"It's complicated": The lived experience of female sexual desire

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Table of Contents

Preliminaries

Part I: Study outline and existing knowledge

Part II: Research philosophy and processes

Part III: Research results and analysis

Part IV: Conclusions and reflections

Back room

Abstract

'What is sexual desire and how do women experience it?' is the central question of this hermeneutic phenomenological study. The goal was to challenge the pathologisation of women's sexual desire by highlighting its complexity, situatedness and temporality. In-depth interviews and autobiographical art data elicited in partnership with seven participants were interpreted and analysed using a life course perspective to highlight how both positive and negative experiences, as well as the acceptance or resistance of cultural scripts and double standards, contribute over time to a woman's sense of her own access to sexual desire, agency around sexual decision-making, and entitlement to sexual pleasure. In line with the study's meta-theoretical principles, the researcher completed a parallel reflexive writing and art practice to deepen her engagement with participant experience. In analysing all data, it became evident that women's sexual desire, develops through a complex multistage process over the lifetime. Participants all reflected MacNeil and Byers' (2005) finding that the more comfortable and agentic a woman feels in expressing her sexuality and communicating her desires, the greater her feelings for intimacy and the higher likelihood that she will derive satisfaction in sex.

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List of tables/figures

Tables

Figures

Part I: Study outline and existing knowledge

Figure 1: Marbling 1 (reflexive practice)

Focus of interest

This study on women's sexual desire draws on the World Health Organisation's (WHO) (2006) definition of sexual health as:

> "…a state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality […] requiring a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled".

The WHO determines that sexual health cannot be defined or comprehended without a broad consideration of 'sexuality', a key component in determining behaviours and outcomes related to sexual health. The WHO's (2006) working definition of sexuality is:

> "…a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors."

Upon deciding to explore the experience of sexual desire in women, I quickly discovered that the concept of 'sexual desire' was difficult to define, with much conjecture in the literature as to its aetiology and function. In the Collins English Dictionary (2008), 'sexual desire' is found under 'desire', and is described as 'sexual appetite' or 'lust' – words alluding to instinctual processes. Shifting the gaze to academia, Phillips

and Slaughter (2000) refer to 'sexual interest', Freud (1920) to 'libido' and Weeks (2006) describes "a dynamic, instinctive force derived from the essential core human being" (p. 13). Levine (2003) defines it as "the sum of the forces that lean us toward and push us away from sexual behaviour" (p. 285), whereas Regan and Berscheid (1999, p. 15) encapsulate it as "a psychological state subjectively experienced by the individual as an awareness that he or she wants or wishes to attain a (presumably pleasurable) sexual goal that is currently unattainable". Aside from this absence of a widely-accepted definition, what appears to be missing in the literature is a thorough exploration of women's own understanding of sexual desire.

The second, yet related aspect of sexual desire that this study seeks to focus on is 'sexual subjectivity'. Which can be understood as the subjective experiencing of sexual desire, and the possessing of the ability to act (or not act) on that desire with agency (Martin, 1996). Female sexual subjectivity is understood to encapsulate a woman's experience of her own sexual identity. It includes her relationship to entitlement to sexual pleasure and safety, her being able to make decisions regarding sex, and to identify herself as a sexual being (Tolman, 2002). It is about self-empowerment, about being able to act according to her own will, to reject unwanted advances, but also to have the right to pursue her own desires and to enjoy herself. Compliance with expectations of femininity involves passivity and receptive desire, and therefore it has been theorised that sexual subjectivity could be considered an act of gender defiance (Montemurro, 2014).

For the purposes of this study, 'women' refers to the several heterosexual female participants. While it is acknowledged that there is a dearth of knowledge about other sexual orientations and non-gender-binary individuals who align with female/feminine qualities, such contributions are outside of the scope of this study. This study does not seek to make

generalisations, but rather to provide colour and texture to the lived experience of these few women.

Significance of the study

This study is timely with the recent growing emphasis on the medicalisation and pathologisation of women's sexual desire (Kleinplatz 2013; Tiefer, 1996). Critics such as Tiefer (1991) and Parker and Gagnon (1995) contest that disciplinary misuse of sexuality's relationship to health has resulted in erroneous associations being made between sexual behaviours and illness, such as the inclusion of Female Sexual Interest/Arousal Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (5th Edition) (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013) and the recent Federal Drug Administration (FDA) approval of controversial female desire drug *Flibanserin* (Jin, 2015). Given the lack of consistent referents or distinctions between subjective arousal and desire (which will be explored in later sections), they argue that there is no basis for definition in which to inform desire related diagnoses (Meana, 2010). The debate also speaks to broader epistemological and political issues surrounding how to conceptualise sexual desire, what can be known about it, and how we might come to know it. This study draws on the voices of dissent to explore alternative ways of viewing female sexual desire outside of a biomedical framework.

While research on the psychosocial aspects of female sexual desire does exist, this study is significant in that it gives primacy to women's own understandings and experiences of their own sexual desire, in both verbal and non-verbal mediums. With the ongoing academic and social conjecture surrounding women's sexual health, ensuring women's own voices are heard and valued is integral.

This study will also contribute to existing critical literature by adopting a life course perspective. By asking women about their sexual development, including early influences and experiences meaningful in shaping sexual desire, we can better understand the context of relationships and sexual self-image as women age. In addition, by analysing women's sexuality as cumulative, we can investigate significant episodes and transitional periods that helped define women as sexual beings.

As Berney et al. (2000) highlight, cumulative effects on health may occur not only across one's own life, but also across generations. Therefore, layered into this research process is also the consideration of different generations in order to explore the influence of historical context on women's sexual evolution. Ken Plummer (2010) noted that "sexuality should be interpreted on the basis of generation because language, habits, significant historical events, symbolic objects, and narratives vary depending on when an individual has come of age" (p. 28).

By increasing our awareness of the personal, temporal and social experience of sexual desire and subjectivity, we may improve upon health education and services so that they "provide not just safety nets but also springboards" (Bartley, Blane, & Montgomery, 1997), enhancing women's potential for optimal sexual health. It is hoped that knowledge gained through this study might inform health practitioners, and empower women to discuss their sexual experiences. An overview of anticipated outcomes is depicted in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Anticipated outcomes

Health	Holistic health focus
Education	Sexual health education
Awareness	Awareness of women's experiences
Learning	Research base expansion

Talk	Encourage discussion
Health service planning	Expanding sexual health services at key transition periods

Study aims and research question

The aims of the study were:

- To understand and explicate women's experience of sexual desire
- To understand how life events, transitions, and generation impact upon a woman's development of sexual subjectivity.

Thus, the following research question was posed:

How do women experience sexual desire and how does it develop over the life course?

Argument for the study

Sexual narratives of everyday women are rarely themed as shown above. Myths and preconceptions surrounding female sexuality continue to sustain a world-view that constrains women's access to and enjoyment of optimal sexual health. As it will be further argued, power structures involved in the social construction of sexuality have silenced certain stories being told, in particular those of mothers and older post-menopausal women. Yet, the narrated experience of sexual desire explains a way of being-in-the-world as a sexual being and reaffirms sexual identity (Ricoeur, 1991). Thus, it is important for women's voices to be heard on this topic, to provide some insight into their understanding of said phenomena.

Literature review

This section details existing knowledge about female sexual desire.: including an exploration of the history of sex research, a consideration of empirical and sociological understandings, the presentation of a case-study and the identification of deficits in knowledge of the phenomena.

A brief history of sex research

As Meana (2010) argues, there exists a long history of societal timidity toward sex research. This is reflective of historical associations between sexuality, fertility and religion that resulted in moralising around sexual pleasure (Foucault, 1984). From the 19th century, however, with the growing field of science, and in particular the domains of medicine, psychology, sociology, anthropology and sexology, society has become more accepting of research that is sexual in nature.

Ellis (1859-1939) and Freud (1856-1939) were influential in the formative years of sexology. Ellis (1927) was the first to include female sexuality in his writings and research, contributing to the later emergence of female sexual liberation. He was also one of the first to posit that sexual desire was an instinctive biological force, and is often considered as the founding father of sexology (Robinson, 1989).

While Ellis' research was primarily based on written communication, Freud's (1920) research centred on clinical observations and interviews with individual patients. In developing psychoanalysis, he posited that hysteria and adult neurosis are the result of unconscious repression of sexually related experiences that occur in early childhood. He believed that from infancy humans unconsciously seek pleasure through erogenous zones and sexual energy, according to specific stages of sexual development. Freud's research has been criticised on scientific methodological grounds, as it was based on behaviour that cannot be

observed or empirically tested, however, it remains highly regarded, suggesting that observable scientific quantifications do not hold all of the answers for explaining human behaviour (Ricoeur, 1970). Secondly, Freud theorised that libido is a powerful internal motivator in human behaviour, and that sexual self-expression is mediated by the sexual and social roles imposed throughout life. This speaks to a sexual world structured from the co-constitution of the sexual self and a sense of 'being' in the world (Bristow, 1997). Therefore, exploration of an individual's sexual desire must include consideration of social and cultural context.

After Freud, sex research did not garner much attention until the mid-twentieth century (Robinson, 1989). Recognising a lack of information about sexual behaviour in society, entomologist Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) conducted a major survey of the sexual habits of the American population (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953). Publication of results revealed a range of sexual behaviours, such as the extent of non-heterosexuality, masturbation and extramarital sex, that were confronting for many. This research was important in that it enabled society to learn about sexual behaviours that were previously known only through personal experience (Robinson, 1989), however, the conservatism in Western academia at the time resulted in a withdrawal of funding for Kinsey's research (Rubin, 1984).

Whereas Kinsey's research employed wide ranging cross-sectional surveys, Masters and Johnson (1966) used a clinical laboratory setting to directly observe human sexual activity. Based on their observations, they described a sexual response cycle (for both sexes) that comprised of four distinct stages of linear progression: excitement or initial arousal; plateau or full arousal; orgasm; and resolution or post-orgasm (Masters & Johnson, 1966). The results remain referential for many modern sex researchers, and spawned a wide range of research into sexual

behaviours, function and treatment for sexual dysfunction (Robinson, 1989).

Major social changes in the twentieth century saw shifts in public perceptions of sex, and sex research (Gagnon, 1975). The arrival of the contraceptive pill made sex a social, as well as a personal issue (Bartky, 1997). For the first time in history, women were empowered to explore their sexuality without fear of pregnancy. In addition, society became more accepting of sexual experiences outside of heterosexual married couples.

Ellis, Freud, Kinsey and Masters and Johnson are all examples of researchers who have created the means for which new knowledge about sexuality has been tolerated and assimilated into society (Bullough, 1995). While society endorses research about reproduction, fertility, orientation, dysfunction and satisfaction, preliminary exploration for the current study confirmed a dearth of explanations of women's sexual desire that bridge the biomedical and social divides.

Contemporary research on sexual desire

Referring to desire, Meana (2010) argues that due to it being the most subjective component of sexuality, it poses difficulties in researching and thus has been mostly ignored by deterministic inquiries such as that of Masters and Johnson (1966). The topic itself is of much popular, academic and clinical attention, and has become a heated battleground a variety of theoretical and political perspectives (Lindau, Coady & Kushner, 2015). The current literature on female sexual desire evidences the complexity of human experience (Meana, 2010), however many still attempt to stuff the elusive experience into ill-fitting and often polarising (empirical vs. social) theories, frameworks and

paradigms. This section will explore the current academic landscape, both empirical and social understandings of female sexual desire.

What is sexual desire? Empirical understandings

As mentioned earlier, attempts to define 'sexual desire' in empirical science have proven challenging. Many scientific definitions seek to operationalise subjective sexual desire, drawing upon poorly understood cognitive, psychological, or behavioural referents (Meana, 2010). These are explored below:

Cognitive

Basson (2007) posit that on a cognitive level, desire appears to share almost all attributes of subjective arousal. Regan and Berscheid (1999) however suggest that subjective arousal is more stimulus-dependent than desire. Complicating matters further, Everaerd and Both (2001) integrate sexual arousal within desire, defining the latter as the awareness of the former, whereas Andersen & Cyranowski (1994) try to differentiate between the two based on the moment of their occurring. Inconsistencies in these cognitive referents of desire however, are not taken into account by the ongoing research on sexual desire (Kleinplatz, 2013). This leads to an unfounded usage of the two terms as having independent meaning. It remains not only a problem within academia, but also leads to confusion amongst women, as reported by qualitative inquires (Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, 1994; Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, & McBride, 2004).

Although data exploring the connection is scarce and inconsistent, sexual fantasies have been proposed as another possible cognitive referent of female sexual desire (Purifoy, Grodsky, & Giambra, 1992). For example, Beck, Bozman, and Qualtrough (1991) showed that 17.9% of women link sexual

daydreams to their sexual desire. Furthermore, Ellis and Symons (1990), in their exploration of evolutionary approaches to desire, found that fantasies have a role to play in increasing sexual arousal, with 43% of women indicating they engaged in sexual fantasy in order to augment their interest in sex. This link has been integrated – despite inconsistencies – into the research community – for example, criteria for *female sexual interest/arousal disorder* includes the "absence or deficiency of fantasies" (APA, 2013, p. 434).

Physiological

Physiological referents of sexual desire are even less understood. Until recently, physiological arousal (erections in men and vaso-congestion and lubrication in women) and subjective perception of sexual experiences were thought to be "interdependent aspects of the same underlying construct of arousal" (Rellini, McCall, Randall & Meston, 2005, p. 116). However, recent studies have proved this to be a hasten conclusion, especially concerning women. For example, Chivers, Seto Lalumie`re, Laan, and Grimbos (2010) found that women do no associate arousal with physiological states, and Levin and van Burlo (2004) measured heightened physiological arousal in women during unwanted sex. Furthermore, Levin (2005) shows that women may feel physiological arousal despite reporting lacking in experience of sexual desire (also supported by Chivers & Bailey, 2005). To add to the hubbub, Laan, Everaerd, van der Velde, & Geer (1995) suggest that the perception or awareness of physiological changes within women during sexual arousal is made possible by subjective arousal or desire, and that physiological changes do not determine arousal. Such literature highlights a weaker and more complex association than previously thought.

Behavioural

The last empirical referent of sexual desire is behaviour. A vast and divergent body of literature suggests that women engage in sexual activity for a great many reasons unrelated to desire (e.g., Impett & Peplau, 2003; Meston & Buss, 2007). Reasons women agree to have sex include, but are not limited to, wanting to "satisfy a partner's needs, promote intimacy, avoid tension in a relationship, and avoid rejecting a partner" (Impett & Peplau, 2003, p. 91). In their extensive qualitative study on undergraduate women, Meston and Buss (2007) found the most common nonsexual motivations for engaging in sexual activity include "the expression of love, escalating the depth of the relationship, curiosity or seeking new experiences, and marking a special occasion for celebration" (p. 483). It is important to highlight that while desire may have occurred inside of these interactions, the aforementioned goals could have been achieved through means other than sexual activity. (Meana, 2010).

Sociological understandings

Sociological understandings provide critical context to empirical research (Felin & Hesterly, 2007). Such theories seek to explain sexual desire within a social and/or environmental context (Searle, 1995). DeLamater and Hyde (1998) argue, "biology does not dictate where, when, and with what object a person engages in sexual behaviour" (p. 15). Similarly, Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that "sexuality . . . is channelled in specific directions socially rather than biologically, a channelling that not only imposes limits on these activities, but directly affects orgasmic functions" (p. 181). While empiricists seek universal explanations, it quickly becomes evident that sexual desire is not a universal phenomenon. It is given meaning by culture (Tiefer, 1991). For example, Laws and Schwatz (1977) argue that biologically understood

constructs such as birth, sexual anatomy, impotence, and menstruation "have social significance; terms exist to refer to them, and communication occurs about them" (p. 17).

Under this perspective, mating preferences are considered, in part, the result of socialisation. Therefore, socio-cultural standards of desire and desirability are reflective of cultural values, as well as social structures (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). For example, Regan et al. (2000) found that women's sexual desire is affected significantly by physical attractiveness, emotional qualities, and intelligence. Therefore, while preferences for an attractive mate may indeed be universal, but there are no strict universal standards of attractiveness (Laws & Schwatz, 1977). Evolutionary theorists, such as Howard, Blumstein and Schwartz (1987), position sexual preferences as serving reproductive purposes, thereby increasing the possibility of selecting a fertile partner. However, not all sexual desires are consistent with an evolutionary perspective, for example, if a woman desires an expressive lover, this connects with relational characteristics that have no direct relationship to fertility or relationship survival.

DeLamater and Hyde (1998) argue that a common misunderstanding in the study of sexology is the consideration that gender-typed attributes are the result of socialisation rather than an innate *being* of male or female. From this social constructionist perspective, gender is seen a process external to the individual, and created in interactions between people, as they communicate discourses of cultural patterns through language (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The empirical approach to sexuality assumes that the human sexual behaviour depends on biological determinism and cultural essentialism; however, Teifer (1991) and Searle (1995) posit that there are no true essences, but rather a socially mediated sexual reality that shifts and changes over time. For example, women with voluptuous bodies were

desired as sexual objects a century ago, whereas Western notions of attractiveness nowadays tend toward a lean or athletic figure.

DeLamater and Hyde (1998) discuss attempts to weave together biological and social influences on sexual desire, stating that such theories are often termed 'interactionist' despite the fact that "they rarely specify a true interaction between the two sets of influences" (p. 116). One such conjoint approach was developed by Berscheid and Walster (1974), who argued that 'passionate love' occurs when biological and social influences conditions exist simultaneously. For example, the person is in a state of intense psychological arousal, and then relates the experienced sensations to a particular cognition labelled 'love'. The first component is certainly biological, and from the essentialist point of view, it is based on an underlying assumption that there is a true essence of sexual desire, and it must be activated for the experience of 'passionate love' to occur. The second part appears to be social constructionist because the idea of 'love' is socially constructed, and based on the presence of a relational Other and other factors such as notions of romantic connection.

Jackson and Scott (2007) further argue that human sexuality is not permanent, but reproduced and altered as an ongoing achievement of everyday practices within a social world. They add that a common manifestation of human sexuality inclines on the assumption that women's sexual desire is particularly mysterious and unknowable. Similarly, to Meana (2010), they state that women's orgasm is conventionally less physical, but rather more rationally driven and dependent than that of men.

The goal of desire

'Desire for what by whom?' is another assumption often lacking critical reflection in sex research. Therefore, it is important to also highlight

literature that attends to the relational aspects of sex. The name 'sexual desire' implies that the object of desire is sex, however, as already mentioned, for many women, sexual engagement may not always be the end goal of sexual desire. Therefore, it is important to consider whether alternative reasons for engaging sexual activity (even if desire ensues) such as love, intimacy or relationship maintenance be considered as part of female sexual desire, or something different entirely. Meana (2010) asks "if subjective arousal and pleasure result from these nonsexual motivations for sex, why would that ensuing pleasure not become the reason for engaging in sex more frequently than it does? More specifically, why do women in long-term relationships who report pleasure when they have sex, despite their low desire (e.g., Sims & Meana, 2009), not want to repeat the experience more often than they do?" (p. 107).

Secondly, what if being desired and desiring are self-sufficient stimuli (without requiring action)? Studies do indeed show a connection between satisfaction and feeling desired in women (Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, 2009; Graham et al., 2004). Furthermore, women perceive desire as independent from sexual activity or orgasm (Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, 2009; Regan & Berscheid, 1996). In this context, the question of desire's self-sufficiency posed by Meana (2010, p. 107) gathers relevance.

This question brings us to consider the longing for desire itself, which is often reported by women that lack the feeling of sexual desire (Rellini., McCall, Randall & Meston, 2005). In their study of women seeking treatment for their self-described desire-deficiency, Goldstein, Lines, Pyke, & Scheld (2009) found that such women seek an "improvement in levels of desire", independent of a change in pleasure or rates of sexual intercourse (p. 1350). Despite the apparent self-evidence of this fact, Meana (2010, p. 107) points out that higher degrees of pleasure do not lead to an increase in sex quality, especially in the case of women who

either have not felt or do not miss desire. She instead asserts that the challenge of reconciling individual differences of desire within a sexual relationship might be a motivating factor in seeking treatment. The conclusion drawn is that further research is required given that desire for desire is not an absolute factor and that "perhaps women who never had a high level of desire are less likely to mourn normative (age and relationship longevity related) declines in desire" (Meana, 2010, p. 107).

In summary, in exploring this question it becomes evident that desire is not only oriented towards self-actualisation within a sexual act. Therefore, "if we conceptualise desire solely as a goal-driven state having sex as the endpoint, we may be overlooking the rewarding nature of desire itself" (Meana, 2010, p. 108).

Relationship factors

A major driver of the move toward reconceptualising women's desire is the assumption that it is oriented towards relationships and based on dependency, which is sustained by a number of empirical studies. For example, Baumeister (2000) argues that women's desire is less flexible than men's, and that they often choose to engage in sexual activity regardless of the presence of sexual desire, for the sake of their relationship. However, this was contested by a cross-national study by Diamond (2006), who argued that women have a wider horizon of desire and that they are more flexible in perceiving various stimuli arousing than men. Such stimuli have been shown to be largely relationship based, for example: being desired (Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, 2009), open communication (Byers, 2001), and intimacy (Regan & Berscheid, 1996). Furthermore, Hayes, Bennett, Fairley and Dennerstein, (2008) have shown that relationship factors are reliable indicators in identifying causes for desire distress.

Sexual desire brings with it the necessary implication of alterity or otherness, that is the longing for somebody other than one self. The exception to this being autoeroticism, that is "sexual gratification obtained solely through stimulation by oneself of one's own body" (Autoeroticism, 2017). Regan and Berscheid (1996) claim that this all the more so present in women, whose object of desire is less defined by physical characteristics. Alterity also plays a major role in self-appreciation, with women finding the external validation of being desired by the Other very arousing (Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, 2009).

Despite an overarching emphasis on relationality for dominating women's sexual choices, long-term relationships have been shown to reduce the sexual desire and satisfaction for both men and women (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). While age is often cited as the catalyst for desire decline, this is overly simplistic, as a reduction in sexual activity and satisfaction have been cited to appear for women in relatively early university relationships (Klusmann, 2002).

To explain how relationship's serve as a mechanism on women's sexual desire, Sims and Meana (2009) developed the causal attribution for desire decline into three main themes. The first is identified as the *institutionalisation of the relationship.* This term explains the decline of sexual activity between long-term married couples because sex has become a sort of obligation instead of being a suspension of the mundane. Here, they also implicate the formalisation of the couple's union, which lacks the eroticism that was previously found with casual lovers. The second phase is *over-familiarity,* which relates to the gradual loss of individuality, transforming sex into a mechanical, strictly scripted, orgasm-centred physical activity. The last theme is related to the *de-sexualised roles* associated with most of the couple's daily activities. This means that women, enacting their roles as mothers, homemakers, or various professional activities, felt that they would be incompatible with

the appropriate sexual role in the bedroom. In other words, they felt a lack of sexual desire toward their partner despite compliments and assurances. Therefore, all three together suggest that intimacy and closeness within a committed relationship can have a dulling effect on sexual desire (Meana, 2010, p. 112-113).

While relational factors are fundamental in understanding women's sexual desire, literature also indicates the need to also consider other non-relational socio-cultural effects.

Self-consciousness

It would be remiss to reduce women's desire to mere responsiveness, whether to a partner's advances, or to her ability to be aroused by that partner. While 'responsiveness' in sex is undoubtedly associated with relationality, theorising in this space often lacks the notion of reciprocity. When viewed through this lens, the focus of desire becomes one-directional, in that that women respond to activity instigated by the Other, and therefore the implication is that motivation for desire is also relegated to the Other (Rutter & Schwartz, 2012). Such explanations fail to accommodate the agency that women experience in 'wanting'.

The way in which women feel about themselves is emerging as an important determinant of women's sexual desire (Schalet, 2009). For example, Weideran (2000) found that approximately one-third of his sample of female college students experienced self-consciousness about their bodies during sexual intercourse with their partner, and that this dampened their desire, and enjoyment/interest in sex. In another study, women reported more appearance-based distractions, and were more affected by negative self-evaluations in sex than men, and this had a detrimental effect on their sexual satisfaction (Meana & Nunnink, 2006).

Conversely, other research posits that positive self-appraisal is the single greatest predictor of women's sexual enjoyment, and that positive body related self-esteem increased sexual desire (Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, & McBride, 2004). One participant stated: "It's much easier for me to feel sexual desire when I'm feeling comfortable with myself" (p. 533). Finding one's own body attractive has also been cited as determinant of desire in both eroticism and autoeroticism (Bennet & Rosario, 1995; Moser, 2009). For example, Moser (2009) found that half of their sample reported feeling aroused by the image of their own body in sexy underwear, or by the thought of being irresistible to others.

The degree that women's feelings about themselves impact sexual desire, are however, not limited to their bodies. Negative mood and anxiety was shown to be a major inhibition theme in Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, and McBride's (2004) study, for women more so than men. Women also compare their sexual self against perceived norms (Pronier & Monk-Turner, 2014) and engage in more 'spectatoring', excessive introspection and monitoring during sexual activity that distracts from somatic experience, than men (Masters & Johnson, 1970).

The paradox of desire fulfilment

As already mentioned, even in the presence of desire, women do not necessarily feel the need to realise that desire through sexual activity. Mediators of sexual desire and mediators of action toward sexual activity may be strongly related, however maybe not (Rosen & Bachmann, 2008). Incentive motivation models posit that when an incentive is considered to align with one's motive, the subject shall act upon it (Hill, 1997), however, this is not always the case for women. For example, participants in Graham, Sanders, Milhausen and McBride's (2004) study stated, "It's almost like you can turn it off and on when you want to" and "It's a lot easier for a girl to walk away from a situation" (p. 236). Furthermore, Toates (2009) makes the distinction between 'wanting

and liking' sex. He reminds us that women may want sex even though they do not enjoy it, or that they want it in lesser degrees. Here non-sexual motivations may be at play. Essentially, the theory posits that just because a woman desires sex doesn't necessarily mean she craves to repeat the experience. Impett and Peplau (2003) concluded that men in desire-discrepant couples experienced confusion at the paradox of their partners apparent enjoyment of sex when it occurred, and their lack of motivation to do it again. There is a dearth of literature on women's decision making around initiating sex based on desire, as well as a critical consideration of the 'cost' of sexual fulfilment for women.

Sex-based differences

It is important to contrast research into women's sexual desire with that of their male counterparts. An interest in women's sexuality is overrepresented – although not from the female perspective as already stated – in both academic data and social conjecture. To account for this gender skew, Maurice (2007) suggests that men's sexual desire is often taken for granted, and that the idea of men being disinterested in sex, or having problematic desire is often believed to be an oxymoron. Conversely, feminist scholars posit that women's bodies and beings are unequally subjected to surveillance and scrutiny (Bartky, 1997).

However, sex-based differences do exist in the reporting of sexual complaints (Meana, 2010). Men predominantly seek healthcare advice in regard to erectile difficulties, whereas women tend toward seeking help with low sexual desire (Laumann, Paik & Rosen, 1999). For example, a greater disinterest in sex by women (26-43% 13,882 women from 29 countries, aged 40-80 years) than by men (13-28%) was shown by The Global Study of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (GSSAB) (Laumann et al., 2005). Furthermore, 64% of women (as indicated by 11 studies analysed

by Hayes, Bennett, Fairley, and Dennerstein (2006)) point at low sexual desire when it comes to finding a reason for sexual difficulties, as opposed to 7% of men.

While male desire is not the focus of this thesis, it is important to highlight some gendered differences in the experience and theorised mechanisms of sexual desire. For example, men consistently show a greater amount of activation in brain regions associated with sexual arousal (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001), report spending more time thinking and dreaming of a potential sexual encounter (Mark & Murray, 2012) and exhibit a higher frequency of masturbation than women (Robins et al., 2011). Women's brains are believed to be more plastic and malleable to socio-cultural and situational factors (Baumeister, 2000), whereas men's sexual responses are considered more linear and automatic (Masters & Johnson, 1966). At the level of intention, Regan and Bershceid (1996) found that women's sexual desire is less aimed at sexual activity than men's (43.1% vs. 70%), and that it can often be attributed to other goals such as intimacy and feeling desired. Both genders also perceive men's sex drive to be stronger and more robust (Regan & Berscheid, 1996).

