up a discussion where their questions were answered and their curiosity satisfied. If the mother had taken the time to help the girls understand, a positive outcome could have emerged from the combination of their mother's teaching and what they learned from play; it could have set up a good foundation for healthy future sexual selves. Several others in this study recall similar childhood memories of sex play:

I was young. My best friend who was my next door neighbor, she and I used to play the Fonz and Laverne and we'd go behind the bushes and we would make-out like they did on t.v. We didn't know what it was. We knew it was something about sex but we didn't know exactly what it was (Parker, age 46).

I had a friend and we'd play "Boyfriends". She'd go into a room by herself and "make-out" on the bed and I'd be like, "What do I do now?" (Abbie, age 47)

I recall being very young and acting out sexuality with friends. Mimicking what we did know about romance or sex (Jacqueline, age 23).

Several respondents, such as Debra (age 19) and Karla (age 19) recalled playing "truth or dare" in their youth and stressed the importance of learning about sex through this provocative game:

I remember doing rather sexual truth or dare games with neighborhood kids when I was 7 and 8. Some of the other kids were a year older than me and I had just moved to the area. We would dare each other to kiss another person in the group. We saw each other naked.

We would lay on top of each other naked which is what we understood as sex at the time. They taught me what was what I now know as masturbation. One of the boys was in my class and we sat next to each other and he put his hand down my pants and I would put mine down his (Karla, age 19).

Although “truth or dare” is called a game, it is not a “game” in the tradition of Mead. The structured rules and understanding of roles that are important in Mead’s idea of games is not evident in Karla’s account, nor part of the activity known as “truth or dare.” Instead, in the Meadian sense, “truth or dare” is “play” — or, at least, as the activity is recalled by the participants in this study in their youthful explorations of sex. The children in Karla’s account are imitating what they understand to be sex¹. They are playing out perceived roles. Karla even makes a point to say that what they were doing is something she “now” knows as masturbation; a clear indication that her previous “play” is now informed by the rules of the “game” that she now understands and calls “masturbation.”

For Jacqueline and Phoebe the childhood play became quite sexual, but the learning process is evident as they explain how they tried to understand how sex worked amongst female friends of their youth. Phoebe (age 25) recalled a memory from second grade. “We went in the bathroom and we humped” she said, adding, “We had our panties down. It was so awkward ‘cuz we couldn’t figure out how to penetrate or anything because we both have vaginas. We faked it ‘cuz we didn’t have a penis.” To clarify, I asked “You were grinding?” Phoebe replied, yes,

¹ While some of these childhood experiences of sex-play may be perceived as abuse, the majority appear to be normative and parallel how children use play in a developmental process that is like any other social role that they later require. Furthermore, children cannot be held accountable for moral standards that they do not yet possess.

“grinding with clothes off.” Others in this study recall very similar memories of early childhood sexual interactions with peers, such as Jacqueline (age 23):

I was very young the first time I acted sexual. My friend and I were probably 5. I remember being in her room during a sleepover. It felt very good. We would pretend to be boyfriend and girlfriend and kiss while rubbing ourselves together. We would do it all night and stay up late playing sex. We called it that, playing sex. Our relationship was very fun and ultimately innocent. We would play Titanic and one of us would be Jack and one of us Rose! We would look forward to having sleepovers because we knew that once our parents went to bed we could play sex. Even when we got older like 9, 10 and so on we kept doing it. Looking back I’m happy that I “played sex” it was [a] healthy expression and thankfully it was safe.

Learning about sex in the manner that these narratives provide, demonstrates that sensory stimulation paired with a desire for sexual understanding is a particularly common variable in the early development of sexual selves. Children are exposed to sexuality either through external influences such as television and movies, as noted in the repeated playing out of character roles, or personal motivations such as realizing what feels good. Waskul, et al., deliver a simple but important statement when they mention, “Women masturbate because it feels good” (2007:169). “The body *makes sense*” according to the researchers, “because, in part, the body *is sense*” (ibid: 161, emphasis in original). The same idea is applicable to children. Children follow the same sensory cues as adults. They are interested in what *this* is that feels so good and they play both because they are trying to learn about it and because it does feel good. Children can and *do* learn

what feels good and childhood sex play, individually and with other children, provides resources for sexual selves that can be drawn upon throughout a life-course.

Sexual Perceptions

Perceptions are an integral part of self-acquisition as we see in the determination of whether or not an audience accepts or rejects an actor's performance in Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, and certainly, in Cooley's (1902) looking-glass, in the initial considerations of self and the perceived judgments of others in interaction events. In this study, I specifically asked participants about their sexual perceptions of themselves as well as how they thought others perceived them. I intentionally asked these questions separately. I asked about how they thought others perceived them sexually at the beginning of the interview and waited until near the end to ask about how they saw themselves sexually. These questions were placed in this manner so that respondents would not immediately connect the answer of one to the answer of the other. A few respondents found both questions difficult or impossible to answer. However, for the other participants in the study, the answers received are consistent with the theoretical approaches by both Goffman and Cooley.

Reported perceptions of self mirrored how respondents thought others perceived them sexually. With Goffman's approach, the social actor prepares for the performance backstage then moves to the front stage where the audience either accepts or rejects the performance. After the performance, the actor returns backstage to make necessary corrections based on audience reactions to the performance. Cooley's final stage has the individual returning to the "looking-glass"

to take into account the imagined perceptions of others and reconsider perceptions of self. It may be some conjecture on my part, but some participants in this study gave reason to believe that the mirrored responses I received came from the final stages of the Goffman and Cooley approaches where individuals are considering their own perceptions of sexual selves along with the perceptions they have garnered from others. For example, Amanda (age 52) stated:

I see that my physical looks attract a lot of attention. Men seem to equate a good-looking woman with one that is sexy. I don't like to flaunt my sexuality at all, but I see how men look at me, and often, how other women look at me as well. I like the idea of my sexuality to be there, but not "in your face," if that makes any sense.

Amanda is very conscious about how she views the perceptions of the generalized other. When asked about how she saw herself sexually, she answered, "I'm still attractive for a woman my age, and it's important to me to stay healthy, active, and sexy."

Karen (age 22) feels pressured by others, "My roommate, he thinks my sex life with my partner is pretty boring and straight forward. My best friend thinks that I should be more adventurous." When I asked how she perceived herself, she answered, "I see myself as a pretty boring sexual person." Further questioning of Karen made it evident that prior to criticisms by the likes of her roommate and her best friend, she felt she was satisfied with who she was sexually and that she was pleased with the sex she shared with her boyfriend. Reactions to her sex life placed her backstage again or in front of her looking-glass rethinking her sexual selves and now reframing herself as a "pretty boring sexual person." This scenario is echoed in the responses by Kenneth (age 19) who imagines that others see him as "boring" and, due to this, he now sees himself as "inexperienced or underwhelming."

Beth (age 22) spelled out the process more clearly telling me that she has always seen herself as being sexually open and engaging and, because of this, others see her the same way. She is intentional in maintaining this as a cyclical process. Even for the “random person in the street” she would like to think, “they can perceive that I do like to express my sexuality.”

Karla (age 19) was corrected in her assumptions of how others saw her sexually. She believed her bi-sexuality was a hidden sexual self but, “When I told my first friend that I might be bi she said that she thought that was already confirmed.” Karla came to realize that she had not been as quiet about her sexuality and experimentation as she thought she had been. Her acknowledgement of future sexual selves came in her answer about how she saw herself sexually, “I see myself pretty open sexually. I like to experiment. I feel confident in my own sexual self and I’m open to how I’ll change sexually in the future.”

The only exception to the mirrored answers I received, apart from the few that did not know how to answer, came from Phoebe (age 25). Phoebe is very open when talking about sex. She admits that she enjoys talking about sex. However, her need for a trusting and spiritual relationship prior to any sexual activity keeps her from having sex often; in fact she has only had sex twice in the past year. When asked how she feels people view her sexually, she answered, “They see me as a ho because I like to talk about sex.” She attributes this juxtaposition between her actual sexual selves and the perceptions of her sexual selves by others as part of the sexual double standard in society. Phoebe explains:

I’m open verbally. I talk about [sex]. To me, everyone does it. I feel like women have to keep it a secret because we have this thing where you’re not considered a woman if you talk about it. I’m like, we are human. If you want to talk about it, I don’t care. It’s like

the [double standard] if a woman is sexually active like a man she's considered a "ho" but a man is considered a "player" and it looks good. Women like sex, I personally feel, just as much as men, we just can't talk about it or we can't show it.

For Phoebe the sexual double standard has created a barrier between how she sees herself and how others perceive her. She suggests that the only way to shatter barriers formed from perceptions of others is to "get people to stop being judgmental and ignore the norms. Good luck with that." Juxtaposition in perceptions, however, were not the only barriers encountered in the narratives.

Sexual Barriers

Anytime there is interaction with others, there stands the opportunity for disagreement between the parties; varying points of view. With sexuality, differences in sexual mindsets can build barriers that can retard the process of sexual self-development. Participants in this study who identified as gay or bisexual all pointed to barriers in their lives set up by the actual or perceived homophobia of others. Kenneth (bisexual, age 19) was just one of the gay/bisexual respondents who discussed the religious and homophobic barriers:

LGBT phobias have been the hardest to deal with. Other things that have been frustrating are issues like religious discrimination and bisexuality erasure. For a long time I hated myself because of my religious upbringing. I felt as though God hated me for being different from my family.

Because of the barriers that he acknowledges, Kenneth has not become sexually active nor experimented with his desires, even though he wishes to. “I would like to lose my virginity” Kenneth admitted, adding “I would like to be in a loving relationship that is intimate and sexual.” Debra (age 19) is also bi-sexual. Unlike Kenneth, Debra is more open about her bisexuality, “I figure I have nothing to hide and that if I open up more and more people could become comfortable with talking about sex and it wouldn’t be this big secret in the world.” The issue for Debra is that many people she encounters do not want to hear her speak as openly as she does and she acknowledges that as a barrier, especially when she feeds into it by catering to their discomfort by toning down her rhetoric.

Haley (age 28) is aware of the social barriers to her polyamory. She turns the table, however, to demonstrate how those barriers have negative effects on others:

I have had some people who don’t understand how I can be comfortable with being with more than one person, but I am happy and all my partners are too, so I don’t let it phase me. But the judgment that I get from people prevents them from really seeing who I am and it prevents me from being able to really bond with them and have a good friendship. I haven’t fully told my mom about my lifestyle because I feel like she would feel awkward about it and around me. I think she has an idea but I feel like it might be too much for her, which prevents me from being able to be fully open with her. Maybe my mom doesn’t need to know that much...