Concerning these sex-based differences theorists argue that sexual experience in women has been understood through a 'male analog' as shown by the stances on the matter by Masters and Johnson (1966), by Kaplan (1974), and by the 3rd, 4th and 5th editions of the DSM (APA, 1987; 2000; 2013) (Basson, 2000; Meana, 2010; Tiefer, 1991, 2001; Wood, Mansfield & Koch, 2006).

It has also been claimed that persistent theorising that women do not express, report or exhibit as much sexual desire as men, is misleading due to the periodicy of women's desire, and the belief that when women do desire it is believed to be at the same level of intensity as that experienced by men (Wallen, 1995). Tiefer (2001) and Leiblum (2002)

argue that the gap may be narrowing as women gain freedom and political, social, economic and reproductive rights.

Beyond the extent to which gendered differences are biologically determined, adaptive or a by-product of social suppression, low desire in particular remains a significant concern in sexual health literature (Carpenter & DeLatamer, 2012). Meana (2010) attempts to reconcile these debates, pinpointing four 'erroneous structural assumptions' in relation to these gendered differences – as exposed above – and more specifically to the male analog: "first, it assumes that sexual desire is a spontaneous urge to engage in sexual activity. Second, it assumes linearity in the sexual response, with desire as the starting point and orgasm as the end point. Third, it ignores the relational context that envelopes sexual interactions. Fourth, it ignores the socioeconomic and political forces that might shape and inhibit the experience and expression of women's sexual desire and behaviour" (p. 10).

She states that "revisions to a reductionist view of women's sexual desire as a pure drive divorced from its relational and social context are long overdue". She however cautions over-corrections which may "caricaturize both male and female sexual desire with the former portrayed as an unshakable, appetitive drive with a near exclusive penchant for novelty and anonymity, and the latter as a fragile intrapsychic and interpersonal phenomenon requiring a delicate calibration of love, intimacy, and multiple other prerequisites" (Meana, 2010, p. 106).

Female sexual interest/arousal disorder: A case study

The aforementioned understandings of female sexual desire can be further explored through the consideration of the psychiatric development of female sexual desire disorders.

The psychiatric diagnosis of low sexual desire in women evolved in light of evolving theoretical and empirical findings. This inclusion remains highly controversial (Segraves, Balon & Clayton, 2017). Firstly, as has been articulated above, the current understanding of the aetiology, mechanisms, and development of desire in women is poor. Secondly, high prevalence of low desire, more often than not without clinical distress, coupled with developmental considerations, suggest it may be, in many cases, a non-pathological experience (Zilbergeld & Ellison, 1980). Thirdly, as with the diagnosis of homosexuality, extraneous factors such as cultural norms and academic trends may have influenced the decision of including this diagnosis in the manual (Moynihan, 2003). Fourthly, its inclusion has possible negative consequences, such as discrimination, lifelong sexual desire/arousal expectations, and sick role performance. These consequences are aggravated by the offer of a new drug as treatment, which appears to have been developed, to a large extent, for political and economic reasons. At present, both diagnosis and medicalisation of low desire seem dangerously rushed.

DSM-5 and its controversies

The DSM-5 *(APA, 2003)* is the handbook currently utilised for diagnosing mental illness worldwide. It was first published in 1952, being often revised in the light of compelling new perspectives, knowledge and evidence. It has increasingly become evidence-based. Published studies regarding each one of its entries are taken into account, assessed, and utilised for clarifying, subtracting, or adding new disorders and/or their symptoms. Retractions from the handbook in new editions translate a turning point about the disease or its symptoms, indicating a consensus was reached about the inaccuracy, irrelevance, or lack of validity and reliability of a specific symptom or diagnosis.

Psychiatrists are gate-keepers of society's attitudes toward deviant vs. non-deviant and normal vs. pathological behaviour. Hence, the impact

of these changes extends beyond clinical and scientific areas, as diagnosis is also informed by social values. An example is homosexuality, which was regarded as a sexual perversion and treated accordingly long before the appearance of the first DSM. The diagnosis of homosexuality was dropped from the handbook in 1973, after great controversy, and substituted by the diagnosis of "ego-dystonic homosexuality" (unwanted same-sex sexual arousal). This change implicated that only some homosexuals had a sexual orientation disturbance, was instigated by gay activists, and expected to improve the social rights of homosexuals (Rubinstein, 1995; Silverstein, 2009). Further revisions led to the exclusion of this diagnosis as well, partly because the DSM considered that negative social attitudes regarding homosexuality were generally internalised. Thus, it was 'natural' to question and reject one's own homosexuality and most, if not every homosexual could be diagnosed, at least at some point of their development, as ego-dystonic.

These changes partly reflect how homosexuality increasingly became accepted by society. Presently, being homosexual is regarded as more 'normal' than it was, both socially and medically. Stigma and discrimination may still arise, but with less support from institutional power. Since censorship is less active or socially supported, homosexuals become less likely to internalise discriminatory attitudes and experience their condition as ego-dystonic or psychologically distressing – which is a critical diagnostic criterion for most psychiatric diagnoses.

This controversy shows the close inter-relation that exists between mainstream cultural and social attitudes and values, medical views on which constitutes a disease, and people's self-image, psychological state and well-being. There are multiple medical and non-medical reasons for including or not some psychological condition in psychiatric manuals, as there are great consequences to doing so, including stigma and discrimination. Being medicalised further reinforces the negative

effects of such inclusion. That is, sociological, political, economic, medical, psychologic, and biological aspects should be taken into consideration when establishing an entry in the DSM.

The evolution of the female sexual interest/arousal disorder diagnosis

Low or lack of sexual desire in women is regarded as a mental disorder - at least since the publication of the first DSM, where it appeared under the classification of 'frigidity'. In the DSM-4, this diagnosis was substituted by the 'hypoactive sexual desire disorder' category (IsHak & Tobia, 2013). It amounted to a psychophysiological autonomic and visceral disorder, developed in the footsteps of Masters and Johnson (1966) and Kaplan's (1974) sexuality model (as discussed earlier). Its stages were greatly characterised via physiological and anatomical aspects. For example, vaginal lubrication was one the main features of the sexual arousal stage – and hence its lack became a symptom of the disorder.

Evidence revised by the DSM-5 suggested that particularly women's sexual response did not linearly follow the sexuality model proposed by Masters, Johnson, and Kaplan (Basson et al., 2004; Frost & Donovan, 2015; IsHak & Tobia, 2013). In part, this occurred due to mounting evidence suggesting that the distinction between desire and arousal was artificial, as experiencing sexual desire did not necessarily translate into sexual activity. Women seem to be satisfied by simply feeling desire, and as already mentioned, frequently engage in sexual activity for emotional, relationship-related aspects than for sexual, reproductive of sexual release reasons (Frost & Donovan, 2015; Tiefer, 2002). Furthermore, criticism had been made to past versions of the diagnosis for its lack of utility, specified duration, and multiple defining symptoms.

For these reasons, the DSM-5 merged the lack of female sexual desire and arousal into one single disorder, named *female sexual interest/arousal disorder*. This diagnosis is to be attributed in the presence of clinical distress that persists for longer than six months (Frost &

Donovan, 2015). Women who are not upset by their lack of desire may have a sexual dysfunction but not a disorder.

Low desire as an arguably normal experience

Teifer (2002) posits that social changes have allowed women's sexual emancipation to progress in terms of "age of sexual debut, number of partners, and entitlement to sexual satisfaction" (p. 197). She, alongside several other sexologists, seek to further progress such emancipation. These efforts point toward the existence of greater expectations for women to be sexually active. Yet, these expectations would benefit from being refrained not to fall in the polar opposite. There are risks associated with the increase of sexual activity, principally in the absence of adequate sexual education. In addition, if low desire is found to be normal, at least in certain circumstances, a lifelong continuous state of sexual desire in women should neither be expected nor instigated by psychiatric gate keepers.

Basson et al. (2004, p.43) remarked that, "in any definition of desire disorder in women, account must be taken of normative changes across the lifecycle and with relationship duration". This recommendation and associated evidence were disregarded by the DSM-5. This is perhaps because the normal lifespan development of the quality and intensity of women's sexual desire is poorly understood, lacks sufficient empirical supportive evidence, and/or is a socially inconvenient truth. Nevertheless, evidence suggesting that low desire may be, in many cases, a normal experience, does exist.

Namely, low desire has a prevalence set around 36-39%, and distressed low desire of around 8-10% (Shifren, Monz, Russo, Segretti & Johannes, 2008; West et. al., 2008) - both greater than most, if not all the disorders listed in the DSM (Frost & Donovan, 2015). The incidence of distress could justify the inclusion of female sexual desire/arousal disorder in the DSM. Although it is important to understand the reasons behind distressed low

desire prevalence data. The overall findings suggest that, for most women, low desire seems to be regarded as a non-upsetting, natural or normal experience - not as a psychiatric condition meriting an entry in the DSM.

Fugl-Meyer and Fugl-Meyer (2003) found that "arousal, lubrication and orgasm were poor predictors of sexual distress", and that sexual distress was more often than not associated with low emotional wellbeing and relationship issues.

Evidence further suggests that both sexual desire and associated distress decrease with age (Frost & Donovan, 2015). It is possible that older women do not expect to be as sexually aroused as they were in their youth and that their expectations minimise their distress. Expectations can be easily shaped through, for example, dominant media representations or sexual education programs (Tiefer, 2002).

Additional factors identified by Frost and Donovan (2015) as predictive or positively associated with low desire can be organised into the following categories: developmental and age-related (menstrual cycle stage, pregnancy, pill use, menopause, and having had children), health status-related (sexually transmitted diseases, poor health and health concerns,) psychological (low self-esteem, negative body image, depressive and anxiety symptoms), and relational (relationship duration, satisfaction with partner, sexual included, and *low expectations about future relationship*s). The latter italicised factor clearly demonstrates the importance of expectations in the experience of sexual desire. Regarding this matter, Nicolson & Burr (2003) argue that the sexology literature has been based on an arbitrary standard which women use to refer to their sexual desire. Without assumptions of normative 'healthy' levels of desire, perhaps fewer women would report low desire. These same authors posit that sexology's focus on sexual

fulfilment has had the undue consequence of pathologising non-orgasmic sexual experiences.

Such research further supports the notion that experience and/or sexual information, both critical for the formation of expectations, could be used to help women expect a certain desire fluctuation, if only due to their age, menstrual cycle's phase, or their fertility status. That which is regarded as normal by society, and by women themselves, is less likely to be experienced as a cause for concern. Hence, their (clinical) distress could perhaps be minimised.

To an extreme, as stated by Frost and Donovan (2015, p. 343), these desire fluctuations may even be '*adaptive*'. For example, it has been found that the greater the number of children the lower the sexual desire (even perhaps for longer than six months, which is the cut-off time for it to become a disorder). These women might have evolutionary gains by investing in offspring rearing rather than in further procreation (Symons, 1979). Similarly, older women, who more likely have non-healthy children, might have evolutionary gains in refraining to do so. That is, there may be instances wherein low desire may be a normal, non-pathological, and even adaptive state.

Medicalising female sexuality

Presently, absence of or low sexual desire in women is not only a disorder as it can be medicalised – despite the aetiology of/mechanisms behind low desire being yet to be fully understood (Frost & Donovan, 2015). *Flibanserin,* a serotonin 1A receptor agonist and a serotonin 2A receptor antagonist, is the first U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved treatment for such disorder. The mechanisms through which it increases desire and arousal are also yet to be discovered. The FDA further recommends medicalisation for when the disorder is acquired, rather than circumscribed to particular situations, and specifies a target group: women undergoing menopause.

Beyond possible interactions with other drugs, *Flibanserin* should not be described when there is low blood pressure; a history of alcoholism or drug addiction; liver disease; a history of depression or mental illness; or for alcohol users. The interaction with alcohol is so dangerous that the FDA demands prescribers and providers (e.g., physicians and pharmacies) to be certified via a risk evaluation and mitigation strategy training program. Prescribers should also request informed consent from their patients. The FDA further requests the performance of three additional randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled clinical trials, although some had already been conducted to see the drug approved. This was perhaps because women in past trials had an average age of 36 years (that is, were far below the average menopause age, which is 51 years-old) and only 10% reported more sexual satisfaction and desire and less sexual distress. That is, the drug acts in unknown ways, can have serious side effects, was not tested in the target group, and was relatively ineffective.

Medicalisation (and over-medicalisation), or the allocation and treatment of psychosocial behaviours and experiences (such as low sexual desire) to categories of medical expertise, is neither a new medical trend, nor necessary, and generally detrimental (Tiefer, 1996; 2001). For example, presently, in many Western societies, drug addicts who are caught stealing may be regarded not as law offenders, anti-socials and criminals, but as sick. This illustrates a perspective shift on addiction from being a form of deviant behaviour to being a disease, a shift that set in motion a series of preventive programs to address addiction from a biopsychosocial perspective. In this sense, as Tiefer (1996) argues, some humanisation of deviant behaviour can take place as a consequence of medicalisation. Yet, considering low desire a form of deviant behaviour is quite controversial if not plain wrong from a developmental perspective (Wood, Koch & Mansfield, 2006).

Furthermore, women, being diagnosed a desire disorder, may enter the sick role. Functionalist sociologists like Parsons (1951) would claim that they would then not be required to engage with their (expected or present) social roles, such as working, taking care of their family, or behaving in a particular way when in a social event. Rather, they would be expected to seek help, gather medical opinion and support, and address their pathological problems. Only after regaining a healthy status, would they be expected to return to the performance of their (expected or present) social roles. That is, being labelled 'sick' frees individuals from their socially-inflicted responsibilities, and engages them with treatment-related responsibilities. The consequences of being labelled sick could thus not only disengage women from sustaining their normal sexuality-related and other social roles as it also clashes with findings that show how health concerns and health problems diminish sexual desire (Working Group on a New View of Women's Sexual Problems, (WGNVWSP), 2000). That is, the diagnosis could worsen their condition.

Moynihan's (2003, p.45) description of the history of the medicalisation of female sexuality further highlights ethical academic issues:

> "A cohort of researcher's with close ties to drug companies are working with colleagues in the pharmaceutical industry to develop and define a new category of human illness at meetings heavily sponsored by companies racing to develop new drugs. (…) To build similar markets [to Viagra's] for drugs among women, companies first require a clearly defined medical diagnosis with measurable characteristics to facilitate credible clinical trials. Over the past six years the pharmaceutical industry has funded, and its representatives have in some cases attended, a series of meetings to come up with just such a definition".

Moynihan acknowledges the present lack of academic consensus about women's low desire, and describes how non-medical reasons and social forces have instigated the creation of a "new category of human illness" concerned with women's low desire. The creation or "making", as Moynihan describes it, of a consumer's need speaks of the will to, or at least the possibility of, over-medicalising. Something which could be normal (low desire in women), at least in some instances, is being problematised for mainly economic and political reasons by those linked to the pharmaceutical industry to the extent that "difficulties become dysfunctions become disease" (p. 46).

In conclusion, the literature acknowledges a certain lack of knowledge about both low sexual desire (aetiology, mechanisms, and development) and *Flibanserin* (mechanisms and effects). Additionally, diagnosing and medicalising female desire disorders both have great known, or at least possible, negative consequence. We would perhaps benefit from slowing down and deepening our biopsychosocial knowledge about the condition, then the drug, and only then diagnose and medicalise a disorder. As it is, pathologising women's low sexual desire seems hurried and ethically questionable.

Moving female sexual desire research forward

The literature reviewed highlights the complexity of women's sexual desire, and evidences a "clash of different theories and political positions" (Meana, 2010, p. 116). This multitude of stances can lead to confusion, especially for 'real-world women' who may be differently influenced by the politisation, economisation, and medicalisation of sexual desire. As the WGNVWSP (2000) argue neither socio-political (which may harm on self-awareness and psychological levels) – nor

medical research (which may marginalise) – can provide an adequate answer to sexual desire as experienced by women. Empirical research also has its limitations, as evidenced in the above case study (Cosgrove, Pearrow, & Anaya, 2008). Nevertheless, empirical research can balance itself through the refinement of socio-political approaches and by taking into better account the social context within which sexual desire operates (Berger & Luckman, 1966). The task of empirical research being then to bring facticity to the foreground without reducing or dismissing socio-cultural evolution.

Teifer (2009) is critical of approaching sexuality with a solely empirical lens, claiming that instead of approaching it like one would digestion (emphasising 'normal' and 'healthy'), we should rather approach it as one would art. She highlights that there is no such thing as 'normal' and 'healthy' painting or dance, but that both can be subject to rigorous processes of analysis. Her metaphor communicates mainstream sexology's emphasis on function to the near exclusion of other essential aspects of sexuality.

She highlights, for example, the lack of consideration of eroticism, "a pleasure-driven phenomenon with no end other than itself" and "no function per se" (Meana, 2010, p. 118), as an aspect of sexual desire unexplained by biomedical understandings. For example, Kleinplatz (2010) highlights eroticism's hedonistic aspect, and relates it to the bonus of having access to the interiority of the Other, which opens up to the possibility of accepting the risk of extreme closeness. Bataille (1986) however, focused on the rebellious aspect of eroticism linking it to the concept of transgression, the undoing the societal bounds. Furthermore, Morin (1995) enhances the transgressional aspect by placing it within a relational and existential context. Perel (2006) related the apparently essential character of violating norms to intimacy and showed how the latter can contain the former. Heiman (1977) however, points in her study

out that transgression does not constitute an absolute norm. Such research indicates the value of a broad non-empirical spectre of understanding of sexual desire.

What we can draw from this that by focusing on non-medical phenomena such as eroticism, the individuality of sexual desire can be better highlighted. Based on this the author argues for a shift from the purely medical understanding of sexual desire towards an inclusive approach that takes the diversity of sexual manifestations into account. Psychology would "better serve both men and women if it placed a little more emphasis on a construct that has pleasure rather than satiety at its heart" (Meana, 2010, p. 119).

In addition to under-explored aspects, few studies look at multiple generations of women or how explore life-course transitions impact women's sexuality. Carpenter and DeLamater (2012) point out the need for such evaluations of women's sexuality, given that an individual's sense of sexuality is developed over time in response to both positive and negative experiences as well as the acceptance or rejection of cultural scripts (patterns of interaction to a specific culture) (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004). The majority of life course examinations are restricted to specific stages such as marriage (Elliot & Umberson, 2008) and pregnancy or childbirth (Ahlborg, Dahlof & Hallberg, 2005); specific transitions such as virginity loss (Carpenter, 2005) or menopause (Dillaway, 2012) or significant experiences such as contracting a sexually transmitted disease (Nack, 2008). Alternatively, they are presented in self-help format (Ellison, 2000) or guides for counselling professionals (Daniluk, 1998).

Validation of women's sexual desire and right to pleasure was also scant in the literature, as was a lack of language communicating their experiential yearning for sex – indicating reinforcement of their status as primarily sexual objects (Kleinplatz, 2013) and binding women's sexuality

to heterosexual relationships (Rutter and Schwartz, 2012). Therefore, the notion of 'sexual subjectivity' becomes important (Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat & Boislard, 2011). Most studies on sexual subjectivity address adolescent sexual development (Schalet, 2009), and indicate that girls and young women are often objectified in early sexual experiences, and even though some may feel sexual desire, they are often passive in sexual situations and judged when they are sexually assertive (Tolman, 2002). For example, in an exploration of adolescent interview data, Karin Martin (2006) found that "as girls reach puberty and enter the new realm of adult sexuality, they feel ambivalent about growing up and anxious about their new bodies and desires. Because female sexuality in our culture is associated with dirt, shame, taboo, and danger, girls are scared and unsure of their desire. They rarely take pleasure in and often feel that they are not in control of their bodies" (p. 11). Here, social context is understood as a predominant a factor in shaping women's experiences of sexual desire, as well as in maintaining the existence of gendered differences (Minichiello & Plummer, 2004).

To summarise, the literature evidences that empirical understandings of desire are insufficient due to the inconsistency of their conceptualisation and lack of contextual consideration. Sociological explanations are missing key understandings such as changes over the life-course, embodiment and women's subject/object relationship to their sexual desire. These considerations demand a reconceptualisation of women's sexual desire to include a descriptive depiction of women's day to day experiences, and to bring to light socio-cultural mechanisms such as the formation of sexual bounds and the influence of norms (Tolman, 1994; Wood, Mansfield, & Koch, 2007). In addition, much needed critical reflection within academia is needed to address erroneous assumptions underlying cognitive, biological and behavioural referents and their questionable applications.

Part II: Research philosophy and processes

Figure 2: Marbling 1 (reflexive practice)

Introduction

This section details the research philosophy (methodology), processes (method) and ethical considerations of this study.

Methodology

The philosophy and methodology underlying this study is hermeneutic phenomenology. Given the depth of comprehension required to perform hermeneutic phenomenological research, this section will first describe a brief history of the phenomenological movement. Hermeneutic phenomenological principles will then be applied to this research endeavour, exploring how its underlying meta-theoretical assumptions articulate knowledge and reality of sexual desire. Finally, the author will argue for the relevance of hermeneutic phenomenology within the discipline of psychology.

Qualitative research

The selection of a methodology for the study began with the acknowledgement that research is guided by a set of beliefs around the 'doing of research' (Gadamer, 2004). Earlier research methods on sexual desire were primarily based on observation and experiment, believed to distance the researcher from the phenomena of interest to enable 'objectivity' (Ratner, 2002). However, as discussed in the aforementioned sections the complexity of human behaviour is not always amenable to such methods, and researcher's began seeking alternative ways of explaining social phenomena, spawning the development of qualitative research methods.

Qualitative research methods, such as those used in this study, are based on the relativity of knowledge, and offer what Bailey (1997) describes as "a multidimensional approach to understanding human behaviour" (p. 18). Over time, diversification of methods across a myriad of fields (philosophy, sociology, anthropology, etc.) further developed methodological traditions away from the traditional positivist laboratory worldview (Ramos, 1989). Qualitative methods therefore moved into the realm of socially constructed interactive processes between the researcher and participant, where the research aim was reconstruction of the interpreted meaning of phenomena (Bailey, 1997). It was this commitment to an inter-subjective process between the researcher and participant that influenced the selection of the study's methodology and methods.

Hermeneutic phenomenology

Definitions

'*Hermeneutics*' can be understood as the philosophy and methodology of text interpretation (Ricoeur, 1981). Ferraris (1996) further defines it as "the art of interpretation as transformation" and positions it as diametric to the view of theory as "contemplation of eternal essences unalterable by their observer" (p. 1). Hermeneutics seeks to go beyond an explanatory analysis to *understand* rather than to reduce phenomena to object and thus imposing its authority on it. As Jardine (1992) states: "its goal to educe understanding, to bring forth the presuppositions in which we already live. Its task, therefore, is not to methodically achieve a relationship to some matter and to secure understanding in such a method. Rather, its task is to recollect the contours and textures of the life we are already living, a life that is not secured by the methods we can wield to render such a life our object" (p. 116).

'*Phenomenology*' is also not only a philosophical movement but also a methodology pertaining to a descriptive investigation of the structures of experience and consciousness (Laverty, 2003). At its most rudimentary level, phenomenology as a research process can be understood as the study of the nature and meaning of phenomena (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Here, the emphasis is on understanding how we experience the world through our consciousness. As a discipline, it "aims to focus on people's perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them; a focus on peoples lived experience" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 4).

Combined, *hermeneutic phenomenology* can be understood as an approach, which seeks to uncover meaning lying latent within the manifesting phenomena/experience, a perspective that highlights the importance of interpretation in deepening our understanding (Grbich, 2007). Scholarly traditions vary, but as highlighted by Berrios (1989), share a set of philosophical assumptions around reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) – and agreed "strategies for the descriptive management of mental entities relating to such a world" (p. 425). Philosophers of this persuasion see experiential essences as the most valid reconstruction of reality.

As a research practice, this approach aims to "produce rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of us all collectively" (Smith, 1997, p. 80). This is done by illuminating taken-for-granted aspects of being-in-the-world (Van Manen, 1996).

The genesis of phenomenology

As already mentioned, phenomenology is not a unilateral philosophical approach but something that has shifted and evolved over time. Its roots of multiple truths extend back to Descartes (1596-1650) who first postulated the existence of dualism (Skirry, 2006). Kant

(1724-1804) and Hegel (1770-1831) also wrote of the existence of multiple perceptions of realities (Wachterhauser, 1986). However, even though phenomenology finds inspiration in the critical methods of Descartes, Kant and Hegel, it nevertheless seeks to overcome dualism by overturning the rigid subject-object epistemic relations.

Developing from these early philosophical musings, and inspired by their strict critical and sceptical methods, phenomenology was given theoretical shape by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). The basic premise of this school of thought is that through suspending personal prejudices in a process of reduction we can attempt to reach into the essence of consciousness. This approach aligns with positivism in that it supports the existence of a singular reality. To grasp at this reality, proponents of this style of phenomenology employ bracketing (i.e. the suspension of subjective beliefs and presuppositions, to reduce personal opinion) (Ricoeur, 1967).

The evolution of hermeneutic phenomenology

An academic disciple, Heidegger (1889-1976) sharply departed from Husserlian phenomenology by rejecting the notion of being able to compartmentalise and suspend personal opinions when describing phenomena. This heralded the integration of interpretive narration (hermeneutics) into the description process, and is the form of hermeneutic phenomenology that guides this study. Here, reduction is deemed illogical, and subjective experience is accepted as legitimate knowledge. This school of thought aims to understand how individuals and groups experience the world, maintains that proximity to truth is best accessed through their own interpretations, and that description in itself is a deeply interpretive process (Heidegger, 1962).

Transitioning from philosophical theory to research

Later scholars such as Gadamar (1967, 2004), Merleu-Ponty (1962) and Van Manen (1996, 1997), fleshed out Heidegger's philosophy and generated a core set of elements related to the methodological application of this school of thought.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) encapsulates phenomenological research as "the study of essences" (p. vii), that is the essential meaning of a phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) adds: "a good [phenomenological] description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way" (p. 39).

Van Manen (1990; 1997) provides a comprehensive coverage of hermeneutic phenomenological research practices. He emphasises the use of anecdotal narrative to provide adherence to the life world of participants. He differentiates between philosophical phenomenology and 'engaged phenomenology' as a social science endeavour, and encourages researchers to immerse in the philosophy prior to engaging in the pursuit. He advises against what Chamberlain (2000) describes as 'methodolatry', and does not prescribe a step-by-step method but rather an all-encompassing interplay between "commitment to abiding concern, oriented stance toward the question, investigating the experience as it is lived, describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, and consideration of both the part and the whole" (Kafle, 2013, p. 191).

Applying philosophy to the current study

This section will explore how the philosophy and research practices of hermeneutic phenomenology informed this study.

Epistemology

This study seeks to understand and reconstruct participant life experience and knowledge of the phenomena of sexual desire (Laverty, 2003). In order to accomplish this, it shall focus on the 'dasein' of the participants, which stands for the receival of meaning from ones situatedness as being-in-the-world. The understanding of 'dasein' relies on the descriptive analysis of mundane life experiences (Laverty, 2003).

Distancing itself from objectivism/rationalism and social constructionism, and relying on the purely descriptive and epistemological inquiry of the subject's psychological experience, this approach acknowledges the subject as a product of social-construction, who also brings her agency to light through interactions with her environment (Martin & Sugarman, 2001). This is an ongoing process through which she continues to interact and to be further influenced by her situated context. (Martin & Sugarman, 2001). This breaks away from the dualism of mind/body and self/world relations, and considers the totality of a woman's life experience from her own "socio- culturally embedded, practical, agentic, moral, and at least potentially political" perspective (Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003, p. 142).