Haley’s attitude is that negative thoughts and judgments regarding her lifestyle do not have a negative effect on her but those that hold those judgments. In her view, they are missing out on

the friendship she has to offer them. Parker (gay, age 46) recognized that sexual barrier as working both against himself and partners he's been with:

[Before I got married] my barrier was partners that had not accepted their sexuality, if they were gay, and their idea of sex was dirty, and it was quick, and it was supposed to be something that was never going to be identified in the light, and it was never discussed because it would bring public shame, and people were not comfortable with themselves.

The barrier Parker recognized led to short-lived relationships. He was unable to stay with partners that held negative views of their sexuality or avoided their sexuality. "I lost out on some wonderful people but they missed out on me too." Parker considered, adding "Now I'm married so if you don't like who I am or yourself, there's the door."

Barriers that originated from sexual abuse affected some of the participants in this study. For example, Danielle (age 22) was raped at the age of 13 by a boy her own age.

Therapy was the best thing I could have done for myself but, even though I'm engaged, there'll be times that I just mentally shut down. And he'll know that. And so we'll just have to stop [having sex] and talk. And that's why he's the best because he'll just stop what we're doing and talk to me and understand.

Sarah's (age 26) sexual abuse put a hold on her sexual development altogether:

I was sexually assaulted when I was 20 so that took away my sexuality for a long time. I didn't feel... when you feel victimized you don't feel confident about that part of your life. So for me, healing through that and gaining back my sexuality was a process. Now

I'm more confident about it. Like I won't let someone slut shame me for my sexuality because I don't care what someone says anymore.

Sarah admits that the regaining of her sexuality was a process and a process by which her sexual selves are acquired. Barriers are part of the process as everyone faces barriers, of one sort or another; they are inevitable. But, barriers are not necessarily an unfortunate part of the process. Barriers provide a significant contribution to the development of sexual selves; as they would contribute to the negotiation of any other self. People suffer under some unfortunate barriers, this is true. But people also rise to the challenge of barriers and work their way beyond them, acquiring confident and robust sexual selves. In both cases, sexual selves emerge.

Suppression of Sexual Selves: Incomplete Lives

The process of self-development found in Cooley's (1902) looking-glass self is dependent upon the individual moving from the first stage, in which they make considerations of self, to the second stage where there is an interacting presentation of self with others. My research found that sometimes, where sexual selves are involved, the process comes to a standstill after the first stage. Fear of judgment or stigmatization is often at the forefront of this isolating of sexual selves and desires. Judgment of other's sexuality is a learned experience through social interaction. Watching others labeled as "sexual freaks" or "perverts" may have the negative effect of some choosing to keep their own sexuality private. Labeling and more extreme cases of violence toward groups such as the LGBT community has kept people "in the closet" with their

sexuality. But fear of labeling or violence affects all groups, not just the LGBT population, such as with Carson (age 32) who identifies as a heterosexual:

I think most people see me as pretty straight laced. I feel that if I was open about my desires that I would be labeled as a sex deviant or sex addict.

Interviewer: Are you able to speak openly with your partner about sex?

Carson: [I am] not completely open as we have just started dating and I worry that my desire for the abnormal may scare her away. I would like to be more open in the hopes of maybe bringing some of these desires to fruition and maybe helping her with any she may have in return.

At least for Carson, there may be a time in the future, when he is more comfortable with his girlfriend, that he opens up to her about his sexual desires. The grains of anticipatory socialization are evident. For Carson, there is the idea of a future possible self, wherein his sexual selves are permitted to fully develop. In the case of John (age 43) opening up to another, even the wife he deeply loves is not a possibility.

I don't know where my obsession with women's feet began. I guess I don't need to know. I remember when I was maybe six years old tearing the socks off the daughter of my parent's friends just to see her feet. I don't know why I did it, I just really wanted to. I have been obsessed ever since. I'm 43 years old. This is the first time I've ever told anyone that I'm a foot fetishist. It's also the last time I will tell anyone.

Interviewer: What about your wife? Haven't you told her?

John: I will never tell her.

John met his wife in junior high who was the first and only girl he dated. They were married during their sophomore year of college. When John spoke about his wife his face lit up. For him, there is nothing more important than their twenty-plus year marriage. He refers to her as his best friend and the love of his life. He is also tortured by his obsession with her feet, and has been since they met.

Redmond (2003) suggests that when an individual fears stigmatization from family members or friends based on a presentation of self, an option to defend one's self is to hide the secret self. Redmond adds, "Hiding one's secret self from disapproving others is a necessary condition if one desires to develop interdependent relationships" (2003:29). Bearing in mind the defense mechanism of hiding away a secret self, the conversation continued:

Interviewer: With this closeness you describe with your wife, why are you unwilling to tell her about your sexual desires?

John: I never want to see that look on her face.

Interviewer: What look?

John: The look of disgust. I don't want her to find me disgusting. Foot fetishists are seen as weird and disgusting. I don't want my wife to think that about me. I'm mostly afraid of that initial look on her face if I told her.

Interviewer: But you don't know that she'll have that reaction.

John: Doesn't matter. I can't risk it.

Interviewer: What is your sex life like?

John: Normal. Vanilla. She's not kinky... or anything. We have sex about once or twice a week. It's nothing special.

Interviewer: Is she satisfied with it?

John: She says she is.

Interviewer: And you?

John: Not at all. If the feet are not involved, I am not satisfied. And I don't involve her feet at all. I won't touch her feet. I try not to even look at them. I don't want her to get any thoughts that I may be that way, you know.

Interviewer: Have you ever considered going outside the marriage to satisfy your desires?

John: Hell no! Never. I would never cheat on [her].

Interviewer: So if you are married another forty years or so, you'll never reveal this obsession with her.

John: No. Never.

Interviewer: So, you are willing to live a life without sexual satisfaction?

John: Yes. It's an incomplete life.

An incomplete life. The potential of negative judgment on his wife's face keeps John from fully constructing a sexual self. With sexuality being such an essential part of a person's life, John himself likens it to a life not fully lived.

We are led to believe that within close intimate relationships we are secure and should feel safe enough to reveal deeply personal aspects of our selves. Certainly, marriage is regarded

as the highest form of the type of relationship that should foster security in being open; especially when one is revealing profound sexual desires. However, the reality is that, as John recognizes, close intimate relations pose a great deal to risk as well. If John were to open up to his wife about his sexual desires, she may react negatively. John disclosed his foot fetish with me only near the end of our conversation and with much hesitation. Before he talked about his obsession, he asked me many questions about judgment and stigmatization. He talked to me about his fetish only when he believed I would not hurt him, based on my expressed personal opinions on fetishism and stigmatization. He does not have such a guarantee with his wife. For John, the potential hurt his wife could cause is insurmountable. But generalized or significant others are not the only sources of fear that lead to suppression of sexual selves; there is also the matter of God.

All the participants in the study who identified as having a religious affiliation reported that they struggled, in one way or another, with their sexuality. The primary reason for their struggle was due to “God’s commandments” regarding sex, which were taught to them by parents and religious leaders. I will address the matters of this struggle later, for now I turn the attention to Grayson (age 84):

I’m gay but I don’t do anything about it.

Interviewer: You don’t do anything about it?

Grayson: No. No. It’s a sin, you know. To do anything about it is a sin. I’m celibate.

Interviewer: I’m not sure I understand.

Grayson: Well... I’m gay and the Bible tells us that it’s a sin. I believe those who feed their desires are punished in Hell.

Interviewer: So, you believe that if you act on your sexual desires, you'll be punished with damnation?

Grayson: Yes.

Interviewer: So, you're a virgin at 84.

Grayson: Yes, I am. I used to take trips to New York to go to the leather clubs but I wouldn't do anything but watch people. That was enough to satisfy me.

In a later discussion of barriers to sexuality, Grayson responded, "The only barriers would be between me and the Lord, I guess. I could have had an active sex life but my relationship with the Lord is more important." When asked directly about how he saw himself sexually he answered without hesitation, "I am a gay man. I am 84 years old and a virgin by choice." I inquired if he was ever tormented by his desires, at which time he bowed and shook his head back and forth, "Oh my yes. Most of my life. But I am thinking about what comes after this life. I will walk with the Lord, not burn. You talk about these desires. It is difficult. [Raising his head] You used a good word "tormented." It is a good word. It's a struggle against the Devil's temptations, you understand."

Foucault refers to desire as "the truth of our being" (1978:5). An essential component in the construction of our sexual selves is our desires. Grayson is not unaware of the truth of his sexual being; he is all too aware. He is also aware of the truth of his religious being. Within himself, these truths and selves are at odds. Grayson weighed momentary acts of sexuality with the immortality promised through his commitment with God. Despite the tortures experienced in his incomplete life, his wish to evade hellfire won out and his sexual selves were tamped down.

Grayson and John were the only two cases in this study in which participants kept sexual desires completely to themselves. Some respondents reported open communication only with their partners while others were open about their sexual desires to friends, co-workers, and, sometimes even family members. And, in stark contrast to Grayson and John, others in this study — such as Haley (age 28) — claim that “If I want to try something I try it” adding, “If I want to fool around with someone or be intimate, I pursue it. I don’t think that it’s healthy for me to repress how I want to sexually express myself.”

Sexual Accounts

How some participants accounted for sexual selves, which are seen by others as deviant or non-normative, was addressed in responses concerning their homosexuality. A few participants chose to discuss what it was that “made them the way they were.” Tabling, for the purpose of this study, the bifurcated debate of whether homosexuality is a biological or externally influenced trait (essentialism vs. constructionism), the responses received for this study came in the form of accounts; justifications to be more precise. Participants who identified as gay or bisexual seemed to deliberately make a point of addressing the topic of their sexual identity without having been asked.

Plante notes that lesbians and bisexual men and women tend to argue that their sexual beings are a choice while gay men tend to argue that they were born hardwired to be gay (2006). Grayson (gay, age 84) goes against the trend that Plante details as he believes that his sexual self as a gay man was influenced by his home life growing up:

They say you are born gay. I don't know about that. Maybe some people are. I don't understand it. I do not believe I was born gay. My father left mother and me when I was very young. She was protective of me. Coddled me, I guess you'd say. I think she raised me more like a girl than a boy. I do remember becoming attracted to boys in school. I don't think I was born that way. I think I became that way. I really do. I think there's probably a head doctor out there that could explain it all to me. I sort of think that if my father hadn't left that I may have grown up to like women. My life would have been quite different, don't you think?