In this regard, human consciousness is understood as the interplay through which it is simultaneously both shaper of itself and the world, as well as shaped by itself and the world (Hacking, 1995). From this multi-dimensional perspective, sexual desire becomes fluidised as a continuous process of 'indissoluble' co-construction between self and world (Munhall, 1989).

Consistent with this methodology, hermeneutical phenomenology looks for meaning in our everyday factual life as agents, and

42

distances itself from the preponderance of abstract, uninterpreted data (Annells, 2006). Furthermore, unlike an empiricist reduction of experience to its sensory components or measurable parts, hermeneutical phenomenology considers the best source of knowledge of female sexual desire as coming from understanding the stream of consciousness of one living that experience (Laverty, 2003).

This understanding does not consist of a procedure, but rather of a clarification of the "interpretive conditions in which understanding takes place" (Kinsella, 2006, p. 9). Gadamer (2004) refers to this as a 'fusion of horizons' – where the raw experimental data from the participant is interpreted through the lens of the researcher. Weinsheimer (1985) highlights this dialectal play, stating "there is a birth and a growth of something reducible to neither the interpreter, or the, text, nor their conjunction" (p. 251). In order for this to occur, the researcher needs to be keenly attuned to their prejudices, and to accept the partiality of their comprehension and understanding. The researcher brings her own understanding to the interpretation of the text, and this horizon is always in the process of formation in filtering the significance of information (Weinsheimer, 1985).

This study considers that "psychological events...are multiply determined, ambiguous in their human meaning, polymorphous, contextually environed or embedded in complex and vaguely bounded ways, evanescent and labile in the extreme" (Koch, 1999, p. 415). The positivist pursuit to simplify or reduce participant experience of sexual desire to causality is therefore rejected (Annells, 2006). Instead, I seek to bring sexual desire within an extended horizon of phenomenality through the deepening of the understanding of said phenomenon as experienced by a small number of participants (Packer & Addison, 1989).

Given that meaning ascribed to something is relative to the ascribing agent, participant actions shall be considered ambiguous. Furthermore, as Packer (1985) points out, an individual may not necessarily be aware of the meaningfulness of her actions, which brings to our attention the role hermeneutics (interpretive) and phenomenology (lived experience) play in deciphering individual meaning. More precisely, hermeneutic phenomenology formalises in a methodological format, what we as humans experience every day and what we unconsciously interpret and adjust ourselves to as experiencing agents.

This study also assumes the plurality of meaning in human action, which is derived from the situatedness – personal, bodily, and cultural – of our actions (Packer & Addison, 1989).   Given that we do not have immediate access to the lived experience of participant's and therefore their individual meaning making, I will try to bridge this gap by bringing my own personal understandings of sensibility to my interpretation. Furthermore, observing and experiencing participant art creations alone may not provide meaning – as the artist is involved in and aware of her context and actions (Laverty, 2003). This study hopes to elude this ambiguity through triangulation.

Hermeneutic understanding is seen as a conversation between text and self, where the researcher is a translator who gives intonation to the text: "translation, like all interpretation is a highlighting" (Gadamer, 1996, p. 386). This highlights the multiplicity of interpretation. Bakhtin (1981) characterises this dialogue as a 'polyphony of voices' rather than a 'monologic voice'. This study also accepts that all interpretation is contextually located. Greene (1995) asserts that "once we accept the notion of vantage point, we become aware that no one has a total vision from any place in the world" (p. 18). This highlights the partiality of knowledge. In this regard, the perceptive and experiential situatedness of the

researcher (historically and culturally) shall act as the interpretative key for texts.

The participant is active in the knowledge production process, as she is one who possesses the capacity of understanding (Laverty, 2003). Her self-knowledge is then interpreted from the viewpoint of the researcher, who constructs her interpretative case based on her own capacity to know (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This stems from the experiential phenomenality of observing itself, which yields knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1989). This brings to light the artificiality of traditional scientific approaches based on subject-object relations, and shifts the researcher/participant relationship from observation to understanding.

Ontology

Ontologically, the facticity of participant lives grounds our study by limiting possibility of their actions to their situatedness within a specific social environment. Practically this constrains the sensibility of their meaning making of sexual desire (Martin & Sugarman, 2001). While it is acknowledged that we are constituted within interconnected multiple realities, this facticity possesses the potential of being instrumentalised for the sake of reaching one's goals. Human kinds, such as the participants of this study, are observed as real subjects immersed in their own reality (Martin & Sugarman, 2001).

Language

Text will act as the primarily object of interpretation for this study, through which we hope to gain access to the meaning of participants taken-for-granted worlds. Here, participant human action (cultural activity) will be viewed outside of its causal or logical determinations and instead regarded as textural experience, and as such structurally semantic (Packer, 1985). 'Semantic' – as understood

within linguistics - refers to the meaningfulness of language. By applying it to human action we grasp a deeper understanding of said action and of its intention and meaning, without subduing it to theoretically based premises (Packer, 1985). Thus, this study shares the hermeneutic phenomenological view, according to which the experience of sexual desire, which exists prior to its transmission in communication, can only be approached only by interpreting this textual representation (Van Manen, 1990). Within the study 'text' includes verbal, written, visual and embodied art.

"Language and history" are considered by Kinsella (2006) as "both conditions and limitations" to hermeneutic understanding (p. 24). Wachterhauser (1986) reminds us that we are always constrained by our ability to linguistically represent our internal worlds, and that those worlds are a by-product of our historically situated concerns and practices. This historicality of understanding is an important consideration in recognising the influence of prejudice, as all humans are theory laden (Green, 1995). As for language, Gadamer (1996) states that "language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting" (p. 389).

Analysis

A thematic analysis (informed by the above philosophical principles) has been used to identify patterns of meaning across participant data in order to answer the research question. Patterns were identified "through a rigorous cyclical process of data familiarisation, coding, theme development and revision" (Judger, 2016, p. 3). The analysis was inductive, reflecting the hermeneutic phenomenological emphasis on openness (Gadamer, 1997).

As part of the analytical process, the researcher continually engaged in the hermeneutic circle, with the intention of understanding "a totality of meaning in all its relations" (Gadamer, 1997, p. 471).

Preconceptions and projections were examined and reviewed in respect to participant data, and data was viewed as "the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole" (p. 291). As Bontekoe (1996) states: "the object of comprehension, taken as a whole, is understood in terms of its parts, and … this understanding involves the recognition of how these parts are *integrated* into the whole" (p.3). The two poles of 'part' and 'whole' determine and both clarify each other (Bontekoe, 1996). This cyclical process enables the researcher to go "beyond what is directly given" (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 712), to read between the lines (Odman, 1988) and to pay attention to what has been omitted or taken for granted.

Relevance to the field

Hermeneutic phenomenology offers an alternative to the objectifying and pathologising of women's sexuality in objectivist studies (Kleinplatz, 2001). It does this by going beyond language and addressing non-verbal phenomena such as silence (Kyale, 1996), embodiment, and materiality (Runswick-Cole, 2011). As such, hermeneutic phenomenology considers – through its descriptive method – phenomena neglected until now by methodologies focusing on social construction (Kvale, 1996).

In many qualitative methods, there often exists an underlying scientism. Here, human experience is often implicitly understood as part of a "causal nexus", or set of variables within the world (Ashworth & Cheung, 2006, p. 1). However, as everyday phenomenality – not explained by positivistic views – shows, interpretative methods and their potentiality call for more attention.

Kinsella (2006) argues that all qualitative inquiry, is by nature hermeneutic (often unacknowledged), and that explicitly engaging

in the tradition of hermeneutic scholarship can "enrich, substantiate and make explicit assumptions about interpretation and understanding that are central to qualitative research" (p. 1).

Gadamer (1990) writes "and yet, over against the whole of our civilisation that is founded on modern science, we must ask repeatedly if something has not been omitted" (p. 153). That which has been neglected is the project of hermeneutic thought, as well as qualitative research more generally. Based on this, hermeneutic phenomenology can further ground and enrich qualitative research on a conceptual level.

Sampling

Participants were selected based on the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, in that they were living the experience of focus of this study (Polkinghorne, 1989). More precisely, seven heterosexual New Zealand women ranging in age from 25 - 59 were selected through a variety of means (social media, newspaper advert, flyer). They were chosen based on their unique contributions to the topic. This sampling method was used because hermeneutic phenomenology does not focus on a broad spectrum and quantity of data (breadth) but on understanding the hidden layers of an experience (depth). As such this study is not oriented towards developing predictive models, which requires large and randomly selected samples Merriam, 2009).

Method

This section details the study's data collection methods including a rationale for their use and a description of how they were

implemented in accordance with underlying meta-theoretical principles. The study included two methods of participant data collection (semi structured interviews and exploratory arts projects) and two methods of researcher reflexive activity (ongoing reflexive art and reflexive writing practices).

Hermeneutic process

The hermeneutic phenomenological research approach is often criticised for being conceptually elusive, however Gadamer (1992) highlights that "hermeneutics is a protection against abuse of method, not against methodicalness in general" (p. 70). An outline of the research can be found below, and is discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

1.   *Orienting to the Phenomena*

2.   *Data collection*

       A.   Entering into Dialogue:

- *Interview one*

- *Interview two*

       B.   Deepening in understanding:

- *Art project*

3.   *Transcription/art-work processing*

4.   *Thematic analysis process*

Orienting to the phenomena

As has already been highlighted, Hermeneutic phenomenology is not so much a 'doing', but a state of mind (Gadamer, 1997). Therefore, the first step in this study was to orient myself to the

phenomena (Van Manen, 1990). Practically, this involved reading widely and extensively about hermeneutic phenomenology and female sexual desire, as well as keeping a journal of my own musings and preconceptions throughout the research process.

Entering into dialogue: Interviews

Participants were interviewed one-on-one twice, approximately four weeks apart. In line with Odman's (1998) view that "hermeneutic phenomenological research involves entering into a dialogue while maintaining a stance of openness" (p. 67), interviews were semi-structured and took the form of open-ended questions. The semi-structured interview has been proposed by Morse and Field (1996) as a middle ground between obtaining the required information and providing participants with the freedom of describing their experience using their own terms.

The first interview was largely exploratory, with questions such as "can you tell me about your early sexual experiences?" or "tell me about your sexual experiences postpartum?" A second one-to-two hour interview was conducted with each participant a few weeks later, with the aims of clarifying any unclear statements from the first interview, discussing emerging themes, and eliciting information from the art task (which was completed in between). Questions such as "can you please tell me about your artwork?" and "what new insights emerged from this process for you?" were posed.

The style of interviewing used is best understood as an interpersonal medium where both partners participate in an interpretative dialog that opens the way to the meaning of the phenomenon in question (Spradley, 1979). This method focuses on the context of the psychological phenomena, on the empowerment of the participant,

and on the specificity of meaning dependent on the experiencing participant (Merriam, 2009). As per Gadamer's (1960) quote "the art of questioning is the art of questioning further" (p. 372), the researcher viewed her role as maintaining an orientation and openness to the substance of the thing being explored.

Making contact:

Email was used to contact each participant and arrange a mutually convenient date, time and location for each interview to occur. In order to provide a non-hierarchal and natural relationship with participants, the conversation was constructed with an emphasis on trust and involvement (Walker, 2011). For example, questions such as "when will it be convenient to meet with you?" were preferred over question such as "when will it be convenient to conduct the interview?" Smythe, Ironside, Sims, Swenson and Spence (2008) argued that the phenomenological method would be lost, if interviews were approached purely from the perspective of conducting research. This relationship-based method was validated by the involvement of the participants in sharing their intimate experiences.

Considering context:

Nieswiadomy (1998) argues that interview location produces its own social meaning and Herzog (2005) reminds us that interview context might influence findings. Location privacy and appropriateness were therefore considerations when planning interviews. Participants were invited to propose a venue convenient to them. The venues agreed on were at the researcher's home (n=*6*), at the participants home (n=3) and in library meeting room in their hometown (n=2) and remotely

via Skype (n=3). I found that interviews occurring in a home environment were more animated and emotive than those conducted elsewhere, possibly due to the familiarity, safety and privacy provided by the environment.

Eliciting the lived experience:

Each interview began with a general question placing the discussion within the broad context of sexual desire as experienced by the participant (Spradley, 1979). Often the question posed confronted the participant with the task of recounting a particular experience, which aligns itself to the method of interviewing in phenomenology (McCance, & Mcilfatrick 2008). This 'grand tour' questioning was then followed by detail-oriented, and open-ended questions (enabling the participant space and latitude to fully explore their experience), as well as more restrictive closed questions (requiring simple yes or no response) (Spradley, 1979).

The types of data elicited from interview responses include word use, explanations and most importantly, illustrations presented through narratives – as these give us insight into 'dasien'. A driving force of human consciousness is to make sense of experience, and this understanding is often contained in the narratives we tell ourselves and others (Cohen, Khan & Steeves, 2000). These stories are often autobiographical and inherently meaningful to the individual, and provide good sites for grasping at the meaning of human experience.

To access this rich narrative data, the researcher employed what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) refer to as 'narrative construction activation', which included activating or inciting

narratives that evoke the experience of concern. Practically this was done through questions such as "can you tell me about some of your experiences with low desire?" This creates a more conversational 'interactive interviewing style' (Morse and Field, 1996), where information was exchanged freely between researcher and participant and the emphasis was on listening rather than driving the interview in a predetermined direction. Participants were asked experiential questions over abstract ones, to avoid their drawing on popular psychology, religious dogma or other sources (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Furthermore, I made use of prompts to motivate participants to go into more detail regarding a specific topic (Denscombe 2007). This was attained by repetitive questions, rephrasing, requesting examples, or by repeating key terms stated by the participant. Face-to-face interviews offered the possibility of self-evaluation of my interpretative method. Denscombe (2010) argued that "good interviewers are adept at using checks" and that this can be achieved by re-representing "a summary of what they think participants have said" (p. 183).

Once I had identified transcript themes from the first interview, these themes then became objects of reflection in the second interview. More precisely, the interpretation of the meaning regarding the preliminary topics was a collaborative action of both participant and researcher and done with the original phenomenological questions in mind. Repeated interviews helped to develop trust and rapport (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). As such, the adequateness of developing themes was a joint action between the participant and I in the second interview.

Capturing the lived experience

For accuracy sake, the exact words of the interviewee were captured with an audio recorder, which uploaded data directly to a secure cloud. This gave the participant the opportunity to expound her experience in a free flow without interruptions (Holloway & Wheeler 2002). It also allowed me to refrain from taking notes, which in turn allowed for greater levels of concentration and participation. However, notes were necessary for the contextualising of the interviews, and these were compiled at the conclusion of each interview.

Researcher/researched boundaries

Hermeneutic phenomenology accepts the involvement of the researcher's preconceptions in the interviewing process (McCance and Mcilfatrick 2008). On this matter, Davies and Dodd (2002) argue that the researcher has the ethical duty of involving herself in the interview, although caution must be taken to avoid leading or unduly influencing the participant. Care was taken to be a sensitive and responsive researcher through paying attention to participant cues and being non-directive or overly interpretive in my responses (Jackson, Daly & Davidson, 2008).

In accordance to a desired non-hierarchical discussion, professional role differences, such as those between an academic and a lay person, were considered (Grbich 1999). The interview was structured based on the principle of equality, which was put into practice by listening intently, conveying respect and interest in all contributions, and providing feedback concerning the importance of the interviewee to the study.

Ending the interview

Jackson, Daly, and Davidson (2008) highlight the importance of terminating the interview in an appropriate manner. Each participant was thanked for their contribution at the conclusion of the interview and provided with the opportunity to pose further questions or to make concluding remarks. I tried to avoid ending the interview too abruptly. This combined with my highlighting the importance of their participation in the study, and a concluding reflexive phase ended each interview in a positive note. The topic of this study was usually further discussed with participants, even after the audio-recorder had been turned off, which provided a sense of closure or completeness to us both. Discussions revolved around the wishes of the participants to find out more about my research. Keeping with the ethical agreement of participation I chose not to make use of this content and to base interpretation solely on the recorded information.

Psychological safety

This topic has been classified as 'sensitive research' due to the personal nature of sexuality, which may provoke intense emotional states (Cowles, 1988). Thus, I paid attention to cues signalling distress and had written information about possible help that could be provided to participants if needed. This was not required. In terms of my own support for processing the emotive content, this came in the form of systematic debriefing with my supervisor. In practice however, the interviews were scheduled in such a manner, that I was able to reflect upon each one and process the experience through my reflexive practice.

'Art' is understood here as "aesthetic, creative, and imaginative acts" (Davies, & Turpin, 2015, p. 11), which do not only depict something – be it verbally, visually or performatively – but also provide perspective, insight, cognition and meaning (Rosenberg, 1983).

At the conclusion of the first interview, participants were either provided with art supplies of their choice (i.e. coloured pencils, crayons, paint, brushes, collage materials or an A4 canvas board), or money to purchase such items, for the purpose of creating of a piece of art that captured an aspect of their sexual desire that they wished to elaborate on in the second interview. This task was open to interpretation, and participants may have used any materials (provided or otherwise) to construct their artwork. This art was then used along with the transcription and reflective reading and writings of interview one, to inform the second interview.

Methodological relevance

Art-based methodologies such as this enable qualitative researchers to widen the horizon of data collection, and offer a "panoply of valuable lenses" (Weber, 2014, p. 42) for studying the ways in which "participants themselves interpret, give meaning to and make sense of, their experiences" (Ferguson, & Boydell, 2012, p. 38). Such methods expand our knowledge of phenomena by capturing neglected but important ways of constructing meaning through artistic forms of expression. These might be 'ordinary' everyday experiences and events such as masturbation - or those that disrupt and may require the construction of new identities, such as motherhood, abuse or divorce.

Frith, Riley, Archer and Gleeson (2005) highlight that research in this vein is still considered 'fringe science' in mainstream psychological research (Barone & Eisner, 2012). This wariness can largely be attributed to positivistic positioning around the subjectivity and ambiguity of such representations (Harper, 2002), which do not conform with the persistent drive toward objective data representing an accessible reality (Guillemin, 2004). However, Chamberlain (2000) argues that 'methodological pluralism' rather than monism broadens our understanding of human experience.

The term 'arts based research' may appear to some as an oxymoron. Research is the child of empirical science – and art is often conceptualised as something entirely different (Barone & Eisner, 2012). The author however, rejects this assumed dichotomy between art and science, instead aligning with Barone and Eisner's (2012) claim that "science, well done, imaginative in character, sensitive to qualitative variations, and organised according to what aesthetic forms can carry is also the result of artistic judgment" (p. 6). This principle can be broadened to include anything skilfully and sensitively created. Such endeavours are appreciated not only for their practical utility but also for the quality of experience in their consumption. The borders between art and science are therefore malleable and porous (Harper, 2002).

A slightly different perspective is provided by Foucault (1972), who posits that art does not conform with scientific methods but is in itself a source of knowledge. This is a widely accepted view within philosophy, which positions art as grounded in its ability to evoke other modes of knowledge (Dewey, 2005). For example, arts based research uses self-generated imagery to symbolise and depict the mutuality and interdependency of socially and

physically determined aspects of the self (Fox, 2015). This aligns with analytic traditions such as hermeneutics that focus on the visual as forms of text for which an interpretation can be built (Karpf, 1988).

The author is interested in exploring art as a legitimate cognitive medium for scientific understanding. Artistic forms of representation can help capture the ineffable, uncovering aspects of experience that cannot easily be recalled or put into words (Gauntlett, 2007). While verbal, logical and mathematical/scientific thought arranges multiple perspectives on a certain matter in a sequence of separate elements, visual representations have the ability, as Eisner (1995) argues, to depict objects in their "all-at-once-ness" (p. 1). This is particularly useful for bringing to light important elements of phenomenon that we had not thought to observe intentionally. Sexual desire is a complex experience involving many things happening at once. Alternative methods of representation help to capture that complexity and hold it up for inspection (Fox, 2015).

Bagnoli (2009) argues that artistic production also has the ability to condense insights, and to enable participants to control the direction of understanding toward issues that are important/meaningful to them. Harper (2002) refers to this as 'breaking the frame' of experience, in that it is engaging participants in becoming aware of taken for granted aspects of their 'dasein' (Radley et al. 2005).

Guillemin (2004) also cites that individuals have different communication preferences. Discussion of produced artistic representations can aid in eliciting further verbal data by

actualising pre-existing cognitions, fluidising and enriching content of interviews, and aiding in achieving an intersubjective understanding (Harper, 2002).

Furthermore, given the sensitive nature of the topic, it felt appropriate to enable participants to explore their personal understanding in privacy, away from the interviewer's gaze. By eliciting the art-based activity after the first interview, this enabled participant's time to reflect upon the issues being explored alone and in a non-verbal manner. Such non-confrontational activities may help participants to disclose information about sensitive issues and emotional aspects of the phenomena being explored (Bagnoli, 2009).

Radley (2010) argues that art and other non-discursive materials are 'didactive', meaning that experiencing them reveals information beyond their form. As we know a picture is worth a thousand words. Dewey (1958) therefore suggests that art could be seen as a tool of theoretical development (representing and securing perspectives that make understanding possible). However, instead of seeking truth and certainty (which is an arguable phantom of empirical science) art research accepts the inherent subjectivity of knowledge, and argues a case for the communal plausibility of knowledge (Dewey, 1958). Arts based research such as this is intended to open up possibilities rather than to converge upon a single correct and true answer to a question or solution to a problem (Frith, Riley, Archer & Gleeson, 2005).

The argument mounted by Barone and Eisner (2012) is that theory is not limited to "statements or to propositions; it is not

necessarily fettered to the linguistic" (p. 160). It can instead be conceptualised as a 'structure' for the promotion of understanding, or "the enlargement of mind" (Newman, 1976 p. 130). This requires an acknowledgement that communication occurs through a multitude of forms (i.e. auditory, mathematical, linguistic), each with its own unique contribution to understanding (Rosenberg, 1983). Therefore, from this perspective, any enterprise that seeks to promote understanding can be considered a theoretical enterprise.

Inviting audience interpretation

Through visual detail and context, arts-based approaches "show why and how the study of the one can resonate with the lives of many" (Weber & Mitchell, 2004, p. 985). The advantage of art is that it enables empathic experience and places the viewer within the artist's perspective. Thus, experiencing an artistic representation "helps the audience realise how the artist's experience relates to their own, as well as the ways in which it differs" (Weber & Mitchell, 2004, p. 985). This provides the audience with tools for determining the authenticity of said experience and the compatibility to their own concerns and practice. This is best described by Eisner (1995) who writes, "artistically crafted work creates a paradox, revealing what is universal by examining in detail what is particular" (p. 3).

Art also engages a wider public in the research pursuit by soliciting or eliciting reactions (Mitchell, Weber & Pithouse, 2009). An essential aspect of an arts-based approach is that it is at least partially a collective, participatory process: visual art is meant to be displayed and audio is intended for a listening

audience. Arts based studies often constitute a call to action, whether deliberate or incidental, to others who are not the central participants (Weber, 2014). In this way, the feedback and collaboration of viewer/readers is an integral part of the knowledge production process (Weber, 2014).

Embodiment and performance based method

One participant wished to explore the topic through spoken word poetry. Fox (2014) argues that artistic embodied methodologies such as this inject new knowledge - grounded in embodied experience - into academia. In line with the meta-theoretical assumptions of hermeneutic phenomenology, our psyche is constituted within our flesh, connecting to the world through bodily functions (Martin & Sugarman, 2001). Performance based methods takes this mixture into consideration by incorporating physicality and voice in research, enabling an in-depth analysis of sexual desire as an embodied experience.

Phenomenology regards embodiment as a conditioning of the relation to the world, and as such, a process of construction of meanings. Therefore, embodiment shouldn't be understood as a purely formal 'acting-out' of information. (McNiff, 1998). Fox (2015) highlights that "art happens when an artistic embodied interpretation of a story or idea – no matter how abstract, fleeting, creative or metaphoric – resonates for the story teller, the performer, and the audience" (p. 322). Teo (2010) posits that exploring alternative and diverse ways of knowing via sounds, flesh (phenomenologically understood), or embodied cognition provides an alternative to the 'epistemological violence' inflicted by mainstream positivist conceptions of knowledge production.

Building a case for analysis

Bagnoli (2009) suggests the use of narrative analysis to look for underlying stories and linking data with other mediums. Radley and Taylor (2003) discussed the importance of combining visual and verbal data, stating that images are "articulated into significance" (p. 129). This narrative focus aligns well with seeking phenomenological understandings. The role of the researcher in the production of art-based text, and the identification of contradictions within data collected through other means were important considerations for analysis (Radley, 2010). As was the examination of the process of creation, including what was made visible, and what was omitted (Radley & Taylor, 2003).

Reflexive practice

Munhall (1994) notes that "self is part of every study" (p. 198). In musing upon this notion, the researcher decided to deepen into her data through a reflexive writing and ongoing art practice. Both methods were used to develop interpretations, to explore the relationship of participant content to her own experience, as well as broader tools of general reflexivity. In this regard, the activities were to a degree autoethnographic, as well as a means for data interpretation.

Self-reflexive data was kept in a journal and written excerpts/images from this journal are inserted into the results/analysis section of this paper in order to show their relevance to the research process. Over the course of this project the author produced 13 items of artwork as a way of processing participant experience and contributing her own understanding.

Weber and Mitchel (2004) argue that arts-based autobiographical approaches such as this, by their very nature, foster reflexivity. Creatively capturing through different mediums distances us from our own perspective and thus deepens self-analysis (Mitchell, Weber & Pithouse, 2009). This practice was considered a valuable way of "break[ing] through the conventionalised and routine consciousness" in order to pave the way for a novel and perhaps more revelatory ways of knowing (Dewey, 1934, p. 184). When viewed in conjunction with participant data, the researchers writing and art diversify the perspective on the research question and present the multiplicity of interpretations, which bring to light the mundane by representing it in unusual ways (Weber, 2008).

Akin to autoethnography, which "describes and systematically analyses subjective personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 1), the entire reflexive practice aimed to produce what Geertz (1973) refers to as 'thick description' of the phenomena of interest by exploring the relationship of the researcher self to the participants cultural world being explored. It challenges canonical ways of doing research and how we represent self and others (Spry, 2001) and considers research as conscious and political tool (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008). It was the researcher's intent to take unique insights she gains from her membership position in the life-world of women, and use it as a vantage point to write and reflect about those commonalities (Roth, 2008). This is built upon the hermeneutic phenomenological notion of 'fusing horizons'.

Theory

This study draws upon the theoretical idea of sexual scripts developed by Simon and Gagnon (1984a; 1984b; 1984c). Sexual

scripts can be understood as social guides that shape personal awareness and action. Through this lens, the way in which women define their sexuality and the degree to which they feel entitled to sexual desire and pleasure are influenced by cultural characterisations transmitted through, for example, media images, family norms, religious doctrine and messages from peers (Daniluk, 1998). These images shape the sexual scripts that guide women in sexual encounters and influence individual and interpersonal sexual behaviour (Montemurro, 2014). These scripts operate on three levels:

- *Cultural scenarios* describe normative discourses on sexual expression. An example of such a scenario would be the one promoting the authority of aggressive male sexual behaviour and thus relegating female sexual behaviour as passive, and exceptions to this norm as deviant.

- *Interpersonal scripts* dictate interaction between sexual partners but are also normed by cultural scenarios. Thus, interpersonal scripts most often accord with cultural norms. That a woman does not act on wish to approach a man, despite her feeling attracted to him, is an example of how internalisation of 'cultural scenarios' creates behaviourally constricting 'interpersonal scripts'.

- *Intrapsychic scripts* are "the cognitive understandings and processing of both interpersonal scripts and cultural scenarios" (Montemurro, 2014, p. 9). They consist of reflexive decision making in the negotiation of sexual situations and the consideration of alternative behavioural reactions. For example, if a woman were to evaluate her desire to initiate foreplay more often with her husband, she would draw on cultural norms and gendered discourses around appropriateness of such an action (Elliot & Umberson, 2008).