What Grayson is offering is an account of a sexual self. Scott and Lyman (1968) define an account as “a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior — whether that behavior is his own or that of others, and whether the proximate cause for the statement arises from the actor himself or from someone else” (46). Scott and Lyman recognize two types of accounts; excuses and justifications. Justifications are “accounts in which one accepts responsibility of the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it” while “excuses are accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility (ibid:47).” adding, “Like excuses, *justifications* are socially approved vocabularies that neutralize an act or its consequences when one or both are called into question. But here is the crucial difference: to *justify* an act is to assert its positive value in the face of a claim to the contrary” (ibid:51, italics in original).

As presented earlier in this chapter, Grayson keeps his homosexuality hidden from others. In allowing for a discussion on his hidden sexual selves, he felt a need to justify his homosexual-

ity. Grayson is not making an excuse for his sexual selves; he is justifying them because he accepts responsibility for his sexual selves but acknowledges that they are only deviant if he acts upon them, and then, in his belief system, only in the eyes of God.

Grayson attributes external influences to his account of his sexual selves. Scott and Lyman uses the example of an individual accounting for his homosexuality as a biological product to illustrate an excuse: “It’s a part of nature. You can’t alter it, no matter how many injections and pills they give you” (ibid:50). In this study, another respondent, Parker (gay, age 46) bases his account with an essentialist take but with a slightly more compatibilist view:

So, I believe that sexuality is for the most part an inherently born trait. I knew early on where my preferences were, though I think I was also just born quite sexually in general. I tried the whole buffet before ordering a’la carte! To me, I think there are those, who’s preferences are truly without fluidity, both gay and straight. I know straight people who cannot fathom sexual experiences with the same sex and gay's who can't imagine something between themselves and the opposite sex. In those cases, I think that may be more than a born trait. I think religious upbringing, family perspective and their environment could definitely provide influence. For the most part though I think that sexual preference or openness is something that we're born with.

Plante acknowledges that essentialism does offer a seductive discourse. “Essentialism,” writes Plante, “provides a reassuring answer to the question [of where a person like you comes from] — I can’t help who I am, I was born this way, it is natural for me to feel the way that I do, and so on” (2006:202). The biologically determined discourse provides an excuse in accounts

that permit individuals to distance themselves from responsibility for who they are. However, one important facet of accounts to note is that, just as in the dramaturgical approach of Goffman (1959) where an audience either accepts or rejects a social actor's performance, accounts do not simply stand with the excuse or justification of an individual. Rather, an account is either honored or not (Scott and Lyman, 1968); dishonoring an account marks it as unreasonable.

Accounts, such as those provided by Grayson and Parker, are developed in the course of their narratives. In his articulation of "vocabulary of motives" C. Wright Mills (1940) forgoes any emphasis on psychological motivation and concentrates on the motivations within the narrative that people offer. The development of his idea of the *vocabulary of motivations* hinges on narratives and their social contexts in the offering of explanations of motivation. As homosexuality is held by many as a non-normative attribute of sexual selves, Parker and Grayson feel the need to offer excuses or justifications in their accounts of the sexual selves they possess. In neither case do they do to avoid their sexual selves.

Suppression of Sexual Selves: Avoidance

While some people, such as John and Grayson, understood their desires and choose to suppress them for reasons such as fear of stigmatization/judgement or on religious grounds, some respondents admitted to suppressing sexual desires because of their inability or unwillingness to understand those desires and their need to distance themselves from them, for various reasons. Ellen (age 21) was forthright and open in discussing her sexuality until I asked about sexual de-

sires she kept to herself. While her openness continued, she began to speak in whispers, despite our being alone, and her mood seemed to darken until a new topic was addressed:

Interviewer: Do you have sexual desires you keep to yourself?

Ellen: Of course I do. (laughs) Everyone does. What is really the point of telling anybody? Because it's not going to happen.

Interviewer: Why?

Ellen: Why? Because you can't force people to do what you want.

Interviewer: By not telling people do you fear that you're not fully realizing your sexuality... or your desires?

Ellen: No. I don't think so. I think it's like a guilty pleasure. It's something that is mine. I don't want to tell anybody any of it. Unless they could relate. There's some things I haven't told other people, no. Other things, sure. Then there's... ummm... things I wouldn't talk about to someone.

Interviewer: A partner?

Ellen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Like what?

Ellen: (long pause) I have dreams where I go down on my mom and my dad and my sister; never my brother. I dream that a lot and I don't know why.

Interviewer: Why not your brother?

Ellen: I don't know. And another thing... Then there's... (long pause) Ummmm... I... ummm... have thoughts of being raped.

Interviewer: Rape fantasy?

Ellen: Yeah. Ummm... I don't want to be raped. Just a thought. It turns me on. But... ummm... it's who is raping me that is disturbing...

Interviewer: Who is that?

Ellen: Ummm... it's just a fantasy. I would never do it or allow it. Umm... children do it. Children do it to me.

Interviewer: Do you have interest in children... sexually?

Ellen: NO! NO WAY! That's sick. I don't know why I think it. I would never.... move on. I don't want to talk about it...

Ellen discussed that dreams involving her family and being raped by children that permeated her waking thoughts but she did not wish to address, introspectively or to another, her account of the root cause of those desires. Despite the fact that she was turned on by these thoughts, she not only understood the criminality involved (incest and pedophilia) should she choose to move her desires from fantasy to reality, but she also found great distaste in her own desires. This is not merely a matter of how others would judge her, it is also a matter of how she judges herself. She appeared to be confused as to why she had those desires and, instead of exploring the matter, she chooses to suppress the desires to the best of her ability.

Avoidance strategies are often employed when the potential of deviant behaviors or identities contain the likelihood of a threat to the self (Plummer, 1975:190). The deviant, therefore, uses avoidance to sustain a closed-awareness system. Plummer claims that one of the problems that lead to the breakdown of a closed-awareness in a deviant individual is the fact that it is difficult for the deviant to arrest those deviant thoughts throughout the course of their day (ibid).

Ellen struggles with the ability to uphold a closed-awareness. While she can keep her desires to herself, away from the public realm, dreams and fleeting thoughts keep the desires alive and at the forefront.

From a dramaturgical approach, what Ellen is engaging in is role-distancing. Using Goffman's original concept, Stebbins offers a definition, "Role-distance is one way by which we intentionally and publicly reject one or more disagreeable aspects of a role" (2013:123). Stebbins continues:

Role-distance develops in line with a particular status or identity and, more specifically, in line with all or a part of its associated role expectations. Role-distance, which is part of a person's interpretation of these expectations, reflects a desire to dissociate himself from them, the reason of this being traceable to their threat to his self-conception. The inclination to engage in role-distance behavior is stimulated by the presence of a certain "audience," or special other persons in the ongoing situation who will denigrate the role player for enacting the expectations. Such behavior should not be conceived of as, however, a refusal to play out those expectations. Rather, it is best seen as an adaptive strategy, whereby the performer can more or less fulfill the role obligations while maintaining self-respect before the audience. (ibid:124)

In actively working to suppress her desires, regardless of the reason, she is suppressing her sexuality, despite the attempt to preserve it using role-distancing and avoidance.

Barry (age 26) served a tour of duty in Iraq. He revealed what effects a military combat operation and a lot of downtime in the desert had on him:

There was so little for me to do in Iraq most days. There was a lot of waiting around. I started watching a lot of porn. I was watching porn every spare second and I was watching all of it; except scat, not happening, Batman. After a while I had a porn and masturbation addiction. I was masturbating... uh... on a slow day... a dozen times a day... other days, I have no idea. No fuckin' clue, a lot. It didn't matter when I was there... when I was in the desert.

The fact that he had a self-defined porn and masturbation addiction did matter when he came back home. Barry explains, "You can't do that shit here. You can't have a normal sex life with someone if you have an addiction to porn and masturbating. I got a little treatment for it and I've worked on it myself. I've whittled it down. It's still there but I mostly avoid it now. I pretend it's not who I am. I think people see me as pretty conservative when it comes to sex... but... that's some complicated shit." Barry works to distance his addiction from his sexual roles.

While he is working toward what he views as an improvement to his sexual well-being, one has to wonder if his hampering of a sexual self could have adverse consequences.

Avoiding aspects of sexual selves or distancing from components of sexual roles has the potential to not only affect one's self but their interpersonal relationships as well. McAnulty and Burnette point out that "such avoidance may have significant effects on the partner, who may interpret these [avoidance] behaviors as not wanting intimacy or contact, as being unattractive or undesirable, and so on" (2006:59). Sexual behaviors that result in dysfunctional interactions with significant others stem from many origins other than avoidance mechanisms. Sexual trauma can provide another source.

Reaction to Trauma

The shaping of one's sexuality is sometimes not a growing, exploratory, or welcoming process but the result of a traumatic event. Phoebe (age 25) views herself as a very sexual person but struggles with sleeping with others unless there is, what she considers to be, a spiritual relationship with older men. How Phoebe accounts for why she struggles to sleep with others, despite her open sexuality, is significant in the manner in which she chooses to act:

I did struggle... I would say it was a struggle... with my sexuality a little bit because (long pause) I was raped, which is weird because I blame myself for it - not because all women blame themselves - because I felt like I didn't fight for myself more than I should have. I just laid there and take it. So, I kinda blame myself. The crazy thing is that - and it is a crazy thing - before I got raped, I used to joke that if I ever got raped I'm gonna try to find some pleasure out of it so it doesn't hurt me. Because, if you're dry and all that stuff is going on... it hurts [incomprehensible mumble], so I always joked about it. So, when it happened [...] strangely enough, I was like crying while it was going on because I actually felt myself looking at it while it was happening and it was weird, I mean... who's lying there getting raped and worrying about pleasing the person raping you. After it happened it actually triggered my whole everything. I only date older men now. The guy I was just with was 41. The guy I told you about that I liked eating my ass, he's 38. It pushed me to date older men because I feel like the guy [who raped me] was my age so it's a maturity thing... a protective thing. Men of older age have more self-control. That's why I was with a married man too. He was like 59 or 49. It just made me feel a little bit safer by dating him, whereas if I dated

someone young, and it was like a lot of times I did not want to have sex but I did it anyways because I figured it was going to happen anyways. There were many times when I consented but I didn't want to do it. Then I would feel like I was being raped again. But I consented or it was gonna happen anyways. It took a lot out of me.

Because of that, I was very sexually active during those times. Even with [the guy who raped me], I wanted to do it again with him so I could consent to it so I would feel better about [the original rape incident].

This final statement by Phoebe is particularly intriguing; not only is she assigning meaning to elements of her sexuality in the present but she is hoping to have consensual sex with her rapist in order to reframe the experience of her past rape; she is wanting to relabel it as something other than rape. Phoebe holds the belief that such a reassignment will eliminate the trauma; she is no longer a rape victim as he is no longer a rapist. In our interview, she seemed to be looking for a way out of a past situation. What she did not realize in her wish to reassign meaning of the past event was that she would be having consensual sex in the present but the original occurrence was still non-consensual. Ultimately, the reframing could only be something that would be internal for Phoebe. She would have an uphill battle trying to gain acceptance of the reframing by others.

The trauma Phoebe encountered led to her being more cautious sexually despite her high sex drive. In a conversation with Daniela Sieff, Ellert R.S. Nijenhuis reminds us that, "once traumatized, the world is always different. Danger becomes more real and more possible. Survivors are quicker to turn to their defenses and have them shape their view of reality, sometimes inappropriately" (2015:109). Phoebe is now selective about the men she dates and has sex with.

The case of Anna (age 33) is quite different. The devastating events of her past led her to become a self-proclaimed nymphomaniac:

I'll sleep with just about anyone.

Interviewer: Anyone? Males and Females?

Anna: I used to sleep with some women but now it's only men.

Interviewer: Why only men now?

Anna: Are you trying to get me to admit I am looking for someone who loves me and cares about me and will take care of me and I'm doing it with sex. Ok. I am. But I still want sex all the time.

Anna is engaged to be married. It is an engagement that has been on and off for a little over a year. When asked why she breaks it off as often as she does, she says it's because, while her fiancé loves her and provides her personal and financial security, he will only engage in vanilla sex. Vanilla sex is not of interest to Anna and she is sexually unfulfilled by him. Her attempts to get him to be more sexually adventurous ends in arguments and eventual momentary suspensions of the engagement. Anna describes her sexual obsession, "I am horny all the time. Sex is all I think about. Even at work I have to take bathroom breaks every couple hours or so to masturbate, unless I can find someone to fuck me in one of the offices." Anna is not unaware of the source of her obsession, "When I was a teenager, my father tried to kill me twice. The second time he came real close. He stabbed me. I still have the scars on my body. I covered them with tattoos so they are not so obvious."

Anna reported that she experienced a sexual awakening after the stabbing. As her wounds were healing, she began to experience an increase in sexual desire unlike she had known previously. Soon after, she labeled herself as a nymphomaniac. Ultimately, according to Anna, the purpose was to control men through sex. That control was what she found sexually stimulating. It was a sense of control that countered the weakness she felt from being a victim of her father; the man who was the most important male figure in her life. Through the sexual controlling of men, Anna hoped to find a husband that would provide her with all her needs. Yet, Anna accepted a marriage proposal from a man who would not give her all she desired. Is this a contradiction? Yes, but Anna is far from the only person interviewed that fell into contradiction.

Sexual Contradictions

Plante writes, “Culturally, our discussions of all things sexual are marked by ambivalence, confusion, and contradictions” (2006:ix). The interviews conducted for this study were littered with contradictions. At times the participants were fully aware that they were contradicting themselves and, at other times, the contradictions were lost to them through their confusion.

Religion and the idea of keeping sex to the confines of marriage led Amanda (age 52) into contradictions. She spoke at length about several sexual partners she’s had outside of her marriage. When religion came into the picture she spoke differently and falls into a vicious trap by stigmatizing others for behavior she engages in:

I feel that marriage and the sexual covenant are sacred and need to be respected. I’ve had to let go of a friendship when that person began an affair with a married woman; I didn’t

want to pretend it was ok with me, or hear about it when I hung out with him. I felt that by staying friends, I was endorsing the behavior and I couldn't do that.

It would appear that even open mindedness falls prey to contradiction. Karen (age 22) boasts about how sexually open minded she is, "I say this because I don't really care what people do in their sex lives with their partner. What's weird to me might be normal to someone else and what's normal to me might be weird for someone else." I believe this to be a healthy sexual outlook, but, for Karen, it didn't hold for long. She soon began to condemn her boyfriend's mother for having sex with a married man, who is in an open marriage, "[My boyfriend's mom] frequently goes on dates with him and his wife, and his wife's boyfriend. I didn't realize that I had an issue with other people's sexual lives until that situation came into my life."

Lastly, although there was not a single interview that was free of contradiction, Ben (age 22) bemoans the fact that sex was not discussed when he was younger, "I had to figure everything out on my own and had a lot of confusion about it while growing up." Despite his wish for open communication, Ben doesn't appear to want to break the pattern of silence. When asked about whether or not he felt comfortable talking openly to others about sex he maintained the closed door approach, "I do not like to open up to others sexually. It changes the way I see them, and I do not enjoy that."

Plante (2006) expounds that gaps between attitudes and behavior is explained in a culture by the aforementioned ambiguity, confusion, and contradictions. Much of the problem is located in the verbal ability to communicate. Communication, as well as language itself, is an essential

component in the construction of sexual selves. For the process, by which sexual selves are acquired, to be truly fluid, communication needs to be open and honest.

Open Communication

Plante asks, “What do we *really* learn about sex when one of the first things we may learn is that we are not allowed to openly discuss the questions we have?” (2006:10). Most participants in this study talked candidly about their sexuality. At the same time, they questioned why others cannot communicate as openly as they do. In many cases, lack of communication led to confusion and detrimental outcomes. Danielle (age 22), for example, believes that if her parents had talked to her openly about sex, she may have been able to avoid the sexual abuse that happened to her at the age of 13. Danielle has a sex toy business and has learned who she is sexually through her business. She enjoys teaching and helping others through sex toy parties. Her mother hosted her first party and Danielle said they now share an open dialogue about sex because of her career; that dialogue did not exist before. Danielle told me the story how her best friend had to teach her how to use a tampon because her mother would only say, “You can figure it out for yourself.” Danielle prides herself on speaking openly about sex but that was not the case in the early years of her relationship with her current fiancé:

We used to not even talk about sex and that was probably the worst like year and a half of our relationship. It was partially because I had an IUD birth control put in and I bled for like a year straight. So partially communication and partially my body but we didn’t have sex for a year and that was awful. We didn’t talk about it or nothing. Then I got it

out and (groans) we still aren't gonna talk about it. Just an awful, awful year of our relationship. People should talk more — moral of the story.

Lack of honest, open communication equally caused confusion in Phoebe (female, 25) in relation to her menstrual cycle. When Phoebe got her first period at the age of 10, her mother told her that it was a big secret and she should never talk about it to anyone:

Only imagine when I hit middle school and all my friends are talking about it and I'm like (gasps) "Why are you telling your secret?" They were discussing their secret! I was confused. I didn't know. So I learned about that stuff about sex at school.

Phoebe had a similar situation with dishonest communication regarding sexual behaviors that came about when I asked about sexual attitudes in the community she grew up in:

Everybody was having sex but you wasn't suckin' dick because if you were suckin' dick you was a Ho. I did not suck dick until I was 21. Friends asked me why I hadn't done it and I was like, "Well I ain't a Ho so I never done it".

Interviewer: So you still had that conflict even then?

Phoebe: Yeah. It was so hard... so hard. It was easier to say it than do for me. I thought, I got to get over this. I'm a grown-ass woman. I still feel uncomfortable about it. I don't do it much. I just don't... no... no.

Sarah (age 26) insists that “We shouldn’t act like we don’t have sex and do these things. Why is this a closed door conversation?” Advice like Sarah’s would have helped other respondents like Amanda (age 52):

Sex was never discussed in our family. I’ll never know why, but likely because it was just taboo at the time and people didn’t talk about it. I wish my Mom had been able to be more open to me regarding it. I think there would have been less confusion in me about how to understand and accept my sexuality as a teenager and young adult.

There was a time when Haley (age 28) was uncomfortable communicating openly about sex. She explains why that is different now:

The older I get the more I realize that I’m too old to hold things back, especially if it’s about something I enjoy. I’m not afraid to talk about sexual things to people but I do try to be considerate and not just open a conversation about sex. When it comes to actions, I want to be pleased so I am not scared to say what I like.

Abbie (age 47) once considered herself to be quite sexually inhibited. She said that changed due to her husband, “He made me feel comfortable by making sex a commonplace part of our language at home. He made me understand sex is nothing to be inhibited about.” When asked what she thought the benefits were to talking openly with her partner about sex, she answered, “I have more orgasms.”

Masturbation

No questions elicited as much response or reaction that those that centered on masturbation. Respondents either chose to discuss it at great lengths or, in only a few cases, refused to talk about it at all. A discernible pattern appeared where religion was concerned. Respondents who claimed to be Christians or have religious affiliation made up the group that refused to answer questions regarding masturbation or their answers discussed shame and guilt involved in masturbating. The shame and guilt associated with masturbation was especially true when first learning to masturbate for the religiously affiliated group. Gagnon and Simon observed that “in United States society and perhaps in most western societies to learn about sex is to learn about guilt” (2009:262). For instance, Ben (age 22) self-explored, “I just discovered it was fun to play with an erect penis. Then, once I achieved orgasm, I felt disgusted, [it was] post-orgasm shame/guilt. I think it was because I felt that what I was doing was morally wrong.” Only respondents who associated shame and guilt with masturbation, claimed religious affiliation. Not a single respondent claiming no religious affiliation made such an association; rather, they spoke of masturbation as a fundamental building block of their sexual selves.

Patricia (age 19) identifies as Lutheran. She does not masturbate often but when she does it's not seen as a sexual expression but as a method to relieve stress during “rough periods” of her life. Growing up she would touch herself when watching movies that contained “heated romantic scenes,” adding, “At first I felt weird about it, like I knew it was wrong. And I didn't want anyone to find out about it.” As she got older she played with a dildo but was not fond of it, “I'm not big on penetration. I don't get anything out of it.”