There is considerable evidence that sexual scripts reinforce gendered double standards and creative double binds for women (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Research on American society consistently affirms that men and women are held to different standards with respect to premarital sex, casual sex, and initiation of sexual encounters (Rutter and Schwartz, 2012). For example, women who initiate sexual encounters or are rumoured to participate in casual sex may be viewed as 'easy' and labelled as 'sluts' for such behaviour, whereas men may be applauded as masculine conquerors (Tanenbaum, 2000). Women are made conscious of these influences via media and the reactions of others. The internalisation of these scripts and double standards function as social control over women's sexuality, serving to keep women in line, and punishing those whose sexual experience is deemed socially inappropriate (Bartky, 2010). While working on this thesis I paid attention to the promotion and rejection of sexual scripts and double standards by participants.

Ethics

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) identify 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' (otherwise known as 'micro-ethics') as two key ethical strains in qualitative research. The former involves seeking approval and adhering to relevant ethical committees and guidelines/laws governing practice, whereas the latter refers to the management of everyday ethical issues that arise in the 'doing' of research. This section will detail the ethical processes of this study, discuss how 'ethics in practice' relates to specific research activities, and explore the importance of academic reflexivity. Four central ethical issues are discussed in detail: informed consent, confidentiality/anonymity, vulnerability, and issues pertaining to the construction and consumption of visual data.

Procedural ethics

In New Zealand, the Health Research Council of New Zealand requires all research on human participants to be subject to either a Health and Disability Ethics Committee (HDEC) or Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC). As part of a postgraduate degree, this study has been approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee, requiring adherence to the guidelines presented in the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching, and Evaluations Involving Human Participants (2015) (see Appendix A for approval letter). This covers the principles of: "respect for persons; minimisation of harm to participants, researchers, institutions and groups; informed and voluntary consent; respect for privacy and confidentiality; the avoidance of unnecessary deception; avoidance of conflict of interest; social and cultural sensitivity; and justice" (p. 4). In conjunction with the above institutional code, the study was also informed by adherence to the Code of Ethics for Psychologists working in Aotearoa New Zealand (CEPANZ) (New Zealand Psychological Society, 2002), the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry's 'Position Statement on Qualitative Research and IRB's' (Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2007), and relevant laws such as the Privacy Act (1993) and the Treaty of Waitangi Act (1975).

In line with requirements outlined in the above procedural guidelines and regulations, the following measures were taken. Participants were required to sign a consent form (see Appendix B) and read an information sheet (see Appendix C) prior to commencing the study. This was provided via email in advance for the participant to read and reflect upon, and presented for signing prior to the first interview. Consent forms outlined participation requirements and provided all relevant information pertaining to the study design in simple

comprehensive language. It also acknowledged researcher ownership of the data. Signed consent forms were stored securely. Potentially distressed participants would have been redirected by the researcher to specialised online sites and forums where competent professional help is freely available, however none indicated concern. They were offered the right to a non-conditional withdrawal from the research up to two weeks following the second interview. There was no use of deception, and no conflicts of interest were identified. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, and its intimate research design, issues of confidentiality and privacy were paramount to consider. Participants were given the right to remain anonymous, therefore their real names were changed to aliases at the transcription phase, and identifying features of the data were omitted and/or changed with fictitious equivalents. Upon completion of transcription, voice recordings were destroyed. The transcriptions, as well as the larger project were stored on a password-encrypted computer, as well as on two separate encrypted hard-drives kept in a safe location.

Ethics in practice

"Micro-ethics can be viewed as a discursive tool to articulate and validate the kinds of ethical issues that confront researchers on a day-to-day basis" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 273). This can best be explored in relation to the various activities employed in the research.

Informed consent

The CEPANZ (2002) states that informed consent "is a fundamental expression of respect for the dignity of persons and peoples" (p.10). In addition to the procedural requirements set out above, I reflected upon an expanded

notion of informed consent. Kellehear (1996) states that "qualitative research is the creation of an unnatural social situation, introduced by a researcher, for the purpose of polite interrogation. It is this situation, delicate by definition, which is ethically questionable" (p. 98). As such, a range of ethical issues have been raised about qualitative data collection, such as how or whether informed consent can be achieved within the context of an evolving dialogue, or with the invasion of privacy, or the requirements of reciprocity (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Such concerns are especially relevant when eliciting information about a sensitive topic such as sexual desire. To manage this quandary, I sought verbal consent from participants repeatedly throughout our interactions.

Another issue regarding the ongoing 'informed' status of participant's that was managed in situ was participant expectations about how their data would be used (Faden and Beauchamp, 1986). Thorne (1980) points out that researchers tend to manipulate the informing of participants by providing general descriptions of their research and omitting relevant particularities, in short, describing their research through 'partial truths' and thus shaping the expectations of the participants. To combat this, I engaged in detailed conversations prior to interviewing about my research intent/underlying philosophy, and ensured participants felt comfortable to ask any questions or voice their concerns at any time.

Anonymity and confidentiality
Another unique consideration that I anticipated was the management of anonymity and confidentiality, particularly in

regard to non-linguistic data (Wiles et al, 2007). Dilemmas arises due to the potential of visual material revealing more detailed depictions of experiences than solely linguistic data - the tendency of researchers to exploit such potential and publish the unaltered results (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004) – and the conflicting tendency of regulatory bodies to impose the need of anonymisation (Israel & Hay, 2006). Thankfully this quandary was largely avoided, as no visual identifiers presented in participant visual artwork. However, one participant's voice is present in her audio contribution, which she consented to my retaining.

This same participant declared a desire to be identified in her data. However, given that researchers need to consider the consequences of identification (Pink, 2007), it was decided, based on the suggestion of Back (2004), to use a pseudonym in the text, but not distort the sound of her voice. As Pink (2007) notes, understanding of the medium – cultural, political, and social – in which the artistic material shall be viewed and interpreted is important in determining appropriate anonymity, as is the balancing of this with participants rights to agency around the use of their data.

Vulnerability

According to Ellis (2007), 'relational ethics' are concerned with reciprocal respect, dignity and caring and "recognising the connectedness and often intimacy that exists between the researcher and the participants" (p. 24). Beyond a general consideration of these principles, this study needed to consider sensitivity to vulnerability. Tolich (2010) advises that researchers choose their topic carefully and treat all

individuals mentioned in the text as vulnerable, including themselves. One aspect of vulnerability that was overlooked in data collection was the researcher's disclosure of her own sexual world during interview conversations. Drawing on this principle, it was therefore decided in consultation with my supervisor to omit transcripts.

Image construction / consumption

Pink (2003) notes that, in any visual research project, the researcher needs to attend to "the internal meanings of an image, it's production meanings and how it is made meaningful by its viewers" (p. 29). The challenge of working with artistic data is the presumption that it represents social reality, when in fact art is highly constructed by that same reality (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). Furthermore, both researcher and participant influence the realities represented in artistic processes (Harper, 2004), for example through material choice or choice of words employed in explaining the task (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Whilst these factors operate on a conscious level, further unconscious attributes of the participant, such as gender or ethnicity, may also influence the representation process (Harper, 2004). As a researcher, I felt obliged to reflexively consider such processes in order to better contextualise the artistic data presented, and such make it available to the audience.

I also felt sensitive to the perception of images, as they are not only dependent on the context of their production but also on the context of their consumption (Banks, 1995). As such an anticipatory appreciation of how artistic

representations would be consumed and interpreted was undertaken in reflexive writing. I also highlighted the intended meaning linguistically in the analysis, in order to reduce the possibility of reader misinterpretation (Prosser, 2000). This pre-emptive analysis of image interpretation required knowledge of the political, social and cultural context of the viewing of produced representations (Pink, 2007), as well as the social identities of viewers (Rose, 2007). Proper consideration of these issues was necessary for the researcher to relate faithfully to the promises made to participants.

Reflexivity

While reflexivity has long been recognised as an important feature of qualitative research, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) position it as an ethical tool both to help researchers understand the nature of ethics, as well as for the actual application of ethics within practice. Reflexivity becomes ethical when focused on the research process as a whole. For example, McGraw, Zvonkovic and Walker (2000) describe reflexivity as "a process whereby researchers place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and impinge on the creation of knowledge" (p. 68). In terms of this study, it also provided the grounds for adherence to the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology by incorporating the role of the researcher in the researching process (Merriam, 2009).

Throughout this research endeavour I engaged in what Woolgar (1998) refers to as 'constitutive reflexivity', which in practice includes a reflection on the data, as well as an awareness of theoretical and

methodological assumptions, use of language, and pre-understandings (intellectual, perceptual, cultural, textual and cognitive principals and assumptions) brought to the research process (Woolgar, 1988).

In research informed by this paradigm, reactivity is not viewed as a problem to be eradicated, but as a fundamental contributing factor in the creation of knowledge (Cunliff, 2004). It is accepted that the subject is ever present in the object, and the researcher is always written into the text (Lynch, 2000). Therefore, both researcher and participant shaped the production of knowledge rather than research reflecting an external pre-existing reality. Reflexive practice of this persuasion goes further than objectivist reflections to question knowledge claims (Lynch, 2000). In this regard, it is often considered as a tool of trustworthiness or rigor, whereby the identification and disclosure of personal and relational subjectivity ensures transparency and qualification of interpretations (Jootun et al., 2009).

The researcher also engaged in 'critical reflexivity' to consider the complex relationships between epistemology, methodology and ontology (Daley, 2010). This type of reflexivity declares that there is no 'right way' of doing research and acknowledges the partiality and contingency of all knowledge claims (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This practice was motivated by a goal to unpack the basic assumptions and politics in research practice, such as questioning researcher positioning and constructions of the research process, acknowledging issues around the constructive nature of language, and critically considering broader academic/structural influences on the topic being explored (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The multiple layers of reflection therefore left the research process and outcomes open to change (Jootun et al., 2009).

Philosophically, this position maintains that inquiry into the relationships between the 'knower-known', 'knower-knowledge' and 'known-knowledge' are necessary across all styles of research (Clifford, 1986). Johnson and Duberley (2003) argue that to leave these meta-theoretical commitments unexamined "amounts to an abdication of intellectual responsibility, which results in poor research practices" (p. 1280). Critical reflexivity remains within the lines of meta-theoretical commitments to uncover the hidden constrictions of theoretical cognition and to questions its assumptions rather than falling back in a strict "categorisation, complacency and closure" of cognitive systems (Cunliff, 2003, p. 37).

Without epistemic constraints, 'critical reflexivity' also enabled the researcher to move across divergent methodologies, theories and concepts to congruently appraise all forms of research (Holland, 1999). It was assumed that no single paradigm or theory could absolutely account for a phenomenon, therefore being able to traverse the epistemological divide was inherent valuable (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) consider researchers applying this practice as 'bicoleurs' (creative builders), viewing research from different angles and considering how other perspectives might provide different understandings. The result, it is argued, was richer, more insightful and introspective research for the individual, and a more conscious academic community (Brocklesby, 1997).

According to Bourdieu and Wacaquant (1992) reflexivity is not so much about the individual at all, but rather the "social and intellectual unconscious embedded in analytic tools and operations" (p. 36). Therefore, this perspective required the

researcher to call upon collective disciplinary notions of knowledge production to consider how those assumptions may influence research.

Schirato and Webb (2003) cite the tendency to "abstract practices from their contexts, and see them as ideas to be contemplated rather than as problems to be addressed or solved" (p. 545), as well as the masquerading of science as an objective and natural point of view, as important critical vulnerabilities of the 'scholastic point of view'. Collective reflexivity therefore needs to continuously evaluate the conditions of its own ways of thinking in order to avoid being overcome by scholastic fallacy. This includes ongoing questioning of disciplinary boundaries, which has the uncomfortable potential to undermine disciplinary hierarchies (Schirato & Webb, 2003). This links in well with hermeneutic phenomenological notions of leaving inquiry open and adaptive.

Part III: Research findings and analysis

Figure 3: Marbling 1 (reflexive practice)

Participant narratives and artwork

Rose

Rose is a bubbly and attractive thirty-year-old married mother of three. Overall, she experiences a relatively uncomplicated relationship to sex - she enjoys it and sees it as a healthy part of life and her life.

> *Just getting into my body turns me on.*

Rose grew up in a sex-positive household, where her mother and sister influenced her to see sex as something natural and normal. Her desire has been fairly stable over the course of her life, with periods of decreased interest in the early child-rearing years and minor punctuations of relationship conflict. Her utilisation of flirting and fantasy as catalysts for desire has however increased over the years. She identifies as having a consistently higher desire for sex than her husband, but that this does not cause conflict within the relationship.

> *I guess I know that if he could he would. It's just that – maybe he's in a funk, or is shitty with me. And I am just like, sweet, I am happy to do it myself.*

With a busy social life, running a natural foods business, and home schooling her children, the biggest obstacle for fulfilling Roses desire are opportunities for intimacy.

> *It is sometimes as simple as we see an opportunity "oh hang on, this person has our kids and they have gone for a walk down the beach" and it is just like "oh there is this opportunity and we may as well jump on it". Even if we are not feeling like it.*

There have been instances in the past where she felt her sexual desire (or lack of) was disrespected, but Rose, for the most part reflects on

these experiences as lessons that have led her toward feeling empowered and possessing of sexual agency around sex.
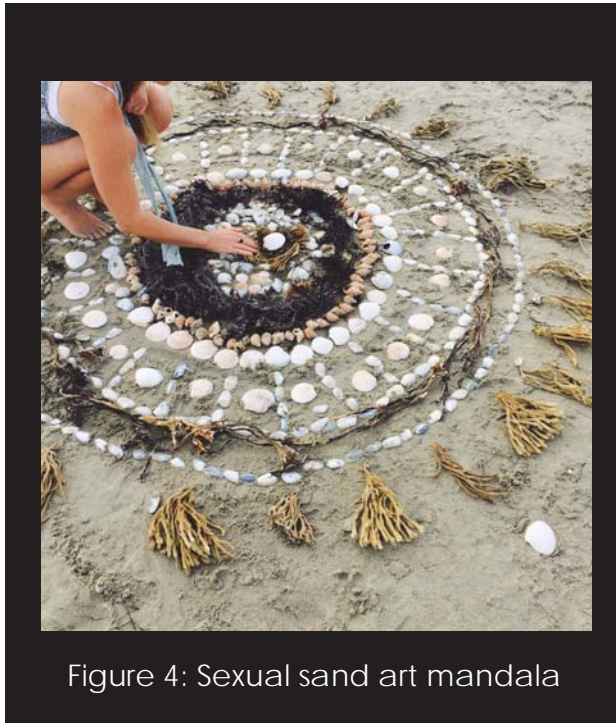
Figure 4: Sexual sand art mandala

Rose chose to explore her sexual desire through the medium of a sand art mandala. This circular art form derived from various ancient beliefs about the importance of the centre as a sacred space (Fontana, 2009). Tibetan Buddhists use the process of creating mandala as a tool for making visible unconscious thoughts, which once visualised can be analysed consciously (Buchalter, 2013). Rose intended for this piece to capture the ecology of her desire, and the interdependency of various inputs.

This is me and my sex, and this could be the intimacy within my marriage, and then as you come out, these other aspects of my sexuality, like talking with friends, reading stories, or social expectations…and it goes out in these concentric circles.

Violet

Violet is a thirty-five-year-old separated mother of four in a new relationship. In her former marriage Violet experienced relational challenges that impacted on her sexual desire and enjoyment of and engagement in sex. As her husband became more interested in

pornography and sexualising other women, they engaged in less sex. Violet felt rejected and frustrated. The arrival of more children, health issues and increased relationship conflict to the point of physical violence, further diluted Violet's sexual desire.

It's like everything sexual in me was dead for so long.

I thought that because I had babies that it must just be all ruined after that.

I was losing weight, my hair was falling out, I felt weak, I'd be dizzy. I was in pain, a lot of pain. I was also bleeding from different places. I felt like my whole inner body was shutting down.

However, following surgery to fix her health concerns, and transitioning out of her marriage, Violet's desire has been reactivated by a new lover. She currently enjoys access to the type of sexual validation and intimacy that was missing from her marriage, and maintains a consistent appetite for fulfilment of her sexual desire.

It's like a new awakening to come alive and be like, oh I do have sexual desire.

Violets spiritual beliefs, developed in her early years have also impacted on her sexual behaviours. Aversive beliefs about pre-marital sex caused some discord around her choices to be sexually active in her formative years.

I was sexually not in proper true connection with my body, because if you're having sex outside of marriage, I knew that that was not God's will, and so I could never fully enjoy it, because I knew that I wasn't actually behaving in a way that I wanted to behave. So, until I was married I probably didn't have

as awesome sex, because I didn't feel completely comfortable with what I was doing.

A recurring issue throughout Violet's sexual desire history is that of consent. She finds it hard to say 'no' to persistent amorous lovers.

So many times in life. It's just like I'd been worried about them getting angry, or what will my repercussions be if I say no? It wouldn't even cross my mind, but afterwards I'd think, why didn't I say no? Or sometimes, if it was a really nice guy, I knew it was a nice person, but I just didn't feel like it.

Violet chose to explore, through the medium of oil painting, the negative impacts of her former husband's abuse and pornography addiction on her sexual desire, as well as the wellbeing of her family more broadly.

So, the black shape for me is about like a spirit or his spirit. Being oppressive. The blackness around is all how I felt everything was sad and stressful. There is water or waves at the bottom of the painting It's swirling water dark and ominous. I felt like I was drowning. Like I couldn't stay above water. The flames represent me. And the kids. They are like a light Like how I think my soul would look like if you could see souls and not bodies. I
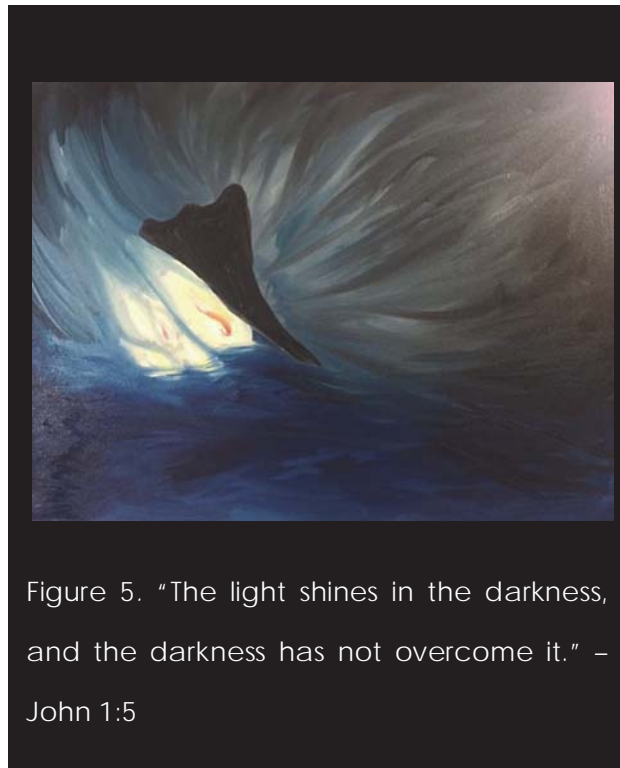
Figure 5. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." – John 1:5

wanted to show that who I was still alive though much smaller and dimmer than it used to be. Sometimes I feel like my light has gone out that I know longer have the essence that made me special and who I am. But I think it's still there and I'm trying to rediscover it.

In viewing Violet's artwork, there is a gradual "dawning of consciousness" as unseen elements of Violets experience are brought into the light (Reid, 1969, p. 23). Its creation enabled Violet to "speak of previously unspeakable states" about her experience of violence and sexual oppression (Schaverien, 2008, p.3). In this way, it captures knowledge about her sexual being-in-the-world that cannot be linguistically articulated because such essences may not be "not formally amenable to discursive projection" (Langer, 1967, p. 240).

Peony

Peony is a fifty-nine-year-old sex worker. She has three children, has been married twice, and currently enjoys a much younger lover with no intentions of transitioning the relationship to marriage or cohabitation. Peony identifies as having a *higher than normal sex drive* and physically very responsive.

I am just a very sexually active person. I love sex. I enjoy sex. And so, when a man comes into the room, it is like, wow, I am going to enjoy myself.

She sees sex-work as a legitimate way of combining her desire for sex, her boredom in long term relationships, and her innate care-taking abilities. She mostly enjoys her job, finding sexual pleasure with clients largely unproblematic. However, she sometimes fakes climax and enjoyment to please clients, but feels no great disharmony in herself

as a result. To her, this is a necessary part of the *theatre* of sexual care-taking inherent to her role.

Peony does however experience a different emotional resonance in intimacies with her younger lover.

> *When I am with him I am not being someone else, so it is more about me. There is perhaps a level of vulnerability that I don't have with my clients that enables me to connect and desire more deeply.*

In addition to pregnancy and post-partum, Peony highlights two embodied experiences that impacted her sexual desire. Menopause:

> *It actually just got worse. Terrible. Or better. I suppose. If I wasn't doing what I am doing now, I don't know, yeah, I don't know how I would cope with it to be honest.*

And an abortion at age 15. She elected to explore this event in the medium of polymer clay for the purpose of analysis.

Figure 6. Not just a bit of fun

> *Sex didn't feel like a pleasure, it felt like a stabbing reminder of the horrible decision I had made. My relationship to [sex]*

81

became complicated. I felt guilty about enjoying it, and treating it as something light and fun, because of what it had led to. I felt guilty because my pleasure and enjoyment felt somehow complicit in the inconvenience of an unplanned pregnancy. I also felt resentment toward my partner for his pleasure – his contribution to the problem – but his biological lack of responsibility.

Perinatal grief, which includes abortion, has been termed the "dark little corner of women's fertility" (Burke, 1999). Abortion grief, in particular is largely hidden (Angelo, 1992). Violet tries to comply with society's expectation of her to move on with her life, but the impact of her abortion is visible and situated in her physical body.

Lily

Lily is a twenty-five-year-old divorced mother of one. She experiences an ongoing struggle with maintaining desire in long-term relationships, primarily due to her self-identified *low physical range*. She historically engages in sexual activity to procure other things, such as *closeness, validation, peace and expressing love.*

While marriage initially provided a space for exploring her sexuality, Lily eventually felt beholden to social expectations around sexual responsibilities. Ultimately her marriage failed, in part, because of issues surrounding an ongoing sexual desire discrepancy.

Growing up Lily identified the perception of possessing high desire as alluring to men, and she came to understand her sexual persona and desirability as a form of currency. However, she secretly struggled to find sex physically enjoyable. Desire (or the perception of) became a way of attracting and maintaining a lover's interest, and then

subsequently in enhancing *his* desire and enjoyment of sex. However, she feels she distanced herself from her authentic turn on:

> *I was masquerading as an incredible sexually uninhibited and desirous creature.*

Divorce and an intellectual renaissance into her own sexuality helped her to develop her own sexual subjectivity outside of relational pressures. However, while she feels more compassionate and understanding of her sexuality in the present, she identifies challenges resulting from ongoing inconsistencies in her desire to have sex.

> *I feel as though I have more of my own desire now, but desire intimidates me because I haven't found it easy to maintain interest in partners over the long term. I view [sexual desire] as a threat to the security and longevity of the relationship*

Lily's used a mixed medium of acrylic beads, nylon string and a glass prism to explore her sexuality in terms of its constitution and evolution.

> *This piece is important to me as it captures aspects of my sexual desire that are hard to translate into words. The process helped to distil my thinking – it felt like more of a private reflection.*

> *I melted acrylic beads for these discs to show how parts of me have changed form through intense processes over the years. In the case of this piece it was heat that caused the beads to fuse together – in the case of my life, I think my coming of age and realising my sexual currency, and my failed marriage were the two formative experiences that have led me to where I am today.*

The theme of metamorphosis, which refers to a striking change in appearance, character or circumstances is evident in Lily's artwork (Metamorphosis, n.d.). She also explores the nature of historicity on

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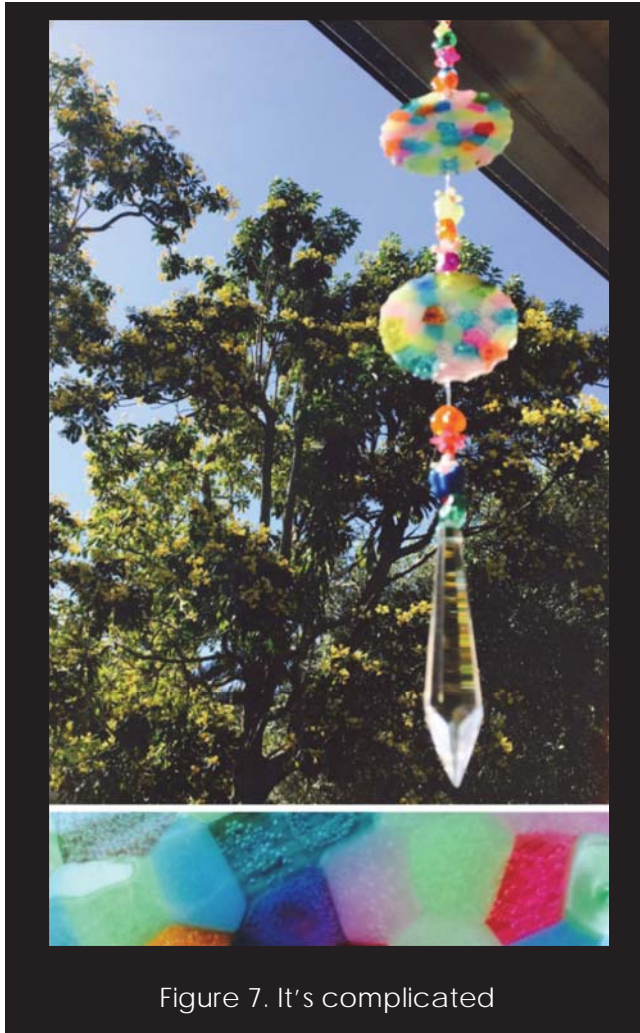
her self. Heidegger emphasised that the future possibilities for 'dasien' are found in an "authentic retrieval of its past" Bryant Smith, 2004, p. 74). This relates to Heidegger's emphasis on the self as coming through the 'having been' of the future (Heidegger, Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962). Lily however is not condemned to her past. As an agentic being she possesses 'resoluteness', the ability to make decisions over who she is in the 'moment of vision' that arises in the unity of past, present and future (King, 2001). Her ability to reflect on the past liberates her future possibilities.

Figure 7. It's complicated

Jasmine

Jasmine is a Welsh migrant in her *late forties* with five children ranging in age from eighteen to eleven. Married twice, she is currently in a committed cohabiting relationship of near eighteen months.

The most influential person in Jasmine's formative years turned out to be a prolific paedophile. She was not physically victimised, but the experience of association had detrimental consequences for her in

the form of fostering toxic relationships and influencing ongoing discomfort with sexuality.

An ex-Mormon, she also feels her faith heavily influenced her attitude toward sex. In hindsight, she recognises the Mormon faith as patriarchal and oppressive to feminine sexuality.

> *Leaving has made me be far healthier as a woman. There were a lot of expectations on behaviour and on dress. I wasn't allowed to show my shoulders, or my knees. Shoulders are very, very evil for women.*

In her first marriage Jasmine experienced a desire disparity and sex was used purely for procreative purposes. Her then husband watched a lot of pornography, and consequently experienced significant spiritual guilt. The relationship ended shortly after the birth of their third child. Jasmine felt burdened by sexual rejection in this marriage, which may have contributed to her vulnerability of attracting her second husband, who over the course of their marriage raped, sexually, physically and psychologically abused her, as well as some their children.

As the spiritual head of the family, Jasmines second husband refused to allow birth-control or get a vasectomy, and as a result she felt powerless over her reproduction.

> *I didn't have sex for a long time because I was scared of having another child.*

She felt trapped, unable to escape the situation, and unable to protect her children. She was very unhappy and sexual desire was not a feature of her life.

> *I wasn't consenting, he knew I didn't want it, but I did it for peace for my children. That was a currency that I used in the home, in*

the marriage was sex to keep my children safe. You prostitute yourself.