Lauren (age 39) also identifies as a Christian and, in contrast, does enjoy masturbation but also makes the link between masturbation and negative feelings:

The first time I had an orgasm I was about 11, maybe even 10. I was in the bathtub and the water from the faucet rushed on top of my vagina, hitting my clitoris. When I had the orgasm I had no idea what had happened. I knew that it felt really good, but I also felt guilt/shame about it. I never told anyone. I did it again and again but not with the sexual thoughts attached.

Karla (age 19), like Lauren, also identifies as a Christian and makes the same associations as Lauren did although she attributed it, in part at least, to the sexual double standard:

When I was 7 and 8 I [masturbated]. Then it stayed consistent for a while. I just like the feeling. It was addictive for me. Around 11 or 12 I started to feel bad about it. Only boys [did] that and if a girl did it she was dirty was the mindset I was in. But it was habit at that point. I remember really hating myself at one point because I would stop for a few weeks only to start again.

Beth (Christian, age 22) did not masturbate until quite some time after she began having sex:

I really don't remember that kind of exploration most people experience in their youth. I do remember though feeling very ashamed of masturbation for a very long time, and I don't think I actually explored that part of myself until I was about 17, even though I had already been having sex since 15.

At no point in the interview did Beth discuss feeling ashamed for having sex from the age of 15. What's interesting is that she assigned her feelings of shame to masturbation instead. In fact, her earliest sexual experience with another was viewed as a sense of accomplishment:

I was 15. I was in my first relationship. He was a year older than me. He was really patient with me and I was eager to learn. The first thing I did was give a hand job, and at the time it felt very awkward, but I remember feeling very accomplished once I got him off.

Karen (Lutheran, age 22) believes that her religion does not affect her sexuality because she knows "God loves her and loves all His children no matter who they are." But she only applied this belief to having sex for the first time. "God," she notes, "does not care if you have sex for the first time at 15 or 55. God does not care if you are married or not when you first have sex." Her tone changed when masturbation was discussed:

Karen: I don't masturbate. I don't do it because I don't feel a need to.

Interviewer: Do you recall, in your youth, exploring your body?

Karen: No. I never explored my body by myself. I actually remember being at the OB/GYN at 16 for a physical and realizing that this stranger has seen my vagina but I had never even taken a mirror to see what it looked like. It was a weird realization. I never explored my body because I just never felt the need to.

The respondents who identify with a religious affiliation do not actually discuss religion and masturbation in the same breath but the pattern is overwhelmingly noticeable that those who

had negative views of masturbation or refused to discuss the matter all held a religious affiliation whereas this was never the case with respondents who did not claim a religious affiliation. For the “non-affiliated” participants, masturbation is key to the construction of their sexual selves, such as Sarah (age 26) who claims, “Masturbation keeps my sexuality active.” Other non-affiliated participants broadened the scope on positive attitudes toward masturbation:

I was acutely aware that my body could give me pleasure from a young age. I figured that out by touching myself obviously. When I was 11 or 12 looking at porn I had my first orgasm. I was rubbing myself outside of my sweatpants and it was awesome, it didn't stop and the feeling was so intense. I became a woman obsessed. Whenever I was home alone I would make myself come over and over. We had a chair back massage thing that would vibrate. I loved that thing. We also had a back massage wand that I would sneak out of the closet and into my room. I remember being amazed by the feeling of climaxing and I knew I could do it multiple times in a row. I started taking more baths and would let the water run between my legs. Masturbation is my #1 thing. It had been extremely important to me. I do it often but it does go in waves. When I am near my menstrual cycle I masturbate multiple times a day. Otherwise it is once a day or every two to three. Never more than three. Sometimes I will start and fall asleep but I almost always orgasm, usually multiple times. I typically masturbate with intent to orgasm. My current partner knows that I masturbate and I don't care how he feels about it (Jacqueline, age 23).

I love love love masturbation! I think that if I didn't, I would be trying to have a guy around all the time just for that aspect. I think that knowing what I like and how to give myself an orgasm benefits me when I am with other people as well because I can tell who I'm with what to do so I feel pleasure. I masturbate at least 2 times a day, it makes me feel good and relieves stress for me. My partners all know that I masturbate, sometimes I will tell them I am and they seem to really get into it by texting me naughty things to think about while I am doing it. They all seem to be accepting about it and, like I said, they are quite encouraging about it as well (Haley, age 28).

I love to touch myself. I masturbate throughout the day; at work in the bathroom, in the car while I'm driving, under the table in restaurants, in movies, outdoors at music festivals, in bars, so on. It's such a big part of me, such a big part of who I am. I've even touched myself while we've been talking (Anna, age 33).

I was in the bathtub. Oh, when you find that pearl. I was like, "Oh, this does this?" that's all she wrote. I learned a lot about myself by having sex with myself. I tell people when I talk about sex. I ask them, "Do you fuck yourself?" and they be like, "No." Well, if you don't fuck yourself how do you know what you like? I can tell you what I like and what I dislike because I take the time to please myself. I know what to tell a man - a lot of women don't do that (Phoebe, age 25).

With regard to religion and sexual shaming, Abbie (age 47), an atheist, had a statement she wanted to make:

I don't have Catholicism, I don't have Judaism, I don't have Islam telling me what to do or not to do sexually. I'm grateful for that. It's a human experience. It's only a point of control with religion; especially with women's bodies. It sets you down a path of shame and that shame transfers to other things too.

Interviewer: Other than sexuality?

Abbie: Yes.

In studying male sexuality, Alfred C. Kinsey, marking the significance of masturbation, observed, "There are no other sexual activities which involve anywhere near so many individuals as are involved in heterosexual coitus and masturbation; and there are no other activities which provide so large a proportion of the total orgasms which the average male experiences in a life-time" adding, "It is a question whether activities which are as important as these can be altogether ignored, easily regulated, or completely ruled out of the lives of any large number of people" (1948:512). A few years later, as the shift of his research focus went from the sexual behavior of males to females, he was able to add the responses of female participants in his study to his findings on masturbation, "Masturbation is the one in which the second largest [after heterosexual petting] number of females engage both before and after marriage. Among all types of sexual activity, masturbation is, however, the one in which the female most frequently reaches orgasm" (1953:132). Consistent with Kinsey's findings, whether masturbation was viewed as

deviant or a welcomed part of their sexuality, participants in this study noted the importance the topic of masturbation played in the conversation of sexuality.

Sexual Aspirations

Acquiring sexual selves is a process that is continuous throughout our lives. Some sexual selves may develop without a conscious effort on the individual's part, they may *appear seemingly from nowhere* (although those, too, are part of a process) or there may be slight impetus to the development as in the case of Amanda (age 52) who, at times, thinks about what it would be like to be with a woman, "But I would never engage in that in real life. It's mostly just curiosity." She may have bi-curious thoughts without an intent of satisfying the desire but that may be a first step to the acquisition of a future sexual self.

Other sexual selves, however, are a result of goal attainment. Debra (age 19) is interested in having a threesome with her partner. While Debra does not know if it will happen, she has talked with her partner about it and claims that he is open to the idea. Through such open communication, the process of attaining her goal is progressing. Jacqueline (age 23) does not communicate all her desires with her partner. I asked her if there were sexual desires she kept to herself:

Yes. There are things that I know I would enjoy but I haven't tried. Something I desire but haven't expressed to a partner is engaging with another couple. I think there are a lot of things that I've seen online that I would like but don't have the ability to try or whatever. I've never had any sexual encounters involving urinating with a partner. Only

online. At 17 I had a boyfriend who I regularly had sex with. I'll never forget how initially offended and turned off I was when he bought under-the-bed restraints. I look back now and *wish* my partner would surprise me with that!

However, Jacqueline did not seem to understand that without communicating her desires to her partner, the chances of those desires being fulfilled are narrow; her sexual goals unfulfilled. The current unwillingness Jacqueline has in talking to a partner about sexual desires is echoed by Patricia (age 19):

I've always wanted to sit on his face and I thoroughly enjoy being eaten out but I don't think he enjoys it that much because he only does it every so often. Mostly just the fear of asking him to do it when it's something he doesn't like. I don't really want him to do it just because I asked.

It's important to note that Patricia does not ask him if he dislikes cunnilingus. Instead, she makes this assumption based on the fact that they don't do it very often. And yet, she doesn't ask for it. Lack of communication, in Patricia's instance, makes the process of sexual self-construction halting and clumsy. Anita (age 18) confessed that she does not have any sexual aspirations at the present, adding, "I just hope that whoever I end up with, I can be extremely comfortable asking them to do certain things or [touch me] a certain way. I need to work on my communication."

Sometimes, consideration for others can hinder the individual. Danielle (age 22) spoke of many things she had to work out with her fiancé; one of them involving sex toys:

There are probably things I didn't tell [my fiancé] until I started [selling sex toys] because I thought that he would think that he wasn't satisfying me enough. A year ago I was invited to a [sex toy party] and I was all excited and he made that sad puppy dog face. I was like, "This'll be fun!" and he was like, "I guess I'm not good enough for you anymore." I told him that's not the case but I felt so bad that I didn't go.

Danielle eventually went to work for the sex toy company that hosted the party she didn't attend. She now attributes much of her sexual awakening and sexual selves to her new occupation. However, she would not have had those attributes if she had not taken the job to protect her fiancé's feelings.

Danielle's account draws a parallel with a study by Roberts, et al. (1995) on why women fake orgasms. Danielle was concerned about hurting her fiancé's self-esteem. Feelings of the significant other are also addressed by Roberts, et al., when a partner is unable to orgasm. In their study, Peter has feelings similar to those of Danielle's fiancé regarding questioning one's self whether they are *enough* sexually for the other person:

Interviewer: How, how does it make you feel? [that his partner does not have orgasms.]

Peter: It makes me wonder what I'm doing [giggles] or what I'm meant to do. 'Cause I find myself spending four times as much time on her than she is on me. And mate I'm finding it, I'm, I'm orgasming, but she, she doesn't.

Interviewer: Mm.

Peter: That, I don't know if it's like that with all women or not, so.

Interviewer: Mm.

Peter: Ah, but it doesn't seem to worry her. I mean I say, "I'll keep going" and know, and she says, "No, don't worry." (Roberts, et al., 1995:527)

Responses that parallel Danielle's were provided by female participants in the study of Roberts, et al.:

Jane: I fake it sometimes. Just... 'cause my boyfriend gets really worried... because... he wants to know that he's giving me pleasure too. And so sometimes I'll just fake it, if I'm not really in the mood...

Alison: Yeah, I used to do that a lot.

Jane: I just, you know, just sort of fake it a little bit. I think everyone does sometime.

Interviewer: So that he won't get upset?

Alison: Yeah.

Jane: Not upset, but so he won't feel inadequate. (ibid:529-530)

Danielle's holding back from attending the sex toy party and the women faking orgasm adds a wrinkle to sexual aspirations of partners. In Danielle's case, her fiancé's self-esteem is protected. He is allowed to believe that since she did not go to the sex toy party, he must be enough for her sexually. When Alison and Jane fake orgasms, their partners are led to believe that they are able to satisfy their significant others which leads to enhancement of their sexual confidence. The men in these accounts are permitted to achieve their sexual aspirations of satisfying their partners. However, the women are withheld from their sexual aspirations. Danielle placed a great deal of her sexual growth in selling sex toys and hosting sex toy parties but was

initially held back from that growth due to her catering to her fiancé's feelings. Alison and June will not experience orgasm with their partners if they allow them to believe that what they are doing mechanically is giving them orgasms when it is not. Experiences that lead to sexual goal-attainment are sometimes dependent on open communication between partners, as well as right attitudes.

Attitudes and Experience

In a 1975 speech at Brandeis University, Mary Calderone (SIECUS, Planned Parenthood) enthusiastically drew attention to a paradigm shift in sexual attitudes, "Until the last decade our sexual selves were held in thrall to the age-old fear and suspicion of that force known as eroticism... Yet the news is good for sex; for more and more of us are being emancipated from that crippling and useless fear" (Petrzela, 2015:184). As I write this, we are forty-one years removed from the time of Calderone's Brandeis speech. Members of society are still prisoners to the same fear and suspicions Calderone brought up. But, we are also still being slowly emancipated from it. Liberation is found in the attitudes of the individuals I listened to for this study. Even when interviews were fraught with negative experiences, there remained a positive outlook in the respondents and a search for confident, strong, and healthy sexual selves.

Parker (age 46) is a chef on the East coast. As a chef, it was natural for him to put his attitudes toward sex in food terminology. "I look at sex like I look at making food; it should be sweaty, messy and loud and if you didn't get it right, go back and do it all over again. It's supposed to be fun. Sex is a human recipe." Others in this study expressed a similar point of view:

When you feel more comfortable with who you are sexually, you become more confident in who you are as a person. We're sexual beings (Sarah, age 26).

Sex is trial and error. Sexuality is what you construct of it (Danielle, age 22).

Atwater proposes that "closely related to change in identity is the process of change in attitudes, for people often change their attitudes after gaining new information or having new experiences. For instance, people who have experienced living in interracial neighborhoods tend to be less prejudiced than they were before. According to one study, women who had extramarital relationships were more permissive in their attitudes toward them after their experiences than they had been before" (1982:154). Respondents in this study reported changes in sexual attitudes that led to healthier experiences and stronger senses of sexual selves. Danielle, for example, was raped at the age of 13. Her ability to mold favorable sexual attitudes allowed for positive sexual experiences she had later on in life which, in turn, led to the robust sexual selves she possesses today.

Sarah (age 26) talked about her reserved nature when she was young. A change came with experience:

The first time I made out with a boy it was [screams with excitement]. "I just made out with a boy!" Excited! It's another part of your life. It's like you're adding a new facet. It's something new to who you are. It came from, "OOOOHHHHHH I just made out with my boyfriend in the car!"

Attitudes and experiences are highlighted as Karla (age 19) looks at the mistakes of her past and attempts to shape her future possible sexual selves:

Sexuality is how I show affection. It's how I plan on interacting with my future partner. There wasn't a sexual environment where I grew up and I hope to create a more sexually open environment for my future family. I had to figure a lot out on my own and that led to a lot of mistakes. Granted these mistakes ended up leading me in the right direction so at least it ended well.

For Jacqueline (age 23) internet use set real world experiences into motion. She attributes the pornography on the internet to expanding her will to experiment:

I remember getting my first home computer at the end of fifth grade. I would google "penis" or whatever. It wasn't until I heard a conversation on the local morning radio show about porn websites. They named a few and I wrote them down! I can remember two of them... BlacksOnBlondes.com and welivetogether.com. I was probably 12 or 13 when I started to cruise porn websites such as those. The internet was hugely influential to me. I would watch lesbian porn but I would have never admitted to that. When Myspace exploded when I was like 14 or 15 I set my sexual orientation to "bisexual." I fell into the party lifestyle in high school so I definitely was influenced.

Not all participants had a positive attitude about pornography. Amanda (age 52) does not watch or look at pornography. She said that if people want to do it "that's their issue" but she considers it to be "damaging and dangerous."

Some participants engaged in certain sexual acts only after hearing about the experiences of others and the positive attitudes that were associated with those events:

I remember when I was a freshman in high school one of my best friends told me she had given her first blowjob and I was curious so I know that her telling me about that kind of led me to give my boyfriend, at the time, a blowjob. I think a lot of my sexual progression came from what everybody else around me was doing/had already been doing (Anita, age 18).

There were instances in which there were not leaps of sexual progression where new experiences and experimentation were taking place. This is not, however, to say that sexual selves were not being acquired or redefined. Amanda (age 52) was quite sexually adventurous in her youth; this changed after marriage:

We don't [speak openly about sex] much, and it's ok. He's limited in his sexual experience and just likes to make me happy. He's not all that adventurous. I'm fine with it, as I've been adventurous before we met and I don't need that now.

Patricia (age 72) shares her perspective on experience, "Sexual selves, engaged or not, are really the sum total of all experiences. I'm [at 72 years old] still working on my own sexuality. It's a life-long thing. I'm still searching. I'm still discovering."

Michael Schwalbe momentarily forgoes the generalized account of social psychology with regard to self in terms of self-concept, cognitive schema, and internal conversation of verbal gestures to focus on the dramaturgical approach in which "the self is not seen as lodged in people's heads. Nor is it an object that precedes situations and is simply 'presented' by its possessor.

It is, rather, an imputation of character that is generated collaboratively in scenes of face-to-face interaction” (2013:75). Schwalbe goes on to demonstrate how Goffman’s dramaturgical approach uses self-conceptions as “prime motivators of expressive behavior” (ibid:88). “The upshot,” according to Schwalbe, “is that Goffman’s dramaturgy shows us how the self is always a situated social construct — situated not just in face-to-face encounters but in normative structures and activity systems” (ibid:89). In the activity systems of the participants of this study, experience provided a clear picture of sexual selves being constructed. Patricia’s enthusiastic sexual attitudes enhance her behaviors with partners. Her audience accepts her performance and, because of this, the sexual interactions in her activity system assist in the continuous “search” and “discovery” of her sexuality:

I’ve wondered what squirting was all about. I slept with a man a few weeks ago that decided to help me with it. He told me that when I came I shouldn’t hold anything back. That was important. When my orgasm started, he suddenly put one of his fingers in my ass and I squirted. It was such a liberating feeling! It shows I am still finding myself sexually. I’m [mumbles - presumably her age, which is 72] and now suddenly I’m a squirter. I’m a squirter. I would not have thought. It just shows you that we are not finished.

Sexual Selves as a Process: A Case Study

No participants were as detailed in their account as Nancy (age 34). A few days after I interviewed her, she emailed me and asked for a second interview. While my first conversation

with her yielded a wealth of honest, open, and richly textured discussion, the second interview proved to be far more invaluable. During the second interview, Nancy told me about her emergence as a swinger. I am presenting a large block of her account here as I believe her narrative demonstrates, better than others, a wider range of elements existing in the process of the construction of sexual selves. Following her narrative, I will demonstrate the connections to the process involved in the acquisition of her “swinger” sexual self.

Nancy’s journey to the acquisition of another sexual self began on a camping trip with her husband and a married couple that were longtime friends:

Nancy: It began with a lot of drinking [laughs]. That happens when you’re camping. I had way too many beers. My [female] friend and I went for a walk in the woods. We started kissing. I don’t remember how our husbands got involved but we later made out a little with our husbands watching. It was mostly kissing with a little touching each other’s boobs over the shirt. The next day was a little awkward but not too bad. My husband and I talked about it. He asked me if that was something I was interested in.

Interviewer: Sex with women?

Nancy: That was part of it but he was wondering if I was interested in including other people into our sex lives. We both decided that we were but didn’t know how to go about it. We did not want to include our friends.

Interviewer: There are groups/clubs that people can join.

Nancy: That’s what we finally found out. We found a local group in a magazine that we could join. That’s when we became nervous.

Interviewer: Why.

Nancy: That's when it became real for us. How were we going to do this? We didn't want anyone to know we were doing this. We definitely didn't want people in the group to know who we were outside the group. Both our jobs could be at risk if people found out. So, we made a fake history for ourselves. We took on different names, jobs, and decided to be childless even though we have two children. We didn't stop there. We created stories about our fake selves that we could tell. So, sexually we were not only us but we were also "the Olsons." We had a long history of stories. It was fun to recreate our lives like that. Everyday for months we would practice our stories and fake lives. When the children were not around we would call each other by our fake names to get use to it. That didn't always work. When we were at the group, we would slip and call each other by our real names. No one seemed to notice it.

Interviewer: Probably because they are accustomed to people not using their real names.

Nancy: Exactly. Also, because everyone there works to make everyone comfortable.

Interviewer: Tell me about this group.

Nancy: It is the friendliest environment I have ever been in. Everyone is friendly. It meets every other month. They take over a hotel for a day. The lobby and eating area is designated as a common area where everyone is clothed and there is conversation. The pool area is nude only. Couples have their own rooms. If a door is shut, the rule is that you don't knock unless you've been invited. If a door is open, that means that anyone is invited to come in and have fun or just watch. No one is ever pressured to do anything. Pressure is against the rules.

Interviewer: How many gatherings have you gone to?

Nancy: Just two but we plan to go regularly. The first time was awkward. We were so nervous. We walked around a bit but mostly we sat in the common area and talked to people. Everyone knew it was our first time and they were very careful not to scare us off. They helped us get over our nervousness but we didn't do anything. We enjoyed the talks and the people watching. The second time was different. We planned to join another couple. We were not quite as nervous this time. We met a couple in the common area that we liked very much. We went to their room. I made out with the woman. We kissed a lot. We stripped each other and played with each other's boobs. There was a little bit of fingering too. After a while I let her lick my clit while she fingered me.

Interviewer: Did you orgasm with this experience?