She began modifying her appearance to become less attractive in an effort to deter the sexual violence.

You don't want to be sexually attractive; you want to be ugly, because if you're ugly, it might stop. If you're big enough and fat enough and invisible enough, it might stop; but it doesn't.

Her caring and interest in sex was zero after her second marriage ended.

I thought I would never ever have sex again.

However, after a slow process of healing and self-discovery, she began dating her current partner. In stark contrast with her former relationships, she views sex now is an extension of their caring and respect for each other.

It's very mutual and it is just what we do.

She values the emotional connection, and felt she was only ready to reengage with sex once she had learnt to love and heal herself.

Jasmine decided to employ the medium of spoken word poetry to explore the impact of her formative experiences of association with her paedophile mentor (see transcript in appendix C). This type of performance art explores the aesthetics of word play, intonation and voice inflection (Pinsky, 1999).

Please click the below link to listen:

https://soundcloud.com/user-776696441/jasmine

Jasmines performance captures the value of alternative methodologies to re-evaluate 'truth' and 'knowledge' (Leavy, 2009).

Here, her voice is an embodiment of her self – the rhythms, tonal variations, associations and images, as well as the content meaning of the words reflect her identity. For Jasmine, this medium represents an important part of healing from her traumatic experiences in terms of finding her voice and sharing her truth.

> *It was my vehicle for healing. Creativity was my vehicle for healing.*

Exploring her experience through spoken word poetry, enabled Jasmine to "create congruence between [her] affective states and [her] conceptual sense making" (Yorks & Kasl, 2006, p. 53).

Dahlia

Dahlia is a thirty-six-year-old childbirth educator with five children. She has had two long-term relationships in her life and is currently living with, but not married to, her partner of several years.

Growing up in a conservative catholic family, Dahlia always found issues around sex and bodies taboo. She felt similar cultural attitudes towards sex imbued through her interactions with her paternal family, who were Fijian and Samoan.

> *So, I got double dose of... they just didn't talk about it at all. They just did not. And anything to do with menstruation was shameful and not really talked about either.*

Early sexual education focused on the mechanics and continued the theme of moralising around sex.

> *Yeah, by the way, don't do it, because you'll get an STD and die! Or God forbid, you'll get pregnant and end up some horrible teen statistic.*

Dahlia was molested as a child and had a baby sitter expose himself to her. This further fostered in a complicated relationship with desire in her early years of sexual activity.

This translated to self-pleasure:

> *I guess I just made that leap that masturbation would be something gross as well. So, needless to say, as a teen you've got teen hormones making you feel aroused really easily, and in that cup would go shame; it was like, I felt like I had an addiction, and I couldn't stop. And every time I did I promised myself that I wouldn't do it again.*

Dahlia's former partner of eleven years was less exploratory and sexual than she. Despite the general trend of existing discrepancies in the relationship, she felt an expectation of demand on her desire.

> *He was a lot pursuing his own pleasure, but my pleasure was more like a trophy to him.*

She also experienced an extended loss of libido for a year over a particularly challenging, and eventually abusive, part of their relationship. On exiting the relationship, she felt sexually liberated and entered into a period of finding herself. Doing so required a renegotiation with her identity as a mother.

> *I kind of distanced myself from my kids a bit. I needed to remove a bit of the mommy identity to find the rest of me.*

In her present relationship, she feels better matched in terms of sexual desire and attitudes towards sex.

> *I think because we're so open and honest and communicative with each other and because we know each other well, but we're still exploring as we go along.*

Along with the usual rhythms of life, Dahlia experienced a temporary decline in desire and shifts in her sexual identity with the arrival of motherhood.

Before I had babies, I was all for; yes, grope my boobies, it feels great. And I really enjoyed it as part of foreplay and sex, but once I started breastfeeding it just felt really weird, and so I didn't enjoy it anymore.

She also suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome, endometriosis and scoliosis, but experiences these conditions as impacting on her sexual stamina, rather than her desire.
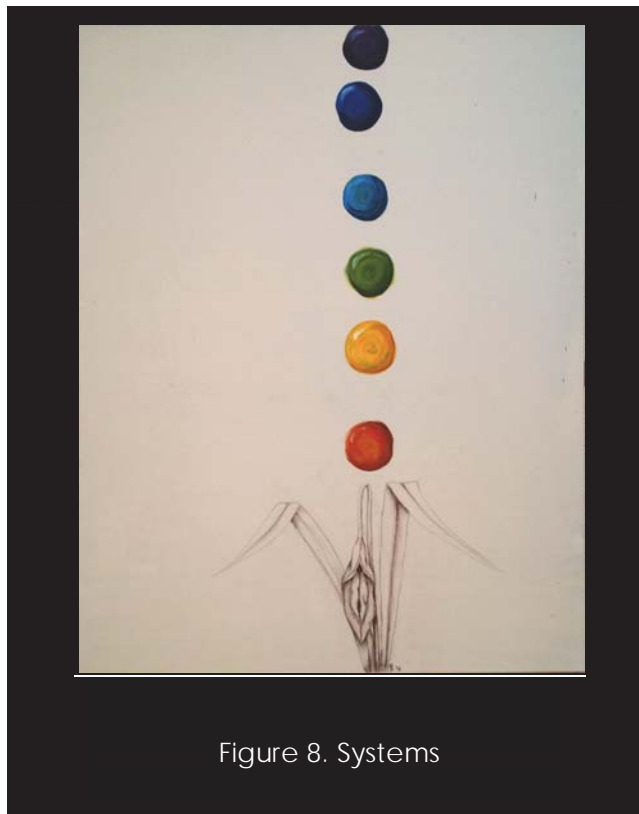
Figure 8. Systems

Dahlia opted to use acrylic paint on canvas in her artwork, which explored her journey toward developing sexual subjectivity.

A lot of how I feel and what I am passionate about come from my own life experience. It took me a while to realise how much damage had been done to me as a person from my experience, and how much it had held me back from really living life, and enjoying sex. It is strange looking back at how I was as a person – it is almost like being a completely different person. Again, that image of a flower just opening up and blossoming – is almost what it feels like.

Dahlia drew on historic associations between flowers and female sexuality in constructing this image, (Frownfelter, 2010). While this symbolism has garnered a multitude of meanings, for example the notion of 'deflowering', or in male perceptions of women as flower-like in their "beauty, fragility, idleness, ornamentality, and passivity" (Bewell, 2010, p. 175), Dahlia seeks to reclaim the flower as a physiological representation of her genitalia.

Like Violet, she articulated value in exploring non-linguistic understandings through her art project.

The cool thing with art – it is open to interpretation. Even with words there is often interpretation involved. It isn't one way. You will say something and it can be interpreted several different ways. In every medium, you can't necessarily control how it will be understood. I think that my sexuality, looking from the outside, is a bit like that.

Grasping at the lived experience

This section details the interpreted results/interpretations of the study. These can be broken down into two distinct parts:

- **Part one**: individual meaning making around sexual desire
- **Part two**: an exploration of how life course experiences shape the development of sexual subjectivity.

Both aspects are important in terms of developing an everyday participatory understanding how women make sense of their sexual desire. Part one provides a foundation from which to interpret the stories that narrate women's life experience in part two.

Part one: Conceptualisation

With ambiguity in conceptualisation evident in the literature, it seems pertinent first to define how some women understand their own sexual desire. Conceptualising sexual desire in regard to acknowledging the sexual self and the individual psychological experience of desire emerged as a major theme characterised by three sub-themes: *acknowledging complexity, caring/thinking about sex,* and *the experience of sexual fulfilment.*

Acknowledging complexity

Reflecting on the phenomena of interest, women universally acknowledged its complexity. This conceptualisation was inherent in the way all participants communicated their sexual worlds in verbal and non-verbal text. Phrases like *it's complicated*, *its changed a lot*, and *that's probably weird* were littered throughout interviews, and art drew on notions of *systems, multiple inputs* and *evolution*. Sexual desire was experienced as *complex, ambiguous* and *changeable*. Synonyms used included *wish, ache, yearn want, motivation, need,* and *want*, highlighting the numerous subtitles of desire. Sex itself was referred to as *fucking, making love, intimacies, getting off* and *naughty fun*. It was understood as *bodily* based and *culturally informed*. Narratives drew on physical experiences and cognitive-emotional aspects of desire indicating that both culture *and* biology are implicated in women's understanding of their sexual desire. This cautions against academic dependence on dichotomies such as mind *versus* body (Tolman and Diamonds, 2001).

This complexity of consciousness was made 'tangible' in Lily's artwork:

No two discs are the same - they have irregularities and imperfections. I guess the main thing the [art] activity revealed to me is just how complex and multifaceted my sex really is. It is like I keep trying to grasp it, you know, understand it, and then it morphs... It is partly conscious but mostly not. I know I can certainly impede or encourage the likelihood of desire – but there is much I do not know and have no control over.

Levine's (2002, p. 49) states that "in everyone's hands, sexual desire is a slippery concept", and this was perhaps most profound with Lily, who, despite an ongoing struggle with self-defined low desire, has from time to time experienced a strong physical awareness of the phenomena.

I know what hunger feels like. To really want. To ache. To throb for someone to enter me. To touch. And that doesn't necessarily translate through to sex or physical enjoyment.

She highlights a personal and experiential knowing, and distinguishes between the somatic experience of sexual desire, and sexual action or any consequential physical fulfilment. Here, what becomes apparent is that for Lily, desire can itself be 'turn-on', which aligns with earlier research suggesting that often neither sexual activity nor orgasms are the goal of female sexual desire (Brotto, Heiman & Tolman., 2009; Regan & Berscheid, 1996).

Due to her low physical range, Lily makes space for a self-interpreted construction of sexual desire that is unique to her:

For me it often starts in my mind. I don't spend much time in my body..., I am often quick to turn on intellectually, and I will recognise there is enough desire potential to proceed to physicality – but the actual physical desire might not come

through until I am being physical – whether it is kissing, or foreplay or full on sex – or maybe not at all.

For Rose however, the experience of sexual desire is more taken-for-granted and automatic. Here, it is both a ubiquitous state of *being*, and an intentional force of active potential.

The feeling is enjoyable in itself, and if possible, I usually want to act on it.

Co-construction of self and world

Sexual desire was experienced as something *deeply personal* and self, as well as *social*[ly] constructed and mediated.

In describing her artwork, Lily drew on notions of perspectivism (Nietzsche, 1979) to describe the confluence of factors, both distal and proximate on her experience of sexual desire.

The process of fusing disparate pieces is also relevant to my reality, in that so many aspects of my 'self' merge together to make the sexual 'me' at that moment in time. They become indistinguishable from each other as they all add to up create this opaque but quite beautiful object.

The piece [artwork of her desire] is in itself beautiful and concrete, but the input of light can have a dramatic effect on it too. With direct sunlight – optimal conditions – it is radiant and omits rainbows on its surrounds – however in the dark or low light, it doesn't give its energy out. I feel like that.

In describing her artwork, Dahlia uses the metaphor of chakras, or energetic systems to conceptualise this co-constitution of self and world in making sense of her sexual desire:

There is a link through the whole system. Just about how we have different aspects as people, but they make up the whole. We can look at different aspects of our desire, but there is a rainbow of contributions. A full spectrum. Lots of things contribute to my sexuality- both internal and external.

Rose extends the notion of complexity in her explanation of her artwork, by positioning her sexual desire as having a hierarchical ecological basis.

There are a lot of different aspects to it, a lot of layers to it. I'm in the middle and then there're all the other factors that could affect my sexuality radiating out. Like, this could be my desire, and this could be the intimacy within my marriage, and then as you come out, these other aspects of your sexuality, like talking with your friends, reading stories, or being desired by other people. And it goes out in these concentric circles. It gets weaker as it goes out, because what's most important is like my marriage is densely important, because I've got all the seaweed stuff here. And, in the middle is my personal relationship with my sexuality.

Regardless of how it was conceptualised, all participants felt that their sexual identities were co-constructions of self and world, and that a multitude of factors served to define, augment or impede their sexual desire. Implicit here is the acknowledgement that because our lives are shaped by social structures characterised by power imbalances and politics, these too play out in our sexual attitudes, beliefs and action (Phelps, 1972). Sex straddles public and private domains, and as a result "the personal is political" (Tuttle, 1986).

Ambiguity and intangibility

In addition to complexity and interrelatedness, participants experienced desire as ambiguous and intangible. Peony referred to her desire as *elusive* and *instinctual*, reflecting Toates' (2014) conceptualisation of "the enigmatic urge", and Foucault's theorising about desire governing us as creatures, not just as subjects (Cremonesi, Irrera, Lorenzini & Tazzioli, 2016).

Things that I find attractive turn on's one day, hold no impact the next. Partners I was once inspired by suddenly no longer excite me.

Rose experienced her desire as being both *beautiful* and *wild,* which in part informed her choice of biological materials for her art project. She appreciated both the *natural* and *imperfect* qualities of her sexuality, and juxtaposed these with

Figure 9. Ethereal (reflexive practice)

Her desire is visceral. Ethereal. It cannot be reduced to mechanistic processes or chemical confluences. It is greater than the sum of its constituent parts, elusive, and deeply fluid. Desire is borne unconsciously of one's own life-world. We can deepen our understanding of it and create more space for it to flourish, but efforts to interfere with its natural expression result in distortions. Ever since Descartes said, " I think, therefore I am", we have been separating the body, mind, and spirit. The full spectrum of desire and sexual attraction however, seems to be the ultimate rejection of this schism.

the understanding of her desire as something that was *easy* and *unconscious*, but could also be *cultivated*.

Dahlia echoed this sentiment, with the added layering of acceptance of imperfections when she said:

> *Notice that the circles aren't perfect either. They are irregular, not all the same size and all over the place. They do have colours from the others in them. I wanted that feeling of merging and flowing – and the statement that people aren't perfect but at the same time – it is perfectly imperfect.*

Lily often experienced confusion in trying to neatly understand and define who she was a sexual being.

> *I think that I am trying to make sense of something nonsensical. I want to make it some linear process toward distillation, but the truth is I still have regular struggles, and imagine my desire today is going to be different in 10, 20, 30 years. I do feel more clarified than before, mostly, but I still intellectualise sex and wonder whether I am expecting too much of it.*

Rose however felt at ease with the ambiguity and fluidity of her sexuality over time.

> *It's impermanent too, so it's like desire in sexuality; this ineffable thing that you can't really fully ever capture or fully ever make sense of, or something.*

Caring/thinking about sex

Building upon the aforementioned acknowledgements, participants differed in their level of caring about sex. All experienced fluctuations in the importance of sexual desire over the course of their lives, which

at times challenged linear narratives of desire dysfunction and decline (Graham, Boynton & Gould, 2017).

At times, sexual desire was considered an uncomplicated and taken-for-granted aspect of life.

In Jasmine's current partnership, sex is:

Very mutual and it's just what we do. It's uncomplicated.

For Rose the activation of desire and any consequential sexual fulfilment is often a simple matter of time and opportunity:

If we're not busy and he's not grumpy at me, I am turned on and we're going to have sex.

Peony describes the act of masturbation as being *like brushing my teeth* and *not something that I would spend a lot of time thinking about it*. For her it is something quick and automatic, an *awesome release and now I can just move on with my day*.

At other times, sexual desire (or lack of) was given less importance. For example, during a particularly challenging time in her former relationship, Dahlia experienced a dramatic decline in her libido:

It was nothing, nothing at all. You could have stuck me in front of some really hot porn and I would have just been like, nah. I actually called myself the frost queen going through that, because I just had no interest whatsoever. And I didn't really care, it just wasn't a priority for me.

Violet's sexual caring fluctuated because of relationship status:

If I weren't in a committed relationship, I wouldn't be having sex, and I would be okay with that.

And at times Lily expressed ambivalence toward sex:

Historically there has not been much that I really liked about it, and I probably could have done without it. I used to just lie back and wait for him to cum – while acting incredibly responsive – but really feeling nothing.

Participants also differed in their thinking about sex, as well as the constitution of their sexual thoughts. Sex was given importance for personal reasons. Participants described sex as being *physically pleasurable*, *feeling good*, and *yummy*. It was experienced as a pleasurable, *healthy*, and important part of *self*.

Peony placed her sexuality as central to her sense of self:

Desire is such an important part of who you are. Being open about sex has always been important to me. It [sex work] was something that I felt called to do. It is meaningful work. A month is the longest I have gone without sex in my life. It was horrible. So horrible. I brought myself a vibrator because I just couldn't handle it.

Here, her role as sexual being is acknowledged as a prime source of self-concept and identity (Weeks, 2006).

Similarly, when embarking on a new sexual relationship with her boyfriend, Violet felt a change in her identification as a sexual being, and experienced an associated increase in the importance and presence of sexual desire in her world:

I did not think I was a very sexual person until I was with him, and then I'm like, "Actually, I kind of like this. Let's do it more".

Rose felt that sex could be a vehicle for self-esteem in the form of *reinforcement that you are still desirable.* She also positioned her relationship to her desire as central to her art piece, referring to it as: *special and protected.* She experienced a growing caring of

nourishing her sexuality and a desire to make room for it within her life:

> *I find that I am really conscious of it of it – and as I read more widely on sexuality, I become more aware – and make more of an effort to integrate it into my life.*

Dahlia also values her sexuality as an important part of her self-expression, defining herself as a *sexual being*. She drew on narratives of sacred sexuality to explore the intersection of sex and spirituality:

> *I am not a religious person, but I am deeply spiritual. There is also this amazing amount of spirituality, and awareness and awakening that can be found through sexuality as well. Sex itself can be this amazingly spiritual experience.*

Here, her sexual experiences are understood as lived responses to an awareness of the 'big questions' of life (Lombaard, 2009). Spirituality and sex have long been linked phenomenologically and experientially (Bell, 2004).

Conceptualisations such as the above challenge earlier theorising that positions women as lacking a strong sense of personal sexuality, or with limited deriving of personal pleasure from their bodies (Montemurro, 2014).

Relational health

Sexual desire was also tied to relational connection and responsibility. Sex was deemed important for generating feelings of *closeness* and *intimacy*, and this was often positioned in regard to *relationship health*.

Rose:

I do think we use it as something that is good for our relationship – like we know that when we are having a lot of sex that, you know, we are nicer to each other, kinder to each other, more connected.

Conversely, Violet described the disconnect that occurred within her former due to her husband's withholding and lack of presence during sex:

When you don't have that [sex] regularly, you just start feeling more distant to that person. You don't feel that closeness, or that intimacy or connection. Yeah, you can be intimate without having sex, but sex definitely helps… And then you're fighting more, and because you're fighting more, you don't feel like having sex, and then you're fighting more, so it's horrible.

A *healthy sex life* within the context of a relationship was understood to change over time. While much research supports the notion that sexual desire tends to be highest at the start of a relationship and declining over time (Murray & Milhausen. 2012), participant experience tended to align with research suggesting that sexual desire may ebb and flow rather than decline (Acevedo & Aron. 2009). For example, Rose described that her desire for her husband had *matured and deepened* over time, and Jasmine, who's history of coercive sex resulted in a slow rediscovery of her own sexual desire, states *its priority [now] shifts around our other family commitments – it isn't stable.*

The experience of sexual fulfilment

All participants identified instances where they experienced sexual *fulfilment* - the achieving of something that that is desired, promised or predicted (Fulfilment, 1989). This experience held different

meanings for participants. It was often described as some combination of physical pleasure and emotional satisfaction, though many participants specifically referred to *climax* or *orgasm*. Emphasis was given to the notion of *surrendering* or *losing yourself* to pleasure. This concurred with narrative findings by Nicolson and Burr (2003).

Figure 10: Musings on Lily (reflexive practice)

Desire is like a garden. Sometimes it is a wild and intrepid landscape, otherworldly and inhospitable. At a glance, it is arid and savage, but on closer inspection it sustains a rich and vibrant inner-life. A mossy breathiness - rich, lascivious, and unattainable. There is an undomesticated beauty and mystery in those wilderness seasons - a slow and private flourishing that is provocative and deeply private. A quiet cultivation of something contained yet unfurling unto itself. A reflexive gaze away from the spectacle.

For participants such as Dahlia and Jasmine, who emphasised trajectories of sexual self-development, sexual fulfilment had to do with *sexual empowerment,* and being able to *express [themselves] in ways that are authentic* to them.

For Lily, who did not find orgasmic pleasure very accessible, fulfilment took the form of *presence*, *mutual vulnerability* and *conscious and intuitive touch*.

Sex can be truly gratifying for me with or without orgasm.

The women's experiences evidence an understanding of the phenomena of sexual desire that extends beyond existing findings. Sexual meanings were created by each woman in interaction with her world (Gagnon & Simon, 1982). This occurred as she sought to understand herself both as a woman and as a sexual being. This process was influenced by past history, present circumstances, and hopes for the future, as well as situationally constructed implicit rules and meanings (Plummer, 1982). What was unsaid or implied in texts was the downgrading of sexual desire directed toward oneself (Foucault, 1978), which reinforces the dominant cultural emphasis on a relational other.

Part two: Development through the life-course

In exploring how women understand their sexual desire, it became evident that this understanding evolved over the course of one's life, through the accumulation of interactions and experience. This illustrates what Gullette (1998) refers to as a 'progress narrative', whereby the women saw themselves as progressing through the past and onwards to a better future (Port, 2012). This chronological or cumulative experience of sexual desire was encapsulated by Lily, who in describing her artwork, said:

> *The piece is chronological – in that it hangs vertically, and the individual beads represent smaller contributions to my sexual desire in between those key events. The large crystal at the end of the string refracts light when hung in direct sunlight. I think this is suggestive of how my desire has evolved to become something less opaque. I feel like sexual desire is more of a transparent and 'clean' experience in my life nowadays. I find*

myself more desirous, and less conflicted about my sexuality. I feel like desire is an energy I have more access too, and being joyful in that space reflects out goodness into the world. It is still something precious and breakable, but I do feel like more of a conduit for pleasure and for positivity. I get the sense that sex can be a joy – not something obligatory or depleting. I have that sense of being hungry and wanting – not always, but I know what that feels like now.

Similarly, when musing over her artwork, Dahlia said:

Only the clitoris is painted – because it follows down from the rest of the chakras, but that is the only part that is actually partially unfinished, and it felt like… as a human being you are never actually finished or complete. Over life we add bits and change things, and whatnot, but there was something that felt right about leaving it unfinished.

This was also evident in women's choice of artistic expression, in that many women choose to capture a specific moment in time, or to explore the temporality of their desire.

This idea of change fits nicely with Carpenter and DeLamater's (2012) Gendered Sexuality over the Life Course (GSLC) model, which positions sexuality as being constructed from both positive and negative experiences over one's lifetime. They posit that such inputs have a continuous and cumulative impact. For example, often negative experiences earlier in life can produce a negative sense of sexuality moving forward. Carpenter and DeLamater (2012) describe this process as "trajectories, turning points and transitions" that define our sexual selves. Timing and socio-historic context are also important in making sense of impacts on sexuality. These theorists assert that gendered sexual scripts and related power disparities create very different sexual realities for men and women. Here, women learn

from society how to express their sexuality through a process of inheriting and disseminating norms, customs and ideologies (Ridgeway, 2009), often developing sexual negotiation skills and an enhanced sense of control as they mature (Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012).

Part two develops upon the abstract conceptualisations explored in part one, and starts to tease out some of the significant life events that contribute to a woman's evolution toward being a subject – rather than an object – of sexual desire. As discussed in earlier chapters, this shall be conceptualised as 'sexual subjectivity', which includes feeling entitled to sexual pleasure, possessing the ability to make sexual decisions, and a critical consciousness about the impact of social structures on one's own sexuality (Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2006). According to Tolman (2002), developing a sense of oneself as a sexual subject is a requirement for optimal sexual health in terms of meeting ones needs for sexual desire, pleasure and sexual safety.

Using the foundation provided by previous studies of sexual subjectivity, this section looks at how women see and experience themselves, and act as sexual subjects over the course of their lives. In interpreting participant data, I found that sexual subjectivity develops through a complex multi-stage process (see table 1.2). While not exhaustive of all experiences, I shall use this as a guide to interpret the participants experiences narrated in the following sections.

Table 1.2: The life-course development of women's sexual subjectivity

1.	Early influences: Developing a stance
2.	Early experiences

3.	Sexual relationships of consequences
4.	Role and relationship changes
5.	Embodied changes
6.	Self-acceptance

1.   Early influences: Developing a stance

Participants' early exposure to and understanding of their sexuality involved developing a stance on sex. As girls, they learnt about sex and took in information (both explicit and implicit) from sources such as friends, parents, media and religion, and started to consider how they themselves saw it. The four sub-themes that emerged in this early influencing stage were: *sex is bad and/or taboo, sex is confusing, sex is for love and marriage* and *sex is natural*. This early stage can be understood as "sowing the seeds of sexual subjectivity" (Montemurro, 2014, p. 20).

Sex is bad and/or taboo

Some women experienced early influences echoing the sentiment that sex was bad or taboo. Some women were hesitant to talk about sex at all, which indicating a persistent discomfort with the subject.   A lack of language around sex was also evident.

For some women, sex was often not talked about in their childhood home. For example, Dahlia:

I had a Catholic upbringing, so anything to do with reproductive organs and sexuality was considered a taboo subject; very shameful and we didn't talk about it…and they were also Fijian and Samoan, and there's a lot of taboo around sexuality in that culture too. So I got double dose of shame… they just didn't talk about it at all. They just did not. And

anything to do with menstruation was shameful and not really talked about either. So I cheerily tended to grow up thinking that it was something very adult, something that kids didn't talk about or shouldn't see.

Figure 11. *Taboo (reflexive practice)*

Shame can be understood as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging" (Brown, 2004, p.7). Many of the women felt judged by others at some point in their lives

When sex was talked about, knowledge imparted often drew on notions of shamefulness. Here the messages that Dahlia internalised centred on the negative consequences of sexual activity, the immorality of sexual girls, as well as confusing messages around the nature of sex itself. She experienced both moral panic as well as incomplete information:

Yeah, by the way, don't do it, because you'll get an STD and die! Or God forbid, you'll get pregnant and end up some horrible teen statistic. Because don't you know, being a teenage mother is a travesty.

Similarly, Violet and Jasmine were raised in conservative religious families, and recall being aware of the stigma reserved for bad girls. These experiences align with research into girl's internalisations that highlights the availability of prominent scripts that 'good girls don't ask for or talk about sex' (Tolman, 2002).

Implicit here is that children's access to sexual information can be understood as 'difficult knowledge', in that it uncomfortably within constructions of childhood innocence (Britzman, 1998), and has implications for power and politics in relationships between children and adults.

Sex is confusing

A similar '*sex is confusing*' stance was developed from insufficient information about sex at a young age. Lily, who received no formal sexual education remembers feeling confused and conflicted about sex as a pre-teen after watching pornography with some friends at a sleep over:

I remember this weird feeling of wanting to watch it, but having this real physical sickness about it too. I was curious, but then I felt ashamed or weird. That was such a body thing. I still remember it now. It was like my first exposure just to seeing sex. I think, before that, I've heard my parents have sex, and I knew that there was this thing called sex and how babies were made, and stuff like that, but I just remember it being this unpleasant thing... It's really strange, because you know, when

you're a kid, you know that it's this thing that you shouldn't know about, and it was quite this weird point of transition. I knew it was normal. But there was something about sex that I felt disturbed by. And I think I still feel that way.

She elaborated on this sense of lingering confusion and ambiguity toward sex that has accompanied her into adulthood, but was unable to isolate its cause.

Some of the women experienced sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence and this informed their early stance on '*sex as confusing/bad/taboo*'. These women experienced conflicted feelings toward sex that extended into their adult years.

For example, Jasmines spoken-word poem embodied her confusion around the sexualising of her peers, and her stolen innocence and memories as a result of proximity to extensive child-sex abuse:

I was a stage curtain to hide behind, and I was death, and I was blind.

I felt for a very long time that I was never allowed to look back and say "Do you remember?", because all my memories were really the way it really was. And I didn't go on to have healthy relationships as an adult, as a woman, and a lot of people that I went to school with who were very involved in my social group also went on to have very toxic adult sexual relationships.

For Dahlia, her experiences of child-sex abuse, coupled with her family's shame around normal bodily functions and sexuality caused confusion:

I went into my teens with this weird mix of the emotional connection you have in sex being really appealing, but at the same time the actual act of sex being kind of taboo.

The experience of sexual abuse as a child can have lifelong consequences including a greater likelihood of sexual and physical assault as an adult (as was the case with both women), difficulty maintaining intimate relationships and asserting desire, and emotional unavailability in adult relationships (Browning & Laumann, 1997; Carbone-Lopez, 2012). However, it is not just the act alone that impacted on these women's sexual evolution – their perspective is also influenced by the reaction of others, such as the messages that significant others convey about sexual decision making and the expression of agency (Ahrens, 2006). For example, in reflecting up her teenage years, Jasmine felt a visceral silencing of that time by her family and school community. She experienced a secondary silencing when she sought support from the church for her later marital rape and abuse. The message internalised here was that sex and sexual abuse are private, shameful and should not be discussed. Feeling confused about sex in general makes it difficult to have the confidence or desire to think about it personally in a way that is free from coercion, violence or guilt (Reinharz, 1994).

A variation of the sex is confusing theme was '*sex is curious*'. Despite the aforementioned negative influences, Dahlia's earliest memories of sex also hint at something less oppressive:

My earlier memories were always of overhearing adults talking about sexual things, and my mother had a subscription to some magazine. I have no clue what it was, but as a subscription, we'd get monthly magazines that told you sex positions and

different things like this. And I was like what on Earth is this? I had no clue what it was. I was just completely oblivious – and a bit curious. At the time, [I had] no clue what these adults in the pictures were doing, just that they looked like they were enjoying themselves.

This sentiment was also present for Lily, who used to *read and reread a puberty book in the school library.* Both women acknowledged a belief that it was inappropriate to discuss their curiosities with others, but that they felt drawn to know more.

Sex is natural

Some women's parents normalised sex and girl's physical development as a regular part of growing up. This was the case for Rose:

Mum was very relaxed about about sex – she positioned it as natural and normal. I also read a lot of girlfriend magazines growing up. Like the sealed section. My sister had a subscription.

This positioned her well to assimilate a healthy attitude towards pleasure and self-determination around sex.

Sex is for marriage

Sex is often socially constructed as an expression of love or a means of securing love (Martin, 1996). This ideology comes from a culture that romanticises sex and idealises love and romantic relationships (Martin, 1996). Some women's early sexual education highlighted sex as something exclusively reserved for love relationships, and in particular, marriages. This was the case for Peony, who was born in the 1950's:

I was brought up conservatively. I mean, sex was for married people. I got married at 17 the first time, and it was for life. You got married, you had children, you stayed together. And that was what I believed. And I have four lovely children from my first marriage.

As was the case for many women of Peony's generation, sex outside of marriage was stigmatised, and there existed strict gendered expectations around celibacy and sexual restraint for unmarried girls and women (Daniluk, 1998). Younger women were less constrained by conservative social views around premarital sex. Twenge, Sherman and Wells (2015) suggest that this generational difference can be understood the context of growing cultural individualism and a trending rejection of traditional social conventions.

For Violet, however her aversion to premarital sex was fuelled not by generational expectations, but by religious beliefs:

I knew God didn't want me to have sex before I was married. I don't think he wants us to go around enjoying sex with random men.

Robinson (2012) found that young people (age 4-5) construct their early sexual subjectivities through a process of stitching together disparate bits of accessible information, not surprisingly, predominantly from concepts such as love and marriage, which as not as 'tightly regulated' as other aspects of sexuality. This serves to maintain the construction of normative and gendered sexual scripts, particularly around sex, marriage and relationships.

Cumulative impacts

Positive stances that encouraged sexual exploration or normalised sex ('*sex is a curiosity*'; '*sex is natural*') or sanctioned it in relationships ('*sex is for love or marriage*') in general bolstered girl's development of sexual subjectivity. Those who cultivated these stances were often raised in liberal families, and were born after 1970. Negative stances (*sex is bad or taboo*) and weak stances (*sex is confusing*) inhibited girl's sexual self-assurance because eventually they had to come to terms with doing something that they had believed or told was wrong. Girls raised in families that did not talk about sex, or had conservative religious backgrounds were more likely to possess such negative stances.

Stances change throughout most women's lives (Montemurro, 2014). After the women became sexually active, many changed their attitudes completely; with Dahlia going from '*sex is bad*' to:

This is amazing. I just want to do it all the time.

For others, such as Rose, this phase in her sexual development was more influential than the other phases in that it chartered her on a course of positive relationship with her sexual desire. In other words, stances are dynamic, and thus indicate sexual subjectivity. A subject takes a stance, forming an opinion about sexuality – and then moves on to the next phase in their sexual development, learning through doing.

2.   *Early experiences*

As girls absorb information about sex from other sources, and become more aware of their own sexuality, they start to imagine themselves being involved in sexual activity. As they begin to experiment themselves, they start to *learn from doing*. This involves developing a concrete understanding of sexual desire that enables

them to discover their bodies in new ways. Sex shifts from an abstract idea to a real experience, and through experimentation, girls learn how boys and men view them. In this process of sexual embodiment and practice, women's initial stances may be reinforced or rejected.

George Herbert Mead (1934) stated "we are not born with a sense of self, we develop it in the process of social interaction" (p. 1962). As girls mature, they recognize sexuality as a new aspect of their identity and construct a sexual-self based on understanding and internalisations of sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1984). This is an important aspect of developing sexual empowerment/subjectivity as in order to feel confident, make decisions about sexual activities and act on sexual desire, girls must first see themselves as sexual and recognise sex as an activity they can, might, or will engage. Girls may or may not want to engage in sex, but as Martin (1996) states, it is important that they be able to imagine the possibility, or make a choice about their participation.

It was interesting to note that when asked about their first sexual experiences, most women defaulted to discussing losing their virginity as the pivotal moment of transitioning from thinking to doing. This fits with the cultural emphasis on dating and romantic relationships (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). However, upon further prompting, many of the women noted awareness of preliminary sexual explorations such as sexual thoughts or masturbation.

Self-awareness and solo explorations

A burgeoning awareness of the physicality of their sexuality generated angst during some women's adolescence. Some enjoyed the physical sensations, but many felt confused, conflicted or scared about changes in their body. This is not surprising given the lack of information many girls possess and the enduring cultural taboos surrounding adolescent desire (Tolman, 2002). Continuing on from

Peony's '*sex is bad/taboo* and '*sex is for marriage*' stance, she describes her pubescent self:

> *I was awkward and self-conscious through puberty. I was flat chested and thought that this made me unattractive. I used to wear a stuffed bra when swimming to give the illusion of a more womanly form. I was conscious of sexual attention given to other girls, and I remember having physical responses to crushes. I was both intrigued and repulsed by my own burgeoning sexuality.*

Similarly, Violet reflects on her early erotic thoughts:

> *I think, for myself, that I was a very sexual person from a young age, but that I didn't really know what any of that was. But I just had erotic dreams at a young age. I didn't even know what sex was, but I was pretty sure I was dreaming about sex. I thought that was really weird, and never talked to anyone about it. I've never talked to anyone about that because I always feel like a bit of a weirdo for being so sexual.*

Both Peony and Violet found their own sexual interest and arousal uncomfortable and embarrassing – an expected response from their earlier stances. They felt conflicted about feeling something they believed they shouldn't feel. In addition, Peony evidences a desire to embody socially constructed ideas around normative beauty and sexual desirability (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). The inclusion of the element of curiosity highlights a shift, or challenge to her formative thinking, however she describes her body as having *high-jacked* her during adolescence, which speaks to a generational gaze over women's adherence to social mores around sexual control and decency (Twenge, 1997). Encapsulating this tension between apprehension and curiosity, Peony describes one early sexual encounter:

A boy liked me, and I liked him, but I felt a tingling embarrassment, a strange shame... fear maybe... because I knew we weren't supposed to do anything. We used to hide in the bushes together. When he did end up kissing me, I pushed him away. Like physically shoved him. And yelled at him to not tell anyone what had happened.

Peony's ambivalence is clear – she was both curious and afraid, and her reaction suggests that most of her unease related to how she would be judged if she *let something happen*. Before this experience she believed that sex was bad and only for marriage, and she did not want anyone to think she was not a good girl. Montemurro (2014) found that women like Peony, from older generations, often received a more morally loaded sexual education (or a lack of education all together), and adopted a fear that people would judge them if they found out they were turned-on or sexually curious.

Also, apparent in Peony's experience, and that of other women is the internalised distinction between self and interpersonal sexual development. Goffman (1969) refers to this as 'back-stage' sexual development and 'front stage' sexual exploration. Some women experienced an increasing awareness of their own bodies and sexual self, but located that as distinct from what they perceived to be *real sex*. For example, Lily located masturbation as separate and 'less than' partnered sex.

I figured out how to bring myself to climax with masturbation, but I didn't really associate that with desire – perhaps more automatic - a physical release. It was just something that was really private. I thought that sex was about relationship, and that my inability to orgasm through sex was this shameful little secret.

The majority of women disclosed masturbating in response to bodily changes as children and adolescents, and all, with the exception of

Rose, reported feeling some embarrassment or confusion about these early exploring of their bodies. For example, Lily experienced shame when caught masturbating by her father, who chastised her as *disgusting* for touching herself. So impactful was this experiential denial of her entitlement to sexual pleasure, she did not reconnect with masturbation again until her early twenties.

> *Then one day I thought I wanted to try it again, but I had forgotten how, and for a while I gave up because I didn't feel anything.*

Lily's story encapsulates how this primary means of pleasure in women's bodies is rarely named, let alone discussed. Waskul, Vannini & Wiesen, (2007) refer to this as 'symbolic clitoridectomy', the "bracketing of the clitoris by means of linguistic and discursive erasure" (p. 152). This 'missing discourse of desire' is perhaps the result of having not been provided education around masturbation, or provided proper vocabulary about their genitals (i.e. vulva or clitoris) in the early years (De Marneffe, 1997; Hite 1976). This impacted the way that women spoke about, and engaged in self-pleasure later in life, informing the relative invisibility of women's masturbation, and maintaining "power-laden assumptions about gender, power and bodies" (Fahs & Frank, 2014, p. 241), such as Peony's later positioning of it as *replacement sex* and concern that it made *men feel inadequate*. This silence around sexual self-exploration perpetuates early stances that foster guilt or confusion around sexuality, dampening the development of sexual subjectivity. In this regard, women's lack of knowledge about their own bodies, combined with taboos about female masturbation, and a cultural emphasis on relationship imperatives, maintain women's sexual objectification (Fields, 1988).

Dahlia:

> *He thought masturbation was disgusting and dirty... so I didn't do it much.*

Challenging this however was Roses curiosity about fantasy and how that opened up her engagement in self-pleasure:

> *I brought a female erotic fantasy book and I think that is what started my masturbating and fantasising. It opened up a whole world... That was a real [big deal], kind of, for me getting that book, because I hadn't really known about fantasies and things like that before hand, so that book was a real eye opener. Before that book I never masturbated. Sex was about a real person I was attracted to. The person was the source of turn on. I probably did have fantasies before the book - I just didn't realise or act on them, or end up masturbating because of them. They were just there. Another thing I just didn't think about.*

Playing with others

Following on from, or in parallel to solo experiences, girls begin to explore relationally with others.

Most of the participants experienced an 'other-oriented', externally driven sexuality in their early sexual exploring – that is, rather than understanding their own sexuality as based on their own wants and preferences, most thought of desire as reactions evoked by someone else (Elmerstig, Wijma & Swahnberg, 2013).

For example, Lily attracted a lot of attention from boys and men, and while it inspired her with confidence, she also came to view her sexuality as *currency*. As a result of generational liberal views sexuality (in part fuelled by mass media's casualising of hyper sexuality), she internalised cultural scenarios that position women as easily aroused, compliant, with generous physical ranges – and men as valuing

Figure 12: Duplicity (reflexive practice)

This cardboard sculpture draws on Hindu goddess 'Kali', a symbol of power, creation and destruction. As a young woman one's desire is often desired and coveted, and with that comes a pseudo-sense of empowerment and egotistical pride. This desire elicits submission, vulnerability and affection from lovers. This power and ruthlessness is however something of a façade or pantomime - because that power is a reflection of attention rather than a product of robust self-worth and sexual authenticity. Here she is both strong and weak - acting out of agency and moved by social conditioning.

women that were sexually liberated and compliant in the bedroom (Van Damme & Van Buawel, 2013):

I felt like men desired my desire – and I understood my sexuality as currency. But it became fake and inauthentic because I understood that that is what they wanted, so even if I wasn't really feeling desire, pretending to be ripe and sexual made them want me more. I guess I was good at acting – but in the process neglected to think about nurturing my own sexuality.

This theme continued when, as a young adult she became involved in a relationship in which she felt very insecure. She lacked self-worth and had trouble identifying her needs or desires.

I don't think I really knew who I was. I knew what he wanted, but I didn't have much of a sense of sex as being something for me.

For Lily, negative early experiences informed by a hypersexual culture, and a lack of self-awareness, distorted her beliefs around her right to pleasure, ultimately inhibiting her development of sexual subjectivity (Kammeyer, 2008).

Similarly, Women like Dahlia and Violet, who grew up with religious moralising around sex, expressed remorse over early sexual encounters that ran counter to their beliefs. Aligning with the findings of Carpenter (2005), these women viewed their virginity as a *gift* or *sacrifice*. Violet who spoke of sexual *restraint,* felt like she had let her parents down because she had failed to follow through on her initial stance. She had to come to terms with the emotional transition to independence, of no longer being the *good little girl* she believed that her parents and God wanted her to be. She had internalised sexual scripts that told her sex was about the expression of love and romance and that good girls do not do it outside of marriage. Amy Schalet (2011), among others found that girls are expected to be good, but being good and being sexual are mutually exclusive. This was the case for Jasmine, who held moral and religious beliefs about femininity and women's roles that suppressed the development of sexual subjectivity in this stage:

> *I was the good girl, I did everything right in their eyes in my life, and it was so toxic, but it kind of dragged me to the altar of abuse, really, because right through my adolescence I was very submissive and very compliant. And that gives you the ability to be abused.*

Tolman (2012) states that girls, like Jasmine, must negotiate cultural barriers that discourage their desire as well as feelings and experiences that cultivate it.

Many women experienced early social pressures to please boys. Some felt emotionally distant or disconnected from these early

119

experiences because they were just going along with what boys wanted. They often felt pressure to participate in sexual activities that they did not want or were ready for. Such experiences often left girls, such as Dahlia, feeling more like objects for someone else's pleasure than subjects entitled to their own gratification (Tolman, 2002):

> *It was actually really painful at first, even though I was really – I don't know whether I was wanting to personally, or I was wanting to for him … And then, at that time, there was one of our friends who was staying the night and my boyfriend then took the used condom and played it around like a trophy, which just made me feel like absolute shit... So that was my first experience with sex; painful, and then I get to be a trophy.*

Violet, who did not disclose abuse, also found that resistance rarely stopped sexual encounters from happening. In her early relational sexual exploration, she would often *give in* to prospective partners cajoling and convincing. In part, she ascribes her religious views on gendered sexual passivity as contributing factors of such behaviour:

> *So many times in life male opinions mattered more than mine. It's just like I'd been worried about them getting angry, or what will my repercussions be if I say no? It wouldn't even cross my mind, but afterwards I'd think, why didn't I say no? Or sometimes, if it was a really nice guy, I knew it was a nice person, but I just didn't feel like it… I just didn't want to hurt their feelings.*

As is often the case, incongruences existed in participant experience. For example, Dahlia reflected on and in part rejected her earlier stance of '*sex is taboo'*, as she garnered positive new perspectives through sexual exploration, and added to her own repertoire of sexual knowledge:

One thing I'm angry at her [step mother] for is that she didn't give a lot of the emotional side of sex as well, and a little bit of more spiritual side of sexuality as well, but rather than just all these cut and dry school sex ads, which is pretty much the mechanics of it, and that's about it. I figured out some of that on my own.

Rose, who grew up with a '*sex is natural*' stance in her formative years, felt empowered and well-resourced to her decision to wait until she was 16 to lose her virginity. She proactively chose a partner to have sex with, and initiated the experience herself. When confronted with her peers becoming sexually active at 14, Rose felt assertive around her own sexuality:

I just felt like they were too immature; and I just wanted, for myself, I was like, right, I'm not going to have sex with anyone until I'm 16.

She thought carefully about when and how she wanted sex to happen and took charge in decision making. She maintained control over her body until she felt ready. Even when part way through the encounter she experienced disturbing sexual visualisations, she felt agency in ceasing the encounter, and her partner did not pressure her to resume. This decisiveness was in part a response to observing the emotional turmoil of her peers engaging in early sexual experimenting, and in part a response to her parents support and encouragement of her sexual development as a normal part of growing up. Normalisation at home, as well as access to information about sex and body integrity positively fortified her sexual agency (Schalet, 2009). Rose quickly learnt how to climax, enjoyed access to physical pleasure, and these early experiences gave her an enjoyment of the physical pleasures of sex, reinforcing her '*sex is natural*' stance.

Despite her restrained formative sexual stances, Violet developed an enjoyment of sex through positive encounters with her first boyfriend at 16.

> *And he was like awakened my body then to all the feelings that you could feel, things that I didn't know, and nothing that I knew what to expect. It was just amazing. [We were] physical but we didn't have sex.*

In Violet's case, she rationalised sexual contact by refraining from intercourse. This enabled her to maintain her early '*sex is for marriage*' stance through her early sexual explorations, while also making provision for access to sexual exploration.

Cumulative impacts

Early stances influenced the degree to which women felt good or bad about their formative sexual experiences. Girls such as Lily and Dahlia, with a '*sex is bad/taboo*' stance were less inclined to see early sexual activity as enhancing their sexual identity or improving their sexual self-confidence. Rather they often felt uncomfortable, guilty or inhibited, and not entitled to sexual pleasure. Rose, who had a '*sex is natural*' stance, found sexual experience bolstered her sexual self-esteem and thus her sexual subjectivity. Sex was not something that just happened to Rose, it was something that she *made* happen. Such early experiences, coupled with a positive view of '*sex as natural*', created a climate of cumulative advantage that served to benefit Rose as she moved through the life course. Gendered scripts that prioritise boys pleasure started to emerge in this stage, inhibiting sexual development.

Generation influenced not only girl's stances, but also the likelihood and amount of early premarital sexual experience. Peony fooled around less than the other women, and was more stymied by

proscriptive stances that elicited guilt when she was learning by doing outside of marriage. Thus, she too was less confident and generally disadvantaged in the early years because she had less sexual experience than women born in later generations. Conversely, Lily, the youngest of the women, experienced more internalisations of a hypersexualised culture that coloured her early attitudes towards her own sexual self-concept.

3. *Sexual relationships of consequence*

Following on from early experiences, acquiring a committed sexual partner was given much significance for women, and it was during this time that women move onto the stage that Montemurro (2014) refers to as *validation, affirmation and encouragement.* Here, trust and respect become meaningful for many women's sexual experiences, and when available built intimacy and confidence for women. The absence of these relational factors inhibited women's desire and sexual subjectivity. Daniluk (1998) states that having a partner that validates a woman's sexual desirability and encourages her desires helps her to feel more comfortable in her body and her sexual longings.

Validation encouragement and affirmation

Validation occurs when women receive verification of their worth as both sexual partners and women in the relationship market (Byers & MacNiel, 2006). Simon and Gagnon (1984, p. 54-55) state that "interpersonal scripting serves to lower uncertainty and heighten legitimacy". Significant relationships in particular have *sociogenic significance* in that they often align positively with interpersonal scripts, which support monogamous heterosexual couplings (Simon & Gagnon, 1984).

Words such as *trust, respect* and *comfort* were used to differentiate between committed relationships from previous ones. For many women, feeling safe meant they were less motivated to use sex as a way of soliciting attention or validation because commitment itself validated and verified their value. This increased sexual self-confidence as did the fact that sex was experienced as less important longer term, and that one's sexuality was less public than before.

Women's self-perception of attractiveness was also often linked to whether they believe others saw them that way. Bogaert and Brotto (20014) described this as 'object of desire self-consciousness'. Participants acknowledged that when their desirability or desire was affirmed by partners they felt more confident expressing their sexual desire.

Violet stated:

> *Yeah, but also he weirdly loves that I am so into sex, like loves it. And because he's really into it, it makes me feel great.*

For Peony, validation also came in the form of recognition for her care-taking role in sex. She relished in positive feedback from clients:

> *It makes me feel good if I have made them feel happy and good… that is part of me as a person. I have been a caregiver for 15 years. And I am an enabler, and that what I do. So, in this job that I am doing now, I am still doing that. Using my skills to help others. Using my desire and my body to help others… but I enjoy myself at the same time, I really do… I have always been [a caretaker], ever since I was small, I have always looked after everybody else, and that has been my life. And I have been able to get my sexual needs met through that caretaking.*

Dahlia said:

I think because we're so open and honest and communicative with each other and because we know each other well, but we're still exploring as we go along. It's kind of hard to describe, but we know each other's likes and dislikes... Exploring our sexuality in general and we're very comfortable with each other, so we're happy to talk about what we do and what we don't like, and that's very much more of a consensual thing with us.

The women all indicated to some degree that knowing they have pleased or attracted their partner made them feel better about their sexuality and more comfortable with their bodies. As Daniluk (1998, p. 14) asserts, "the opinions and values of someone with whom a woman is highly invested in an intimate relationship will likely be more influential in how she experiences and makes sense of the focus of her erotic desire than the opinions of a stranger". For women to feel like sexual objects, they often look to their partners to tell them it is okay to be sexual or confirm they are sexual and entitled to sexual pleasure (Simon & Gagnon, 1984).

Violet's current boyfriend delights in her curiosity and inspires her sexual exploration, whereas her former partner was largely focused on his own sexual gratification and did little encouraging or affirming. Thus, her new partnership is an advantageous step in her construction of sexual subjectivity.

Similarly, Jasmines boyfriend was body affirming and this gave her self-confidence:

He would be quite happy if I never lost weight, but he knows what I've been through and respects my body, so he is very supportive of that. And it makes me feel great.

Because women's sexuality is very much defined by their appearance (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013), it is important to feel physically desired in order to feel sexual. Thus, partners who affirm a women's physicality are likely to aid women in developing sexual subjectivity.

For Jasmine, encouragement and affirmation was described as *mutual* and *comfortable.* She highlighted consent and reciprocity of sexual relating important aspects of developing her sexual agency and affirming her status as a subject:

> *We're happy to talk about what we do and what we don't like, and sex is very much more of a consensual thing with us.*

These are classic examples of Cooley's (1964) 'looking glass self': when these women are in satisfying relationships, they imagine themselves through the eyes of their partners and feel more desirable and less insecure.

Partners that fail to validate, encourage and affirm

Fahs (2011a) stated that "when discussing coercion, it is not a matter of if women have experienced coercion, but rather a matter of how, in what context, and what the coercion meant to them" (p. 26). Unfortunately, all the women experienced partners who invalidated and disrespected their sexual desire. Such men privileged their own desire or felt entitled to their partner's bodies. This manifested across the spectrum, from a distain for female masturbation and menstrual blood and a disregard for sexual preferences, through to sexual violence and rape.

Dahlia:

> *He was a lot pursuing his own pleasure, but my pleasure was more like a trophy to him. It always felt like it was for him. And*

there were times when I actually wasn't interested and he would actually force the point. It made him feel powerful. And that was pretty much the dynamic through our whole relationship.

Violet:

After he'd been looking at porn for 2 years, and then it was 3 years, and it was 4 years, and all the fantasies, and all the excessive masturbation. It just became more like fucking, and it was more like an act. It just felt like I was the body that he was using to fulfil his fantasy. It kind of became more disgusting, as time went on.

And then the abuse started happening. You start feeling like maybe you shouldn't be quite so vulnerable. So you hold back, and you hold back a bit more, or you're careful with what you say, or you're careful with what you do, or how much they say; and so the more you safe guard and protect, the more you're not being vulnerable or open with that person. And so, ultimately, less desire, less fun, less sensuality.

Even Rose, whose earlier stages evidenced cumulative advantages for sexual subjectivity felt at times responsible for maintaining her partners self-confidence through excessive validation of his performance and minimizing requests:

In the past I used to not want to ask of things in sex, because I didn't want my partner to feel like they weren't doing a good job. That's definitely changed a lot as I matured, but that was a thing for me for some time… I remember faking orgasms… I knew it was important to him that I came, so I wanted to please him in that way, and I thought that you need to cum when you have sex, so it was kind of like that; end of that story.

Jasmine felt rejected by her first husband who was disinterested in sex:

> *I felt very hurt. I think because sex is an emotional thing for most women. For me, it was a real rejection, and it was a real "What's wrong with me?" I took that onto myself. "What am I doing wrong?", and you know, I was very, very unhappy*

She also experienced the extremity of a lack of affirmation and encouragement by rape within her marriage. She describes using sex as a way of ensuring the safety of her children.

> *So clearly, I didn't want any sex with him at all, but there were times when I just gave in because agreeing to it would keep the peace for another day and it might buy some sanctity for the children. And then you hate yourself for that, because you use your body as some sort of barter... You're using sex to buy what you want, which is a few days of peace. And I was horrible, it was just the worst time of my life. And then he started abusing the kids.*

While Peony's experience of sexual caretaking was positive, this sexual role has been referred to as the 'third shift' by feminist scholars (Bolton, 2000), and many women experience negative experiences of this demand in their relationships of consequence.

Lily:

> *His need for sex was often more important than my need for non-sexual touch and emotional intimacy. I felt like it was always my job to fill his 'sex tank' and then I might get something back.*

Lily's experience speaks to 'emotional labour', the requirement to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others"

128

(Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Elliot and Umberson (2008) found that emotional labour appeared most intensely during sexual relationships for married women. This ties into gender scripts which demand that women direct attention away from their own needs to privilege the needs of their partners, which results in "problematic symptoms of gender equality" (Fahs & Swank, 2016, p.48) such as faking orgasm (Fahs, 2011a), sexual compliance (Kaestle, 2009), sexual coercion and violence (DeMaris, 1997), tolerating sexual pain (Elmerstig et al., 2013) and prioritising male pleasure over their own. These experiences speak to social scripts which privilege male pleasure and construct female subjectivity as "powerless, pleasure-less and androcentric" (Wilton & Aggleton, 1990, p. 150).

Because of Lily's earlier experiences of pleasing boys she struggled with feeling allure in her marriage given the lack of ongoing genuine affirmation. She felt guilty that climax as an arduous ordeal for her husband, and his consistent messages that she was not *enough* for him sexually impacted gravely on her sexual confidence. She too cited feeling guilty about masturbating, both in front of her husband and alone.

Male partners such as these who follow gendered sexual scripts that mark men as sexually aggressive and entitled, and women as passive and responsive, stifled the development of sexual subjectivity when they failed to validate, encourage and respect women's desire and bodily autonomy. Tolman (2002) proposed that women's sexual passivity may be reflect a desire to conform to such gender appropriate behaviour.

The social construction of marriage

Even though we live in a sexually charged society, discomfort with conceptualising sex outside of marriage persists (Blaisure & Allen, 1995), and as a society we place significant value on marital

129

relationships (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). Women are 'educated in romance' and socialised to believe that finding a long-term partner is a chief concern (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). Heterosexual relationships bring status (Montemurro, 2006) and enable some women permission to be more sexually active without fear of violating cultural or religious values. This makes the transition to marriage appealing for many women, especially for older women such as Peony:

> *Marriage meant I could be sexual and not be judged. I couldn't wait to get hitched – I was so horny! Unfortunately, we were both really useless at it to start. But we had to learn how to enjoy each other's bodies because we were married.*

Violets perception of marital sex as *pure* and unmarried sex as *dirty* calls attention to the way in which marriage and gendered marital roles are constructed in western culture.