Nancy: Maybe a little one. I guess I was still a little nervous.

Interviewer: What part did your husbands play?

Nancy: They only watched. They enjoyed watching us.

Interviewer: Did they masturbate while they watched?

Nancy: No. They sat and drank a beer while they watched us. I had sex with my husband alone in our room later that night.

Interviewer: What are your plans for future gatherings? Will your husband participate more? Will there be a full swap with a couple...

Nancy: ...No. We decided on certain things beforehand that we will not do. We do not want a full swap. My husband won't do anything with another man. I don't want him to get a blowjob from another woman. We don't want another man to penetrate me. Who

knows? Some of these things may change someday but they are our rules for now. What we will probably do next time is have my husband fuck me from behind while I go down on a woman.

Interviewer: I notice that you say “we” don’t want you to be penetrated by another man but only “I” don’t want another woman to give my husband a blowjob. Is that an issue with your husband?

Nancy: That’s one of those things that may change. For now we are both fine with him not getting a blowjob from someone else. I guess I’m jealous about it and he said he may be uncomfortable with it. It’s just too personal of a thing.

Interviewer: Blowjobs are too personal? What about cunnilingus?

Nancy: Oh, the gal going down on me? Yeah. I don’t know. I don’t see that as personal as a blowjob. I don’t know why.

Interviewer: What has this group done for you?

Nancy: OH MY GOD! It has given me new life. I am a new person. I feel free. It’s funny, it’s not something I even thought about before that camping trip. It’s like I’m reborn with a whole new self. I’m a swinger now. I don’t want it to sound like I was dissatisfied with my sex life before. I had a great sex life with my husband. But now it’s something more. I just love it.

The interview with Nancy was rather illuminating. In her story we can vividly see the process of the acquisition of sexual selves. Anticipatory socialization took place in the planning involved in attending the group both in expectations of what the generalized others may be like

and the creation of fake selves for social presentation. “Play” took place at the camp site with the participants imagining and partaking in roles they did not exactly understand at the time. “Games” came about in moving the play at the camp site to the formalized rules between the couple and the group. Not only did the couple have to understand their own role and rules but they had to understand the roles and rules of the other group members. Reflections on self-perceptions and imagined perceptions of others highlights Cooley’s (1902) looking-glass self. Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach takes center stage as the couple make backstage preparations then move front stage for their performance, with the group playing the audience and either accepting or rejected the performance. There is even evidence of audience tact as the group/audience ignored minor flaws when Nancy would mistakenly call her husband by his real name. The group employed audience tact in order to avoid causing Nancy or her husband embarrassment or further nervousness.

In Nancy’s responses, we see how a sexual self is constructed from its origin. In the construction, Nancy names the desire and the sexual self is acquired through something she *does*. She followed sexual scripts as blueprints when she was unsure of how to pursue her desires and future possible selves become present selves through her efforts. In total, Nancy’s narrative highlights how the notions of symbolic interaction are validated in how we construct sexual selves. Through interaction, sexuality is something we actively *do*.

Chapter Five

Conclusions

At the outset of this study, I offered an evaluation in which I noted that previous research into how sexual selves were constructed was meager at best. During the literature review portion of this study, I found nothing to dissuade me from my earlier statements. Suffice it to say, I am not making a condemnation of previous research. There are several current researchers whom I believe are making great strides; Drs. Beth Montemurro, Rebecca Plante, and Dennis Waskul, to name a few. I am merely pointing out that there is much work to do in the years ahead if we are to truly understand how sexual selves are acquired. Even this study is not enough to set the water to ripple with the immediate shortcoming having a sparse sample size (N=39). I recommend larger cross-cultural studies with a healthy sample size. I believe a library of narratives and accounts of sexuality is essential. Alfred C. Kinsey, after all, started his foray into the studies of sexual behavior (1948, 1953) with a sample size of sexual histories of no less than 5300 males and 5940 females. With new studies, each newly acquired narrative offers the potential for new understanding of sexual selves.

In this study, and future studies in my name, I ask the simple question: How are sexual selves constructed? Coming from the position of a grounded theory approach, what is soundly demonstrated from the sexual narratives and accounts provided by the participants in this study, is that the findings are consistent with the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. From the naïveté in Meadian play through the carefully orchestrated process of Nancy's adoption of a "swinger" self, it is evident, in the words of Stevi Jackson that "the sexual self is viewed as

actively ‘doing sex,’ not only in terms of sexual acts, but as making and modifying sexual meanings” (2007:4). The process of a social actor actively *doing* sex, or anything else for that matter, is at the very heart of the symbolic interactionist approach.

In Irvine (2000) and Mason-Schrock’s (1996) claim that selves are a narrative accomplishment, selfhood is established in those stories told to others, as well as ourselves. The participants in this study substantiated sexual selfhood in the often unrestrained honesty of their responses. In chapter two, I included Mason-Schrock’s question regarding how we arrive at stories that point to authentic selfhood. The answer is in accounts people tell; the excuses or justifications that people use to explain why they are the sexual beings they happen to be. Grayson and Parker proffered the accounts of their homosexuality that they felt comfortable with. It is, at least partially, the authenticity found in their subjective sexual accounts that provides them with comfort. Throughout this study, the narratives and accounts collected here accentuate the manner in which sexual selves emerge.

Beginning with recollections of first experiences with sexuality, participants attributed the earliest development of sexual selfhood to their exposure to sexual images on television, in movies, in the pages of *Playboy* magazine, or simply seeing a friend naked. Questions that emerged from initial encounters with sexuality were most often avoided or ignored by parents and sex education classes leading individuals to seek answers out using their own stratagem. Often adolescent sex play, in the Meadian sense of “play,” was a tool utilized by participants in their youth to learn and experiment with sex beyond mere, albeit important, pleasurable somatic cues. In play, participants, as children, began to put together the complex jigsaw puzzle of sexu-

ality through mimicry. Socialization involved in early sex play gave adolescents the opportunity to learn from each other and jointly construct shared meanings of sexuality.

Perceptions of participant's sexuality was shown to be crucial in the inception of sexual selves, not only in self-perception of sexuality but in the real or imagined perceptions of significant and generalized others. Reported sexual perceptions by participants validated the theoretical positions in Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach to self-construction and Cooley's (1902) looking-glass self process. Bearing either work in mind, participants took the judgments of others, both real and imagined, into account when considering their own perceptions of their sexuality. In the reflexive nature of interaction, combining both self-perception and the perception of others presents a fluid sexual self that negates static interpretation.

Sexual perceptions, however, are not stand-alone. They become connected to, associated with, and evaluated by the sexual scripts of a particular society. As noted by Plante, "The menu of possibilities for sexual conduct and sexual selfhood is indeed socioculturally constructed. We know the basics of cultural sexual scripting, the hegemonic *who, what, why, where, when, and how*" (2007:47, italics in original). In the dynamics of social interaction, not only are generalized or significant others accepting or rejecting the performances of social actors, but actors are either adhering to or disregarding the sexual scripts of their social realm. Participants who identified as religiously affiliated tended to accept the sexual scripts handed down by the church, as displayed in the unfavorable views the religiously affiliated had of masturbation. But, in other cases, sexual scripts were disregarded where agency overrode societal ideals of normativity, as found in Nancy's creation of a sexual self (swinger) that is largely deemed non-normative by members of society and runs counter to endorsed sexual scripts.

But self-perception and perceptions of others did not always work toward more satiated sexual selves. At times sexual selves were suppressed, hindered, and not permitted to develop further. External influences were shown to sometimes create barriers that individuals chose not to rise above. For Grayson, his homosexuality was suppressed, by his choosing, due to his adherence to his religious faith. John's fear of the potential negative reaction, by his wife, to his foot fetish keeps his sexual desires hidden and that particular sexual self from being fully developed. In other cases, sexual barriers brought on by external influences produced reactions rather than offered opportunities for choice, as in cases of traumatic events such as rape and sexual molestation. Phoebe's rape, for example, became a determining factor in how she reacted in future sexual events. When hardline choices or reactions to trauma did not take place, for some participants like Ellen, who had a distaste for her desires and a fear of displaying them due to the inherently criminal nature of the desires, intrapsychic scripts called for avoidance of the execrative desire and distancing from facets of a sexual role.

Another feature, feelings, provided yet another common thread through the narratives. Both distinctions of *feelings* were expressed; emotional and somatic. In emotions, positive sexual experiences added to one's overall well-being of self, while negative emotional responses to shame culminated in such undesirable effects as the deconstruction or retardation of self-development. At times, emergence of sexual selves came through simple somatic feelings; little more than what *felt* good. Early self-exploration of bodies gave participants the knowledge of what felt good to them and what did not. Such discovery allowed them to inform future partners how they wanted to be pleased. Knowing what pleased them and being to relate that information to a significant other supported sustained, confident sexual selves.

Regardless of adherence to or disregard of encouraged sexual scripts, traumatic sexual events, religious dictation, avoided aspects of sexual roles, sexual barriers, or judgments of others, participants in this study, displayed a common positive attitude for healthy, satisfying, and rewarding future sexual selves. With the rare exception, such as John who has intentionally placed himself in “an incomplete sexual life,” participants were hopeful of sexual relationships with partners that included such aspects as open communication, freedom to exhibit and pursue sexual desires, and personal development through sexual experiences; in short, to allow sexual selves to flourish. In looking ahead to desired future possible selves, participants demonstrated an interactive process that included the techniques of anticipatory socialization including; gathering information, understanding past aspects of sexual selves that one may wish to avoid in future selves, imagining an idealized version of a sexual self, taking note of and learning from others who have revealed those preferred sexual selves, planning a strategy for obtaining the possible sexual self, and finding the motivation to move toward obtaining the desired sexual self.

What this study accomplished is the production of a basic conceptual underpinning for which to understand how sexual selves are constructed. At the most fundamental level, sexual selves are negotiated in interaction through an understanding of shared meanings. Therefore, symbolic interactionism is a valid and sound theoretical approach to understanding such a vital concept as the emergence of selves, not only in this study but for future studies. In symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective; we can make sense of sexual self-acquisition as a complex social phenomenon, we are able to make more informed predictions, and notions of how sexual selves are constructed become amenable to extension.