Similarly, Jasmine found the prospect of marriage appealing:

> *He was like, "We need to be married"; still being pretty embroiled in the Mormon Church; you don't have sex before you married*

Despite marriage being a social sanctioned site of sexual expression, sexual issues are a common contributor to marital dissatisfaction and dissolution (Hall & Fincham, 2006). As Dempsey and Reichert (2000) found, we generally perceive sex within a marriage as predicable, responsible and infrequent. A decline in frequency has also been reported (Rutter & Schwartz, 2012). Marriage therefore is seen to chasten and change sex. This was both reinforced and rejected by participants.

Violet:

There were other times when I was like, "I'm totally not interested in this, and why do we have to do this?" and then it was more of a trying to be into it because you're supposed to, because you love him. Some of the times it was one, some of the times it was the other.

Dahlia:

I was just living with him, really, and kind of going through the motions.

Jasmine:

I think I really appreciate security and that those things... sex isn't separate; it's a part of the whole package, and for us it has gotten better.

Some women felt constrained by social constructions of what a healthy married sex life ought to look like.

Lily:

Once I was married - a part of that social contract was a sustainable healthy sex life. But after a number of trespasses and difficulties, I lost interest in him. He repulsed me. Sex was advertised as this path to reconnection, and marriage a place of stability and support – but for us it just became problematic. My body couldn't be willed into desire. I thought the problem was me – but maybe it was the relationship?

For Lily, marriage proved challenging as she found it hard to maintain the façade of hyper sexuality over time. She internalised that being a good wife meant responding to her partner's sexual needs and interests, even if they made her feel uneasy. Clearly this experience stifled her development of sexual agency.

Past experiences affected whether or not women marked marriage as influential, or positive/negative in their sexual development, as the Gendered Sexuality through the Life Course (GSLC) model also stresses (Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012).

Cumulative impacts

Although women feel sexual desire, concerns about its legitimacy and appropriateness sometimes constrain their comfort about expressing it (Daniluk, 1998). Thus, significant relationships and marriage act as social institutions that can validate and affirm desirability and sexual worth.

Religious women, and women of older generations were more likely to view marriage as a turning point that enhanced their understanding or security in their sexuality where they felt a greater level of commitment from their partners, or when they were able to shed the stigma associated with premarital sexual promiscuity. Initial stances on sex influenced women's feelings about sex in marriage, for example, older women like Peony and Jasmine with negative early stances on sex experienced marriage an opportunity to shed negative beliefs and see sex as legitimate and appropriate for the first time.

Negative or stigmatised experiences within significant relationships generated disadvantage while positive experiences or socially valued transitions generate advantage (Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012). The role of partners' expectations and the recurrent implications of privileging men's sexual desire over women's highlights how intimate relationships operate as a means through which gendered inequality is constructed and maintained. This undermines women's sexual subjectivity. Conversely, when partners affirmed desire or desirability, women gained confidence in their

sexual desire, which helped them move on to other role changes such as motherhood or divorce.

4.   *Role and relationship changes*

As women move through adulthood, most experience several significant role and relationship changes that influence their sexuality. This section focuses on how two such transitions: the dissolution of significant relationships and motherhood, affects the way women feel about their sexual desire, and precipitate new understandings of the sexual self.

Relationship

Although previous research has studied divorce/dissolution as a status transition, most have concentrated on the process of uncoupling (Amato, 2000), or how sexual attitudes and behaviours change after divorce (Wade & DeLamater, 2002). In contrast, I examine the degree to which divorce and the dissolution of significant non-marital relationships act as catalysts for the development of sexual subjectivity.

For all participants, the end of significant long-term relationships often marked as pivotal moments in their sexuality. The realisation that they would once again have the opportunity (or burden) of seeking new sexual partners spawned reflection and growth. Lily described this experience as:

Eye opening, anxiety producing, and exciting.

While the initial ending of a relationship often triggered feelings of depression and disappointment at the loss of a future vision (which inhibited sexual desire during the period of crisis and separation), the end of a significant relationship acted as a catalyst for sexual self-

discovery, providing women the opportunity to write a new story and make new rules in subsequent relationships. In line with research by Daniluk (1998), a pattern emerged whereby new relationships inspired more sexual self-confidence and positive sexual self-image.

Post-divorce partners that sought to satisfy helped these women to gain sexual confidence and enhanced their sexual satisfaction. For example, similar to the findings of Waskul and colleagues (2007), who noted that some women's post-divorce boyfriends 'discovered' their clitorises for them, Violet's partner *awakened* her and encouraged her sexual assertiveness. So intense was the transformation she refers to it as a *rebirth.* She states:

> *I just tried to basically forget what it was like before, and just see it as a new beginning and a fresh start. It's always like everything sexual in me was dead for so long, that it was like a new awakening to come alive again and be like, "Oh, I do have sexual desire". I thought that because I had babies that it must just all be ruined after that and you don't get to enjoy sex anymore, but actually it was just because I was with a man that did not particularly interest me.*

In this new relationship, Violet pursued her own desire, and, high on validation and encouragement from her partner she discovered fresh aspects of her sexual desire:

> *Yeah, and the safer I feel and the more loved I feel, basically the better the orgasm is. When we're going through a period where I feel like he's really into me and things are going really well, the sex exponentially gets better.*

Dahlia also realised a greater capacity for sexual pleasure after separating from her long-term boyfriend, and father of three of her children. Dissatisfied with an ongoing desire-discrepancy and feeling

suppressed in her sexual expression, once single, she grew more confident about communicating what she wanted and needed in sexual encounters. For Dahlia, the role change from long-term partner to single woman was inspirational for the next sexual self she could not be in her relationship. This required a renegotiation of identity, which at times provided uncomfortable.

After it was over it was just like suddenly I had back my power in myself personally. I kind of went through a period where I went a bit nutso trying to find myself again. And I kind of went, I guess, a bit extreme, but I suppose it's not really surprising when your partner sort of beat you down for 11 years. And I never had that finding myself as a thing, because I ended into a serious long-term relationship when I was 17, so I never really fully found myself. And so I sort of did all of that after the relationship stopped.

Peony's narrative offered a unique 'part-of-the-whole' to consider. Older women are often aware of ageist cultural perceptions of later life sexuality (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2005). As such cultural scenarios that imply asexuality among those over forty constrain intrapsychic scripts and imagined sexual futures. Such women may be hesitant to attempt dating for fear of rejection. However, Peony rejected this denial of her sexuality and experienced meaning and purpose in sex work after three failed marriages.

I find that I do get bored with men. And that is why this job [sex work] is perfect for me, because I have variety – and that is where I am at. I have learnt that I get bored if I am with the same man for too long. It is very interesting actually. I have spent quite a bit of time thinking about how I operate sexually.

For Lily, through dating and casual sex, she discovered enjoyment of sexual variety. Getting divorced led her to better understand her

135

body and sexual preferences, and through this transition she came to perceive herself as a person with sexual yearnings. Divorce provided perspective (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). She no longer felt constrained by someone's perception of her – leading her to feel more confident and act and feel like a sexual subject going forward.

However, Lily also experienced fear around *get[ting] stuck* in a sexually unfulfilling relationship again. Her concerns resonate with the work of Esther Perel (2006), who highlights the paradox that sexual excitement requires an element of uncertainty and risk, and that the defining features of long-term relationships (i.e. stability, safety, certainty and comfort) may be antithetical to the attainment of such experience.

For Jasmine, the difference in her attitude and enjoyment of sex is most profoundly captured in comparing before and after transitioning out of her marriage.

> *Sex is now a time of replenishment and reconnection, whereas in my abusive marriage, it was this thing that I dreaded.*

A survivor of rape and abuse, she identifies how that transition occurred.

> *I thought I would never trust anybody again, but you go through a process, you go through seeing yourself as a victim, and then seeing yourself as a target, and then seeing yourself as a survivor, and then seeing yourself thrive, and I think I'm kind of between those last two places now. Just trusting somebody enough to let your walls down is really hard, and I lived like a nun for a very long time.*

New partners and experiences made women feel more sexually confident and exploratory. This aligns with Waskul and colleagues (2007), who found that sexual subjectivity followed sexual

experimentation and new encounters. In particular, women that had come from sexually problematic marriages began to see themselves differently through a sexualised relationship. Such partners were novel to women who had been in sexual relationships that centred on their former partners sexual needs (Gavey, McPhillips & Dogherty, 2001). Like the women interviewed by Watson and Stelle (2011), they set aside religious and social prohibitions to develop a fresh perspective over the significance of physical intimacy.

Motherhood

Motherhood is a complex subject, with social, psychological ramifications, as well as physiological changes. This section deals with the social and psychological changes. All of the mothers interviewed experienced the transition to motherhood as transformative to their sexual being-in-the-world.

Post-partum women experienced *overwhelm, a sense of responsibility* and a *change in the relationship* dynamic as initial impediments to desire. In the months following childbirth, many women entered a sexual wasteland. They had no interest in sex, no sexual thoughts or fantasies, and no erotic dreams.

Rose:

> *My body was physically healed. But those first five or six weeks were quite extreme, because, you know, I had just been through birth and was just totally all about my baby. So, I'm pretty sure there was no desire in those first weeks – I wasn't masturbating or having sex. I wasn't thinking about it, like, at all. So much of my physicality was being sapped from me. Even self-care becomes a problem – looking after myself – because I was so focused on this little being – so even making sure I was having a shower or eating right. Everything about myself became*

Rose did not view the lack of sex or a decrease in her sexual desire as problematic, or an indication of relational trouble. She experienced it as a rational and normal consequence of a significant family transition. For other women such as Lily and Dahlia however, the transitory period was extended, and this some caused relational conflict. As Lily reported *there must be something wrong with me*. After six weeks or so, avoiding sex is viewed as an inappropriate response to overcome (Daniluk, 1998).
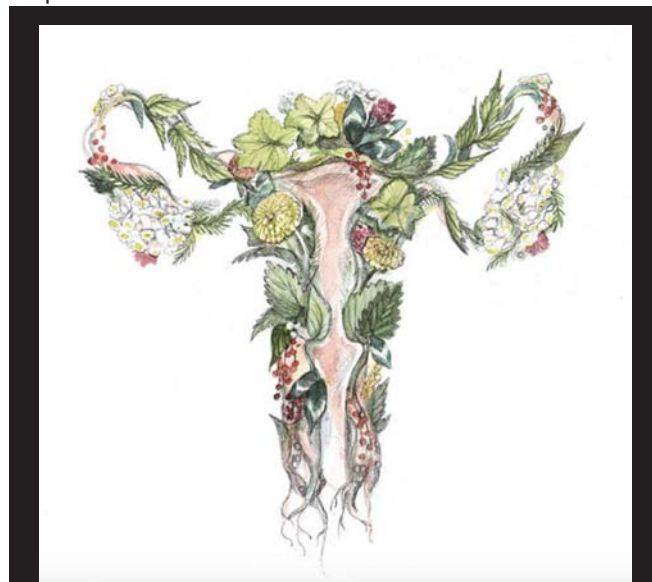
Figure 13. Abundance (reflexive practice)

Body and identity are inseparable as she reorganises and makes space for the new. This requires a renegotiation – both internal, and in relationship. with others

An experiential clash of roles was common, as women tried to integrate their new identity as mothers and their identity as sexual persons (Daniluk, 1998).

Lily:

I also had a lot of trouble shifting gears. Like, I felt I had to be totally available to my child and so this other life – the life before I had my child, where I was perceived as vivacious, interesting and desirable, it all kind of came to a crashing halt, and that was a bit adjustment for me.

Here Lily internalised an intrapsychic script that the two selves are inconsistent (Ussher, 1989). Gillian (1982) states, that this is in part, due to women's worlds being understood as a web of connections, which teaches them to prioritise relationships with others over individual achievement (Gilligan, 1982). Sex for pleasure is seen as self-focused, and this is at odds with a culture that idealises a self-sacrificing mother (Guendouzi, 2005). Mothers are sensitised to the needs of their child, and this may cause them to avoid engaging in sex, or decreasing its priority (Montemurro, 2006). They also feel that their bodies are 'not their own' (Rich, 1976). For example, Dahlia said:

I found out that he was obsessing over breasts and I got really upset about it, but he was always like this. Breasts were like this, this really strongly sexual thing for him and I was very much nervous. I thought, "Babies to have food", and I just really hated the idea of him looking at my breasts in a sexual way. It just felt really gross. Before I had babies I was all for; yes, grope my boobies, it feels great. And I really enjoyed it as part of foreplay and sex, but once I started breastfeeding it just felt really weird, and so I didn't enjoy it anymore.

The role of mother may also affect ones needs for physicality, given she receives much closeness and physical affection from her baby. Daniluk (1998) highlights an absence of discourses about mother-baby sensuousness.

Dahlia:

I felt a lot of closeness and physical affection from my child, so I think in a weird way my sexual needs were being met. I just remember feelings of closeness and warmth. And it is just nice having them next to you. And there is a real purity in that feeling.

For Lily this was in part, understood in reflection to her earlier experiences.

> *I found mothering to be really natural, and the sensuousness I was getting from my baby felt good, whereas sex felt confusing. I had a lot of guilt around it.*

Sexual activity plays an essential role in motherhood and life, and it is also linked to health and relationship benefits (Rutter & Schwartz, 2012), yet public expression of sexuality is still primarily associated with women who are young, childless and unmarried (Dempsey & Reichert, 2000). Kaplan (1990) highlights how media depictions of female sexuality "exclude or marginalise" mothers (p. 422), positioning them as asexual or matronly (Montemurro & Siefken, 2012). Guendouzi (2005) highlights the double standard of parenthood, in that once a woman becomes a mother she is expected to be responsible and behave in a culturally conservative way. This was particularly problematic for Lily, who desired to resume dating as a new parent:

> *I felt I was going to be letting my baby down or not being an attached parent if I was interested in sex.*

Given cultural assumptions about single mothers and sexual responsibility, Lily expressed deep concern over how to balance sexual desire, relationships and her role as a mother. Her strategy was to compartmentalise roles. Similar to the teenagers in Schalet's (2011) study who felt they needed to hide their sexuality from their parents, mothers who feel their sexuality should be concealed, often turn it into a separate part of their identity.

Paula Nicolson (1986) claims that part of the process of taking on the new status of mother is mourning one's independence while figuring out a way to negotiate new roles and old relationships and construct

a new identity. However, Daniluk (1998) points out "women and their partners are faced with the absence of realistic sexual paradigms by which to reconstruct their sexual lives and renegotiate their sexual expectations once they become parents" (p. 166).

Cumulative impacts

With the exception of Peony, desire issues were prevalent in all of the marriages that ended in divorce. Divorce gave these women an opportunity to seek new experiences. Though the initial stress of the divorce should not be minimised, ultimately transitioning the relationship was a catalyst for greater sexual subjectivity in subsequent relationships. Liberated from unsatisfying relationships and inspired by anomic sexual possibility, the divorced women tended to approach sex with a different level of consciousness. Rather than focusing primarily on the love relationship or basking in feelings of being chosen, they acted decisively and judiciously, rejecting partners with whom they did not feel sexual chemistry.

Similarly, becoming a mother influenced a lifelong process of developing sexual subjectivity. In their early years of mothering, the women lamented a lack of time and the demands of children–which impeded their sex lives and their enjoyment of and desire for sex. They craved time for themselves and tried to establish boundaries where they could (Montemurro & Siefken, 2012). Mothers also struggled with balancing their identities as sexual people with their roles as caregivers and role models for their children.

Though becoming a mother rarely enhanced the development of sexual subjectivity, women with strong sexual relationships with their spouses before children, such as Rose, were less disadvantaged by the transition. Women who had children soon after being married or whose early perspectives on sex tied it to procreation often experienced a cumulative disadvantage associated with

motherhood because they had not had a chance to develop their sexuality or learn about the pleasures of sex. The same was true of women who were less comfortable with their sexuality because they lacked the experience before marriage. Once they took on the asexual role of mother, they had trouble thinking about their sexuality and sexual pleasure, which did not benefit them going forward.

5. Embodied changes

In this stage, sexual subjectivity progresses when women learn about themselves through physical changes. As women's bodies change they may recognise their strength and feel empowered or accomplished, which brings them greater self-confidence. For example, when women experience pregnancy and motherhood, many realise that commonality of their sexuality, and their shame or embarrassment about sex and bodies is reduced. For other women however, body changes diminish their strength and thus decrease sexual agency. The more alienated women feel from their bodies, the less comfortable they are with their sexuality (Langer, 2000). This embodied process also extends to issues pertaining to physical health.

Conception, pregnancy and the maternal body

The physical processes associated with motherhood had a marked impact on how women experienced their sexual desire. For Rose, sexual excitement increased when pregnant:

> *My husband was really attracted to my body as I was pregnant, and I was crazy horny. That is just how it was.*

For Peony, an unplanned pregnancy resulted in the decision to terminate, and confounded her attitude towards sex and pleasure for some time. Her artwork depicts her experience of that embodied experience on her sexuality:
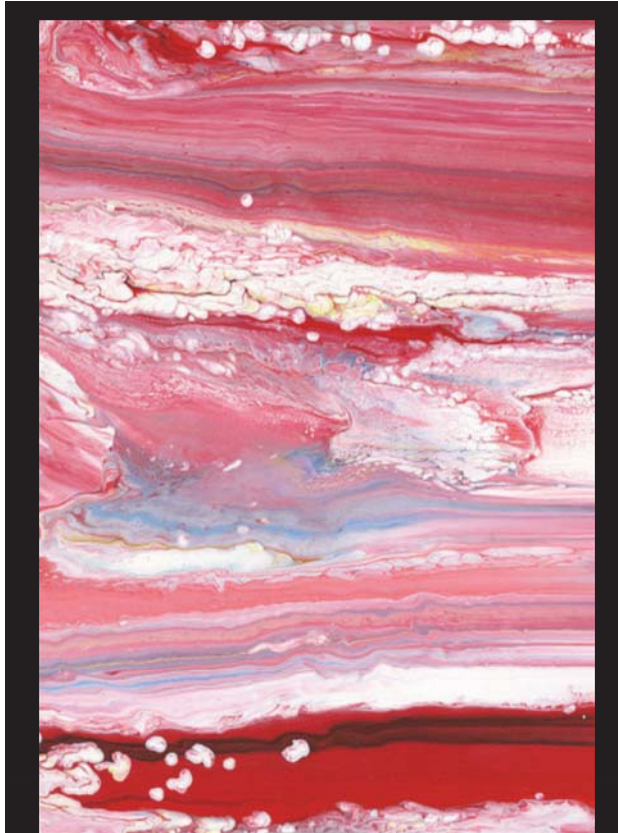
Figure 14. Youthful paradox (reflexive practice)

Her desire evolves through the intersection of biological and social forces – the assimilation of new selves – inhabiting changed and changing bodies.

I am disembodied – no arms or legs, and hollow in my belly. I feel numb, featureless and un-woman-ly. My womb is empty and I feel no sexual desire – only loss, grief, shame and confusion. Pleasure feels distant, foreign and unattainable. That part of my body is damaged. I guess the figure is also alone, and that is how I felt. My boyfriend was young and dumb, and didn't understand my grief. He wanted to resume sex quickly. He didn't feel the pain. The texture of the piece is also imperfect – my physical body is scarred from the experience, and sex had a heaviness to it for a while.

Peony's decrease in desire is in line with research by Fok, Nelson, Siu and Lau (2006), who found that women were not only afraid of

conception, but also viewed sexual pleasure as the origin of "their need to destroy a new life" (p. 258). In line with other research on women with abortion histories, Peony went on to develop an avoidant relationship style (Bianchi-Demicelli et al., 2002). In addition, Coleman, Rue, Spence and Coyle (2008) discovered that abortion was associated with more positive attitudes toward casual sex, which correlates with Peony's experience.

Akin with the social changes related to childbirth and early motherhood, when women cede control over their bodies to motherhood, many of the initial physiological changes inhibited their development of sexual subjectivity (Ahlborg, Dahlof & Hallberg, 2005).

Violet:

> *I did not like sex when pregnant, even when I could have sex. I had these weird Braxton Hicks contractions afterwards, and it was just continuously screw with my head that there was a baby right there and it was just wrong on some level; we just didn't like it at all, and I could; there were times when I wanted to have sex, but then when we did, I was like, "You are poking the baby, stop it". It was gross.*

> *The funny thing is I was embarrassed about my body when I just had a baby; especially the first babies, when you feel like all of your privates are ruined. And that'd been torn, and nothing looks the same, like sex basically hurts or is terrible.*

Lily:

> *I was leaking milk, had a saggy tummy, I was often covered in vomit. I just felt like a really unattractive animal.*

I just didn't really want to have my body invaded again. The birth was horrific, with a cascade of interventions, and my baby was delivered with forceps. And so I kind of just felt like my body had been used, poked and prodded, and sex was just going to be another 'done to' my body that didn't respect my boundaries and need for self-containment. I wanted to keep myself to myself for a bit.

For Violet, body-esteem issues in regard to permanent changes in her body had to be managed in the context of a new relationship:

My boobs look like I've breastfed four babies, because I have breastfed four babies. And they're smaller than they probably were when I was 16, and they're saggier; they look okay, but I want to look beautiful for him, because I didn't have 4 babies to him. They're not his children; he hasn't seen me go through that and know that I've given him these beautiful gifts. At least a husband should appreciate that you've sacrificed your body for their sake, for his offspring, but they're not his offspring; so he doesn't even get that.

However, this was not always the case. The experience of pregnancy inspired Lily toward sexual subjectivity as she felt strong and empowered:

I felt incredibly sensuous and womanly and, like 'creating life'. There was something really honoured. It is this weird thing, because pregnancy/motherhood and sexuality are often viewed as these distinctly separate things but absolutely for me there was something ripe and sexy about that experience.

Menstruation, menopause and aging

Women also engaged in emotion work when managing their bodies and bodily fluids during sex, in part because women's bodies are often labelled as leaky, troublesome, messy, disgusting, and difficult to manage. For example, women managed their partner's perceptions of menstrual blood as *gross*, felt they must clean up after having menstrual sex, and emphasised their partner's feelings about menstrual sex, often at the expense of their own pleasure (Fahs, 2011b).

Rose:

> *When I have my period he [my husband] doesn't want to have sex... I don't mind it. He doesn't like it at all. So we never have sex during my period.*

Peony:

> *Its great not to worry anymore. Lots of younger girls I know don't work when it's the time of the month. Clients tend to not like it.*

This emphasises how women manage others' perceptions of their body alongside their own perceptions of themselves. Another study on menstrual sex found that one third of women said that they would *never* engage in it, often because it threatened their partners, though women in relationships more often engaged in menstrual sex than those who were not (Allen & Goldberg, 2009).

Converse to the majority of literature on older-age sexuality, many women experienced the physical aging process as one of transformation and self-discovery (Kingsberg, 2002). Rose experienced becoming *more comfortable in her skin*, and Jasmine felt more *self-assured* and *centred* in who she was as a sexual person.

Women learn that they older they get, the further they are from societal ideals of conventional beauty. Lily's experience of her body

highlights this negotiation. Possessing a socially desirable body as a young woman, she feels that she undervalued her desire in an effort to get attention for her physical form:

> *I am slim and pretty and so as a young woman, I think I have what society would deem to be a desirable body. And that made me feel good – willing to be naked and sexual. But there are challenges there too because I have had to deal with and become comfortable with imperfections in my body and that has rattled how I have approached and understood desire in my life. It has forced me to reflect on and evaluate what I get out of it rather than viewing sex as a currency.*

Women such a Lily, learn to evaluate themselves on appearance, and to view their bodies as an object to be looked at and consumed by others. She knows how older women are viewed in western culture, and has had a hard time feeling attractive when her appearance deviates from convention. As Margaret Gullette (1997) has noted, culture ages us as much as biology does – perhaps even more so.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) developed objectification theory to explain this phenomenon. They postulate that sustained sexual objectification gradually socialises women to objectify themselves, that is to view themselves from an observer's perspective (Pellizzer, Tiggemann & Clark, 2016). In order to grow, Lily is developing a broader, more complex sexuality than the one encouraged in her youth, one that is not wholly focused on physical appearance.

For the younger women, they acknowledged an expectation that desire and desirability would decrease with age, but were more concerned about motherhood and significant sexual relationships, which were their pressing experiences. Rose stated:

I still feel good about how I look and things. I hope it doesn't change. I hope it gets better. As I get more comfortable in my skin and less inhibited by social stuff, maybe. I would hope that as I get older.

However, for older women like Peony, age and sexuality is a more present concern. Because there is little public recognition of older women's sexuality, Peony believed she would follow the same pattern, but was surprised to maintain a robust interest in sex, coupled with physical urges and the seeking out of sexual gratification through masturbation or partnered sex. This concurs with recent studies into older women's sexuality (Gledhill, 2011).

Even the doctors are shocked and curious when I ask for STD testing.

As women age, oestrogen levels decrease and women begin to experience menopause, which can have acute effects on sexual organ functioning and desire (Freedman, 2014). Among western women it typically occurs in their forties or fifties, as was the case with Peony. A number of other participants told me they were experiencing peri-menopause, the precursor to menopause, when hormone levels fluctuate, causing symptoms such as hot flashes, depression, night sweats, or irritability, as well as changes in menstrual cycles (Daniluk, 1998). While most literature highlights the deleterious effects of menopause on sexual functioning and desire, the women interviewed experienced positive consequences during and after menopause. For Jasmine, who identified as *chronically fertile*, the passage to menopause was seen as something enhancing her sexual subjectivity in that she could enjoy sex without fear of another accidental pregnancy. For Peony, menopause caused an increase in her sexual desire and did not impact upon her lubrication.

If I wasn't doing what I am doing now, I don't know, yeah, I don't know how I would cope with it to be honest.

Several other women agreed that aging could inspire reflection and sexual self-discovery. The process enhanced their sexual subjectivity because they were re-evaluating the importance and meaning of physical intimacy in their lives.

Cumulative impacts

Embodied changes had mixed impacts on women's relationship to their sexual desire and subjectivity, which depending on earlier stages, resulted in a positive or negative development. For example, physical changes associated with pregnancy were positive for Lily, who's history of sexual objectification had limited her enjoyment of her physical body. Through motherhood she discovered a sensuousness and purpose that had been lacking.

The aging process sometimes enhanced sexual subjectivity when women learnt to accept their bodies, as was the case with Dahlia and Rose, or when they felt they had mastered their sexual pleasure, as had Peony. For these women (often with more positive early stances, or learned self-acceptance through motherhood or relationship transitions), aging caused them to better understand their bodies functioning, and have perspective on their social conditioning, thus feeling more comfortable with their sexuality.

In other cases, aging diminished sexual agency when they felt insecure about their desirability, given the correlation between youth and sexual appeal, and especially following the transition through motherhood (Furman, 1997). Such women had often grown up with negative stances on sex or had bad sexual experiences and lacked validation of their desirability or affirmation of their desire. These embodied changes required a renegotiation of sexual identity.

<u>*6.   Self-acceptance*</u>

Aging often yields emotional maturity, and with that maturity, many women learn to accept their bodies as they never did prior (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). This self-acceptance inspires a kind of sexual confidence that most women reported they lacked in their early years. This concurs with Vares, Potts, Gavey and Grace's (2007) study of "mid-later life" women in New Zealand, who found that sexual activity improved with age because they have begun to challenge the male-sex-drive discourse (Fine, 1998).

Peony:

> *I am happy with my body. I am quite happy with myself. I love myself. You know. And that has taken a long long time to get there. That is one of the benefits of aging. You learn from experiences and you draw from you past – and you put it all together and you finally like yourself. You stop seeing yourself through other's eyes.*

Through a process of maturation, many women came to realise that they too deserved sexual pleasure. They learned to (or were learning to) stop focusing on how others viewed them and trying to live up to unrealistic media-driven standards (Montemurro &Gillen, 2013). Finally, they were able to appreciate what their bodies had allowed them to do throughout their lives. This was the case for Peony, who felt deserving of pleasure and agentic about getting her sexual needs met.