Utilizing the symbolic interactionist approach, I can safely state; (1) sexual selves are constructed through a reflexive process of interaction where, according to Hewitt, “It is the acquisition of self that ties the individual to the group and makes the group a part of the person being created” (1976:96). (2) Sexual selves not static, rather, they are created and recreated in a process that is continuous throughout an individual’s life course. (3) Sexual behaviors can be explained through sexual scripts. (4) Sexual selves are the end emergent of negotiations in the public realm between individuals and members of society. (5) Sexuality is something we actively do, which is only possible with the possession of sexual selves. (6) Sexual selves are presented and either accepted or rejected by others. Sexual selves do not stand on their own accomplishments. (7) An individual has a multitude of sexual selves. (8) Social actors are goal oriented toward future possible selves, which are constructed in the same manner we learn anything and. (9) The frameworks of sexual selves contain sexual subjectivity, sexual identity, and socio-cultural variables (Plante, 2007). These verifiable facts regarding sexual selves, exist in the basic premises of symbolic interactionist argument. Using these basic premises as a springboard from this humble study, provides a pathway to subsequent and advanced understanding of the construction of sexual selves.

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Appendix A:

Survey Instrument

The Construction of Sexual Selves *Survey Research*

Researcher: David W. Wahl (david.wahl-1@mnsu.edu)

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to better understand the manner in which sexual selves are constructed and how sexual selves continue to develop in social interaction.

Procedures: By filling out this survey, you consent to the fact that your responses may be used for this research thesis. Also, by filling out this survey, you are agreeing that you are at least 18 years of age. This is a double-blind survey. As the researcher, I will not be provided your identity. Please answer the survey questions with as much detail as you feel comfortable providing. Answer in the space provided or on a separate sheet of paper with question numbers clearly indicating which question you are responding to.

If you wish to participate in a face-to-face interview, please contact Dr. Dennis Waskul (dennis.waskul@mnsu.edu) and he will put you in touch with me. If you choose to meet for an interview, I will meet with you at any place and time of your convenience to document your sexual stories. Other methods available for the interview are email, Skype/Facetime/Scopia, or telephone. With your permission I will digitally record the interview. If you choose to meet in person, in most cases, the interview will take about 30 - 60 minutes. By filling out this survey, you are under no obligation to participate any further in the research project.

Risks/Benefits: Since your participation in this research is purely voluntary, and you do not have to answer any questions, there are minimal risks or benefits to you other than those encountered in day-to-day life. To safeguard your identity and privacy:

- Records of this study will be kept private and locked in a digital print safe; only the researcher will have access to the records.
- This is a double-blind survey. The researcher will not know your identity.
- All identifiable information provided by the respondent within answers will be omitted from all research records.

Subject Rights:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study if you don't want to be.
- You have the right to change your mind and leave the study at any time without giving any reason; at which time, your responses will be destroyed and not used in the study.
- You have the right to leave any question blank that you do not feel comfortable answering.
- Any new information that may make you change your mind about being in this study will be given to you.

- You do not waive any of your legal rights by responding to the questions in this survey.

Questions About This Study or Your Rights As a Research Subject: If you have any questions about the study, your rights, or research-related injuries, you may contact my thesis advisor and professor of Sociology Dr. Dennis Waskul (dennis.waskul@mnsu.edu).

Age _____

Race/Ethnicity _____

Gender _____

Religious Affiliation _____

Birthplace _____

Occupation _____

Sexual Identification _____

Q1: What is your earliest memory of sexuality in your life?

Q2: What does your sexuality mean to you?

Q3: How do you think your sexuality has been influenced by your external environment/others?

Q4: Do you feel comfortable opening yourself up sexually to another person (either verbally or through action)? Explain why or why not.

Q5: How do you think your sexuality has changed over the years?

Q6: From what source(s) did you gain most of your knowledge about sex?

Q7: How do you perceive that others view you sexually/your sexuality?

Q8: Will you explain for me this first time you remember acting sexual with another person?

- How old were you?
- Who was the other person to you?
- Where did it take place?
- What were your feelings during the act?
- What were your feelings afterwards?
- Please describe the relationship between you and this person afterwards.
- Looking back on it now, what are your attitudes towards it?
- Did you experience orgasm?

Q9: What sexual desires do you have that you have been unwilling to share with your partner?

-Why have you been unwilling to share this with your partner?

-What do you think your partner's reaction would be if you shared these desires?

-How do you feel about keeping these desires secret?

Q10: Do you consider yourself to be open-minded sexually?

-What is the reason for your answer?

-Do you wish it were otherwise, and why?

Q11: Are you able to speak openly with your partner about sex?

-What are the barriers?

-What have the benefits been to openly talking about sex with your partner?

Q12: How do you see yourself sexually?

Appendix B:

Research Consent Form

The Construction of Sexual Selves

You are being asked to volunteer in a research study on the processes by which sexual selves are developed and emerge. You are asked to take part in this study because you have already expressed interest in participating. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have prior to agreeing to take part in the study.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to better understand the manner in which sexual selves are constructed and how sexual selves continue to develop in social interaction.

Procedures: If you choose to participate, I will meet with you at any place and time of your convenience to document your sexual stories. Other methods available for the interview are email, Skype/Facetime/Scopia, or telephone. With your permission I will digitally record the interview. If you choose to meet in person then, in most cases, the interview will take about 30 - 60 minutes.

Risks/Benefits: Since your participation in this research is purely voluntary, and you do not have to answer any questions, there are minimal risks or benefits to you other than those encountered in day-to-day life. To safeguard your identity and privacy:

- Records of this study will be kept private and locked in a digital print safe; only the researcher will have access to the records.
- If I digitally record your interview, I will destroy the recording after it has been transcribed (which I anticipate will be within a week).
- Your name and all other identifiable information will be omitted from all research records.
- All identifiable information will be omitted from all research records.

Subject Rights:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study if you don't want to be.
- You have the right to change your mind and leave the study at any time without giving any reason.
- Any new information that may make you change your mind about being in this study will be given to you.
- You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.
- You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this consent form.

Questions About This Study or Your Rights As a Research Subject: If you have any questions about the study, you may contact David W. Wahl at telephone (612.618.9167) or e-mail at david.wahl-1@mnsu.edu. If you have questions about your rights or research-related injuries, you may contact my thesis advisor and professor of Sociology Dr. Dennis Waskul (dennis.waskul@mnsu.edu) or the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research (Barry Ries, 507-389-2321 barry.ries@mnsu.edu).

If you sign below, it means that you are at least 18 years of age and have read (or have had read to you) the information given in this consent form, and you would like to be a volunteer in this study.

Subject Name (printed)

Subject Signature

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

IRB Approval Number: 865474

Appendix C:

Qualitative Sample Questions

The Construction of Sexual Selves Master's Thesis - Wahl Research Interview

Interview # _____

Age _____

Race/Ethnicity _____

Gender _____

Religious Affiliation _____

Birthplace _____

Occupation _____

Sexual Identification _____

Agreed to Interview _____

Provided a copy of the Research Consent Form _____

Overarching Questions:

Q1: What is your earliest memory of sexuality in your life?

Q2: How has your sexuality has changed over the years? If yes, in what ways?

Q3: How has your sexuality has been influenced by your external environment? If yes, how?

Q4: Do you feel comfortable opening yourself up sexually to another person (either verbally or through action)? Explain why or why not.

Q5: Have you encountered any barriers when presenting your sexuality to others? If yes, what were those barriers?

Q6: What does your sexuality mean to you?

Q7: From what source(s) did you gain most of your knowledge about sex?

Q8: Do you have any sexual aspirations? If yes, what are they and how do you plan to achieve them?

Q9: How do you perceive that others view you sexually/your sexuality?

Q10: Do you have sexual desires you keep to yourself? Why?

Probing Questions:

Q1: Do you recall, in your youth, exploring your body and discovering sexual pleasures for yourself?

- Describe those memories for me.
- Do you recall why you didn't?
- What do you remember feeling when you were exploring your body at that time?

Q2: Will you explain for me this first time you remember acting sexual with another person?

- How old were you?
- Who was the other person to you?
- Where did it take place?
- What were your feelings during the act?
- What were your feelings afterwards?
- Please describe the relationship between you and this person afterwards.
- Looking back on it now, what are your attitudes towards it?
- Did you experience orgasm?

- Q3:** When you were growing up, was sex a topic that was discussed in your family?
-What were the barriers to having discussions about sex?
-Why was it easy for your family to discuss sex?
-What were your feelings about lack or ease of talking about sex in your family?
- Q4:** How important has masturbation been to your sexuality through your life?
-How often do you masturbate?
-Do you always orgasm when you masturbate?
-Why not?
-Is your partner aware that you masturbate?
-How does he/she feel about it?
- Q5:** What sexual desires do you have that you have been unwilling to share with your partner?
-Why have you been unwilling to share this with your partner?
-What do you think your partner's reaction would be if you shared these desires?
-How do you feel about keeping these desires secret?
- Q6:** Do you use the internet to obtain pornography or engage in internet sex?
-If "no," what are your attitudes toward others using the internet for these purposes?
-If "yes," how often do you use the internet for these purposes?
-Please share with me your experiences with internet sex.
- Q7:** Does your religious affiliation affect your sexuality?
-In what ways does your religion affect your sexuality?
- Q8:** Do you use toys (i.e. vibrators, dildos, cock rings, anal beads, etc...) in your sexual encounters or during masturbation?
-What are your attitudes about using toys?
- Q9:** Do you consider yourself to be open-minded sexually?
-What is the reason for your answer?
-Do you wish it were otherwise, and why?

Q10: Are you able to speak openly with your partner about sex?

-What are the barriers?

-What have the benefits been to openly talking about sex with your partner?

Q11: Do you engage in sexual behaviors that you are not interested in only to satisfy your partner?

-What are your feelings during this sexual behavior?

-Is there discussion about the behavior before or after the encounter?

-How do you perceive your partner's attitudes if you refuse to engage in sexual behaviors that are only acceptable to him/her?

-How is the relationship affected by your decision?

Q12: What are your attitudes concerning sex being limited to the confines of marriage?

-Have you or anyone you are close to engaged in extra-marital coitus?

-What are your attitudes on extra-marital coitus?

-Please tell me about the situation you are referring to.

Q13: How do you see yourself sexually?

Q14: How do you feel others see you sexually?

Q15: What were the attitudes toward sexuality in your immediate environment where you grew up?

-Were you in alignment with these attitudes when you were growing up?

Q16: Was sex education offered in your high school?

-Please describe the sex education classes you were offered in school.

-What were your feelings when you took the classes?

-Did you find the classes adequately taught sex education?