A few women under the age of forty were in the early stages of self-acceptance. This was implied in the shifting themes of Roses fantasies:

There are always womanly characters now, and that is a big part of it. They are definitely women – they are not young girls – they are women… Also women that I admire and see as beautiful has changed as I have gotten older, so I don't necessarily look at like, young women. I see them as pretty, but I have a different lens on it now. And I think that is healthy.

She was generally self-confidant and did not worry about her sexual body image in the way that many other participants did or had. Similarly, Dahlia is moving toward self-acceptance, and positions this as happening over time through her own maturing process:

A lot of how I feel and what I am passionate about come from my own life experience… It is strange looking back at how I was as a person – it is almost like being a completely different person. Again, that image of a flower just opening up and blossoming – is almost what it feels like. And just how freeing and empowering it is.

Clearly, positive experiences during other phases – particularly early experiences and self-discovery through role/relationship changes – can bolster self-acceptance, which is the ultimate step in this process. All of these women recognised the importance of self-realisation as they age. They feel less obliged to emulate unattainable socially driven standards and sexual scripts. Dowd (2012) has noted the significance of self-acceptance in cultivating desire and a sense of personal security as people age. They enhance their wellbeing when they accept their limitations and scale their desires to their capacities.

The other women had not yet reached consistent self-acceptance, arguably as a result of age, as well as the cumulative impacts of negative earlier experiences (Carpenter & DeLamater, 2012).

Throughout women's lives, many experiences and encounters affected their development of sexual subjectivity. Once girls discovered the existence of sex, they took a stance on it that influenced their future experiences. Part of becoming a sexual subject involved "constructing and revealing a public sexual self" (Montemurro, 2014, p. 65). When girls are young and learning about or imagining sex, their sexuality is hidden and private. As they get older and begin to experiment with others, they present a public sexuality in how they talk, display their bodies, and express desire, pleasure and satisfaction. Girls and women who mirror hegemonic displays of hyper sexuality lack authenticity in their public sexual self, but they still put forth an image and allow others, even if only their partners, to see them as sexual.

When early encounters were positive and when women felt supported by others, their subjectivity was enhanced. However, women raised in conservative religious families tented to lack sexual confidence in early sexual experiences because they felt guilt or shame about violating religious or cultural norms. For a number of women raised with conservative religious values, generation mediated the impact of religion. Given the many available models of hyper sexuality, women born in later generations were far more comfortable about non-marital sexual experimentation and their sexuality.

Overall desirability preceded desire. When partners in early sexual encounters affirmed or validated their physical appeal, women felt more confident and interested in sex. Partners who encourage self-gratification, were eager to pleasure, or supported women's interest in sex and sexual gratification helped them to recognise their entitlement to sexual pleasure. In contrast, men who showed little

concern for or recognition of women's sexual pleasure or desire did not bolster sexual subjectivity and sometimes suppressed it. Women from all generations noted that transition to marriage enhanced their feelings of sexual allure because it was a public statement of desirability. Among younger married women, marriage often increased sexual confidence because it gave them a sense of trust or respect or allowed them to reconstruct their sexual identity in a culturally legitimate way. However, marriage also stifled sexual desire when her desire was out of alignment with her husbands, or they maintained different expectations of marital sex.

Common midlife experiences such as motherhood, divorce and menopause, inspired self-discovery. In motherhood, women felt transformations in their body. Though most expressed a diminished interest in sex and did not feel desirable in the early transition to motherhood, over time many recognised and appreciated the power of their bodies. They noted the strength it takes to carry and bear a child and were proud to realise that they possessed such fortitude.

The end of significant relationships, though rarely welcomed, often gave women an opportunity to reinvent their sexual selves. They reflected on failed relationships, considered their personal desires, and often sought them out in new relationships or sexual encounters. Many ultimately found breakups liberating because they helped them become more independent and self-aware. Mothers who had divorced had difficulty balancing their roles and identities as mothers with those of sexual women, which complicated their post-divorce sexual identities. Most of the single mothers told me that they compartmentalised their identities and hid their sexual sides for fear of sending inappropriate messages to their children and others.

As women aged they came to terms with declining fertility and changed physical appearance. For some, aging stimulated self-acceptance. Over time, they learned to care less about other's expectations and define and refined their own sexual interests and needs.

I found that generation mattered in the development of sexual subjectivity. Women born in later generations were quicker to become confident and shed negative stances about sex because they can of age in a time where premarital sex was normative, hyper sexuality was embraced, and information about sex was more readily available. Religion had a significant effect on women of all generations. Those from conservative backgrounds recalled early proscriptive messages about sex and said that sexually active girls were tagged as immoral.

Given the wealth of information and the diversity of women's sexual experiences, I was unable to address all of the experiences that shaped participant sexual development. Although I have detailed the major influences on women's development of sexual subjectivity, episodes such as a health crisis, or a period of depression also played a significant role in suppressing sexual desire.

The significance of sexual scripts and double standards

As Dahlia so eloquently said, *women assemble the puzzle of their sexuality through their lives*, influenced by socialisation, experience, and consequent personal growth. Carpenter and DeLamater (2012) have suggested that these pieces can yield advantages or disadvantages in subsequent experiences. Cultural scenarios from certain generations or a national culture influence intrapsychic scripts, which affect interpersonal scripts and interactions (Plummer,

2010). Throughout the women's lives, sexual scripts influenced sexual decision-making and self-image. The women with whom I spoke communicated a strong awareness of sexual double standards, and though some suggested these were changing, many believed in the dominance of gendered norms that differentiate women's and men's sexual desire and behaviour. Showing keen interest in sex or sexual pleasure outside (and sometimes inside) of committed relationship was generally perceived as deviant. Even when a woman rejected sexual double standards personally and felt confident in their desire, they still have to negotiate such noncompliant behaviour within a gendered world (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). As the personal is political, the sexual is social. Women do not simply act on or have physiological desires. Desire is influenced by cultural constructions (Elliot & Umberson, 2008), and women navigate among mixed, age-variant messages about sexual expression.

Developing sexual subjectivity and a sense of entitlement to sexual desire and pleasure may be easier as women get older because sexuality becomes more private. As women age, marry, or become mothers, they are culturally desexualised. Thus, they deal with fewer expectations about expressing or displaying their sexuality. They must construct their sexuality in a personal way because the roles that most take on as they move through life define them as non-sexual. In other words, aging can be liberating. Although women of all ages want to feel attractive and appealing, the audience with whom they hoped to curry favour narrowed as they grew older. Married women wanted their husbands to continue to find them desirable, but cared much less about men in general.

Women also defined their value more broadly as they aged. In adolescence and young adulthood, many girls and women put much more effort into their physical appearance and sought

validation of their allure by attracting men's attention. Relationships brought status. But as women grew older, they garnered validation from other aspects of life, such as motherhood, work and experience. Validation of self-worth and desirability on multiple levels also bolstered sexual subjectivity.

Women with greater sexual subjectivity are women with greater power. Sexual experiences, relationships, and role transitions can enhance sexual subjectivity when women feel in control of decisions about sexual activity and the use of their body. In contrast, non-consensual sexual interaction, the sense of being at the mercy of sexual pressures or expectations, and a belief in gendered sexual scripts based on a male sex-drive discourse all stifle sexual subjectivity. Among participants, women who lacked information as girls or young adults were more likely to feel alienated from their bodies and objectified during sexual activity. Knowledge functioned as power for girls whose families were open about sex.

Sexual subjects have self-confidence – they act judiciously. They know their bodies and generally feel mentally and physically in control of their sexuality and sexual decision-making. Possessing sexual agency and self-confidence gives women the power to write and tell their own sexual stories. And "the power to tell a story, or indeed not to tell a story, under the conditions of one owns choosing, is part of the political process" (Plummer, 1995, pp. 26). Women's sexual power is compromised by sexual double standards and scripts that make their expression of sexuality deviant. Nonetheless, all of the participants experienced the development of sexual subjectivity during their lives. Though the plots and characters of their stories varied, their stories were their own.

The journey to understanding

The aforementioned sections interpret participant experience of sexual desire. This hermeneutic phenomenological approach revealed aspects of how these women construct sexual identities in a social world, and how this process evolved over time. Themes identified and analysed during interpretation were considered across all participant data to form a longitudinal narrative of the experience under consideration. In other words, the study moved across the hermeneutic arc from explanation toward a deeper understanding of the experience of female sexual desire (Van Manen, 1996).

Figure 15. Hermeneutic circle (reflexive practice)

The text appears chaotic and distinct at first glance I find myself grasping at essences in the process of reading, writing and re-reading. The part and the whole become clearer as my thinking distils. A semblance of clarity, an approximate knowing of something. Her sexual-self hood emerges, and something pertaining to the ethics of sexual action.

While "an event belonging to one stream of consciousness cannot be transferred to another stream of consciousness... something can pass from one to another" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 74). It is my intention to pass on

something of the experience of female sexual desire to readers of this study. In line with qualitative research's valuing of process over outcomes, it was never quite clear what would emerge from participant consciousness, nor what interpretations would arise in the hermeneutic circle. In order to interpret how these women made sense of their sexual desire, the researcher was required to get "lost deep in conversation" with the text (Sharkey, 2001, p. 160), through entering the figurative world of the sexual being and trying not to disturb the natural environment (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). In this way, I became what Patton (2002) refers to as "the measuring instrument" (p.14). Once located in the world of each participant, I was able to grasp at understanding of their experience, and reveal this new knowledge through interpretation.

The use of multiple methods enabled participants to peel back layers of potentially protective metaphorical clothing to reveal their lived experience of sexual desire. "Many roads lead to the experience of sexual desire and many emerge from it. However, tangible we wish desire to be; there is something metaphorical about it" (Levine, 2007, p. 96). Artwork data in particular enabled "a transferability and material detachability of attributes and states" that would otherwise have been hidden (Schaverien, 1992, p. 42).

Interpretation of results

Layering on top of how women make sense of the nature and life course of their sexual desire, the philosophical themes that resonated most closely with this experience were '*acknowledging the sexual self*' and '*relational sexual ethics*'. These emergent themes articulated how participants were situated within their sexual worlds, how they understood themselves as sexual beings, and how they treated/were treated by those whom they engaged with sexually. This aligns with hermeneutic phenomenological work that centralises

158

such themes to the understanding of humanity (Ricoeur, 1992). Therefore, this study evidences consistency between the informing philosophy and the emergent knowledge produced. These themes will be discussed in the following sections.

Acknowledging the sexual self

Acknowledging the self is a hermeneutic process that requires a level of reflection (Gadamer, 1997). This was required from participants in the elicitation activities, whereby they were invited to reflect upon their past, present and future sexual selves. This brought intentionality to the experiences that were brought into their consciousness. The meaning produced was shaped by their own history and understandings, but also the history of humanity that enabled them knowledge about what

Figure 16. Self-reflection (reflexive practice)

The women acknowledge themselves as sexual beings – inherently desiring. This forms a part of their identity (sexual self-concept?) which through time is shaped and adapted by their cumulative lived experience. Sense making is in part of social process of comparison (to self over time, and to others). The sexual self is existential (separate from others but constant) and categorical (what type of sexual am I?). It may also include aspirational, value-based and reflective

159

constitutes the experience of sexual desire and a sexual identity in relation to the social world (Gagnon, 1982). Woven into this is the mediation of language, which gave shape and form to experience. Together the participant as author of the text, and the researcher as interpreter, created new meanings of female sexual desire, which once spoken/written/produced, was freed from the participants intent and open to multiple interpretations by unknown readers.

In acknowledging the sexual self, all participants considered the matter of sex as important. Studies have found the meaning of sexual desire to be a social construction (i.e. Giles, 2006). In particular, Kiely (1997) found that cultural and social processes constrain women's ability for sexual expression. In the current study, whilst the ability to express sexual desire was undeniably socially constructed, the meaning of sexual was more of an existential experience. All participants experienced sexual desire irrespective of sexual function, partner availability, health, age or perceived social constraints. Sexual desire was experienced as a mental process that was not dependent on external factors.

Relational sexual ethics

Ethical dimensions of sexual engagement often involved identity and sexual negotiation. In describing the nature of sexual desire, Levine (2003) noted that drive differences create the need for negotiation for every couple. Wood, Mansfield and Koch (2007) noted the distinction made by feminists that women were either sexual subjects who were in control of their desires, or sexual objects who were "used by others, primarily men" (p. 192). In the current study, most participants reported experiences of being sexual objectified and of lacking control over their sexual needs,

and would have easily identified with these conclusions at a younger age. Their narratives however, often demonstrated a self-determination over their sexual needs developing over time.

Ethical dimensions of sexual conduct also involved reciprocity in terms of mutual satisfaction and feelings of closeness – common themes identified by participants in long term relationships. It also involved a respect for each other's sexual desires and contact preferences.

The majority of participants experienced an unethical dimension of sexual engagement within a significant relationship at some point in their lives. This manifested as rejection, betrayal or sexual ambivalence, and was experienced as disappointment, disillusionment, and a questioning of one's own sexual identity and desirability. In addition, a number of participants experienced abuse, which resulted in feelings of disgust, embarrassment, terror, or disconnection from their sexual selves. Such experiences exerted powerful influences on later relationships, particularly in relation to trust and intimacy. Additionally, ethical care was absent in the relationships of participants who had experienced sexual exploitation in their childhood. For those participants, the experience meant confusion around sex, attachment issues, and a lingering perception of being viewed as a sexual object.

Theory surrounding emerging themes

The emergent themes of '*acknowledging the sexual self*', and '*relational sexual ethics*' closely aligned with Ricoeur's (1992) theorising around identity as a concept that could assist in explaining and understanding lived experience. He posited that identity is constructed from characteristics unique to the individual, and by which they are recognisable to themselves and others. One's identity

is subject to two ontological assertions: the idem (sameness of identity), where the person is the same person throughout their life, and the ipse (selfhood of identity), where the self is capable of initiative action immutable only to that self. Self-understanding occurs at the intersection of the idem and ipse.

As already mentioned, participants drew on a level of self-esteem to enable the revelation of deeply personal experiences that involved their own sexual reality, and the reality of others who figured within their texts. Acknowledging the sexual self was fundamental to the creation of sexual narratives, and through this revelation, reflected a consideration of the ethical dimension involved in sexual engagement with others. The genesis of human conduct was framed by Ricoeur as an individual's mode of action (1992). In engaging with others and in eliciting a self-reflected narrative, an ethical imperative entered the narrative domain in regard to participant actions across the sexual relationship.

Part IV: Conclusions and reflections

Figure 17: Marbling 4 (reflexive practice)

Conclusion

Results reveal that the experience of female sexual desire followed a pattern across the life span toward the evolution of becoming a deserving and agentic sexual being. It revealed complex aspects of sexual desire that are often overlooked by sex researchers such as psychic patterning and the impact of contemporary sexual politics on women's sexual self-concept.

It was determined that while social and cultural factors could influence sexual behaviour, sexual desire remained an internal process whereby participants acknowledged cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts, whilst not necessarily being constrained by such influences. The results suggest that sexual desire is an intrinsic and existential human experience which gives rise to sexual expression. Thus, there evidenced a tension between social constructions of sexual desire, and the existential nature of desire. While the results in the current study cannot be generalised to all women, responses demonstrate some women's own participatory understanding of their desire.

Contribution to knowledge

In approaching the current study, I found that previous research surrounding the phenomena of interest was dominated by negativity associated with medicalisation and pathologisation, and poorly defined referents (Meana, 2010). While inquiring to these aspects of sexuality is important and necessary, the results of the current study are intended to provide a broader knowledge base of women's own experiences of sexual desire.

The practical utility of such understandings can be applied across various health and social settings, for example, in informing clinical

practice, and the development of health curricula. Results may also provide an enabling platform aimed at improving communication processes between women, families, the community, and health practitioners. However, more broadly, the study contributes to our knowledge of female sexual desire by re-presenting lived experience that might be "personally transformative and humanising for the reader" (Todres (2007, p. 89).

Validity of knowledge claims

While hermeneutic phenomenology is not subject to a standardised assessment of validity, the presented study can be considered in terms of its adherence to Spencer and Ritchie's (2012) qualitative research guidelines. Firstly, the study contributes to our personal and collective understanding of female sexual desire through the identification of theoretical constructs. Secondly, the methodology was appropriate to the goals of the study and the researcher engaged in an open process of reflexivity (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999). Thirdly, its credibility and rigor can be evaluated by how "vivid and faithful" the description was to the experience lived by participants (Beck, 1993, p. 264). Faithfulness was sought through triangulation over various methods and repetition of contact, to ensure a greater proximity to the participants lived experience (Bannister et al., 2012).

It could be argued that participants sexual lives were given colour and coherence in the researcher's account, however faithfulness will be revealed through an ongoing process of interpretation, and through the accumulation of further knowledge of female sexual desire (Beck, 1993). Narratives are like texts, open to different interpretations (Ricoeur, 1997). We are exposed to different narratives

about the same event or element of knowledge, and we are invited to decode the significance of each particular perspective.

This appraisal aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology's emphasis on the openness and incompleteness of knowledge – whereby wider horizons of understanding of sexual desire will develop through new readings, and inferior knowledge will be discarded (Packer & Addison, 1989). Laverty (2003) situates this as occurring through an ongoing process of academic and social consensus.

Assessing validity of art

Gadamer (1996) invites us to recognise that understanding is revealed in different ways. Artistic representations of phenomena can be more elegant and economical than words due to arts ability to capture more complexity within less space (Reid, 1969). It also has the power to transcend the context of creation, and to illustrate wider generalities through the process of interpretation (Weber, 2008).

Given the elusive essence of art, validity is best understood as 'credibility' (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Barone and Eisner (2012) state that "the virtues to be found in arts based research are not located in some isomorphic relationship between a statement and an event, but are to be found in the degree to which it makes our conversation more interesting" (p. 6). This study adheres to two concepts relevant to this process. '*Structural corroboration*' refers to the importance of evidence within art data that enables it to deepen analysis of study conclusions. Here, it could be argued that inclusion of art data in this study made the analysis more sensitive and complex, particularly throughout the reflexive process. Secondly, '*referential adequacy*',

which attends to the cogency and plausibility of meanings, was apparent in the consistency of themes and understanding across all data mediums. In assessing validity of this study's art-based data, these criteria cannot be applied as operational definitions, but rather discussed and considered through subjective judgment (McNiff, 1998). I argue that this is not a liability, but rather recognition of the particular characteristics of the form of representation that was appropriate for the phenomena being explored.

Limitations of the study

While the current study extends the boundaries of what is known about female sexual desire, several study limitations were identified. Only those members of the community who were willing to engage in a study exploring their sexuality were recruited. Developing rapport with a participant essential for eliciting lived experience, however the study was limited by the information that each participant felt comfortable to impart. In addition, all participants were of European descent and educated, with English as their first language. Thus, participant homogeneity perhaps limited the texture of findings considerably. Generational differences existed across the sample, however, stronger associations could have been made, especially in regard to the later stages of development, with a greater spread in participant ages.

The results of the study were also limited by the environment in which the interviews took place, and by reliability of recall. All participants chose the interview setting – and while some interviews were conducted in the privacy and quietness, one participant chose to be interviewed in a university library with their toddler present, and another was Skyped at home with children around. Both impacted on freedom of speech and audio quality.

Whilst the universal elements permeated through all narratives, in the end all texts were unique and therefore differences in amount and time of information did not alter the conclusions reached.

Future research recommendations

This study attempted to weave together women's own understandings of sexual desire with their broader development toward feeling agentic and deserving of such desire. Missing in this study is a consideration of non-Western women, a demographic often over looked in sexual research (Laumann et al., 2006). In addition, culture and ethnicity are often handled as proxies for other related variables such as education, rural-urban locus, and socioeconomic status, which warrant further inquiry (Helms, Jernigan & Mascher, 2005).

Furthermore, there are relatively few lived experience studies of men's sexual desire, especially exploring sexual self-concept and sexual fulfilment (Kimmel, 2007). Similarly, with research on women's sexuality, the literature on men's desire evidences a significant skew toward negative aspects of sexuality.

There are also few narrative studies which explore older women's sexual desire, and this would go away to normalise older women's sexuality (Daniluk, 1998). As my oldest participant was 59, I was unable to chart further life course changes beyond aging and self-acceptance for older women. While many studies find that interest in sex declines with age, researchers are curious about a cohort effect among the baby-boom generation that may lead to current generations of older women to continue the adventurous and expansive practices of their youth (Waite, 2010).

Lastly, alternative qualitative methods, such as focus groups or participatory-action research, could be used to explore the phenomena of interest, and this would advance our knowledge, particularly in regard to communal meaning-making (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

Figure 18. What lies beneath (reflexive practice)

The task is far greater than I could have anticipated, and so much of the work is below ground, invisible to readers. This visual metaphor translates to desire in that I feel wholly inadequate in my handling of the topic given its enormity. Every thread I pull reveals complex relationships to so many other aspects of life, theories, ways of knowing. I try to find joy in those moments of pure curiosity. The seasons, even the difficult ones, are quite beautiful to witness and relate, and often lead us to a greater depth of self-understanding and compassion.

Reflections on the journey: Concluding statement

Sexuality is woven into nearly every aspect of our lives: pleasure, power, politics, procreation, social roles, religion, identity, health and creativity. The dynamic interaction between sex and all of these spheres inspired me to commence this project. When I first decided to meander down the path of exploring women's sexual experience, I was somewhat naive about the journey. Firstly, I found

169

myself disillusioned by the state of the field, and in trudging through the literature, experienced motivation to reveal unchartered knowledge and challenge what I perceived to be joyless and unsatisfactory 'truths' within the discipline. In engaging with participants, I was privileged and delighted to hear their stories and to share in creative process, and humbled by their courage and transparency. I felt very much 'in relationship' with participants throughout the study – a state that felt meaningful both as a researcher and as a human being. When it came to analysing data, I think I largely existed in a state of overwhelm - at the enormity of the task, and at my own capacity to accurately capture the essence of what was imparted. Adding to this self-consciousness was the knowledge that these stories were *toanga* (treasure), and that I was to *tiaki (*take care of) them. My early educational learning has me feeling nervous at the incomplete-ness of findings, as I am aware that there were many other routes through the text to take, which may have led me to vastly different destinations. However, all in all, I feel grateful for the opportunity to explore new knowledge, to play with alternative methodologies, and to push myself beyond my comfort zone.

"Kua hua te marama" - Something has completed a full cycle.

Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of approval from institutional ethics board

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
ALBANY

3 March 2016

Ms Kate Ferris
57 Manuwai Drive.
Matua
Tauranga 3110

Dear Kate

HUMAN ETHICS APPROVAL APPLICATION – MUHECN15/069
The lived experience of sexual desire

Thank you for your application. It has been fully considered, and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, a re-approval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Dr Andrew Chrystall
Acting Chair
Human Ethics Committee: Northern

cc   Professor Kerry Chamberlain   Professor James Liu
        School of Psychology   Head of School of Psychology
        Albany Campus   **Palmerston North Campus**

Te Kunenga
ki Pūrehuroa   **Research Ethics Office**
                 Private Bag 102 904, Auckland, 0745, New Zealand Telephone +64 9 414 0800 ex 43276 humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz

171

Appendix B: Informed consent form

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
TE KURA PŪKENGA TANGATA

The Lived Experience of Female Sexual Desire
CONSENT FORM

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I consent to the interviews being sound recorded, transcribed and analysed for the purposes of this research project.   agree/do not agree

I consent to having my artwork visually reproduced in the following ways:

- Reproduced in the researcher's thesis   agree/do not agree
- Reproduced in academic journal   agree/do not agree
- Reproduced for presentation at an academic conference   agree/do not agree

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: ....   **Date:** ....

Full Name - printed ....

Appendix C: Information sheet

The Lived Experience of Female Sexual Desire

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

This information sheet is intended to tell you more about this project and to help you decide if you wish to take part. Firstly, my name is Kate Ferris and I am enrolled at Massey University as a Masters student based in the School of Psychology. My master's thesis project is a qualitative inquiry into how women experience and make sense of their sexual desire. The goal is a deeper understanding of both women's experiences and the ideologies that shape those experiences.

I am interested in this topic as there is a lack of research on sexual desire from the woman's perspective, and most research overseas conceptualises it in medical language, thereby simplifying and medicalising women's sexual health. This study seeks to challenge this position by emphasising sexual desire as a complex and multifaceted phenomena, and using a combination of language (interview) and arts-based methodologies to capture its meaning to the individual.

Who is invited to participate?

4-5 participants will be recruited for this project. They must identify as female, be over 18 and willing to openly discuss relevant aspects of their sexuality. A small number of participants is appropriate for qualitative inquiry, which seeks depth over breadth of information. This study does not seek to make generalizations, but rather explore themes both common and unique to participants.

What does the research involve and what would you have to do?

The topic will be explored with participants through two semi-structured audio-recorded interviews (approximately 1-2 hours in duration each). These interviews will take place two weeks apart, and the participant would be asked to complete an autobiographical art project in between. The first interview will be exploratory, and the second will deepen understanding and reflect upon insights gained from the art project. Additional information about the interview and art project is provided on the 'Interview Schedule' document provided. The location of interviews would be at your discretion, and the art project would be completed at home at your leisure. If you require childcare in order to participate in the interviews, you would be welcome to source your preferred babysitter and the researcher would cover the expense at the conclusion of each interview. The total time commitment for participants would be approximately 3-7 hours.

In conjunction with participation, as the researcher I will also complete a longitudinal art project aimed at exploring my own personal sexual desire in order to deepen empathy and fuse my self-knowledge in analysis of participant's experience, as well as charting changes over time.

Combined, the information collected will be analysed and the findings will provide the basis for my thesis discussion. It may also be reproduced in academic journal articles and presentations.

Your rights

It is acknowledged that the research topic is sensitive and personal in nature, and therefore you must be aware that you may experience some mild discomfort during your participation. With this in mind, I would like to remind you that you are under no obligation to accept this invitation to participate in the research. However, should you decide to take part, you have the right to:

- Ask any questions about the research at any time.
- Not disclose anything that you do not wish to, stop and start the interview audio recording at your discretion, and be provided an opportunity to review or retract any information at the conclusion of each interview.
- Withdraw your permission for the project at any time, up to 14 days after final interview.
- Know that all audio-recordings, transcriptions and images that are part of the data set will be treated with care and respect, stored safely and shared only among the project's research team.
- Understand that all information you disclose is confidential and you will not be able to be identified in any publications as all identifying information will be removed to protect your anonymity.
- You will receive a summary of the research on completion.
- Participants will receive a small koha at the commencement of the study to thank them for their participation.
- If you experience any discomfort or emotional anxiety as a result of your participation, a free counseling service can be accessed by phoning 0800 543 354 (Lifeline).

Contact details

The above provides a broad overview of the project and your rights with regard to taking part in this research. If you think you would like to participate, we can talk further about any issues or questions you may have. My contact information is below and I would love to meet with you so that we can talk a bit more about the research. Please be assured that meeting with me doesn't obligate you in any way to take part in the research. You can also contact my supervisor, Kerry Chamberlain, if you have any questions about the research.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this information sheet.
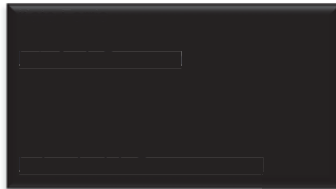
This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application 15/069. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Andrew Chrystall, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800 x 43317, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix D: Jasmine poem transcript

"My drama teacher was a pedophile. He kept this fact hidden for many a long year. His grip was a vice upon those children who caught it the limelight of the stage. He instinctively understood the insecurities of actors and our need for audience approval, so he made his choices wisely, picking boys and girls from broken homes with busy or neglectful parents. He prepared us, carefully cultivating our talent and our trust. He was the God of our theatre, the all-powerful master of our universe, and he was raping my classmates while I was busy waiting for Godot. While I was a tortured Juliet, he was torturing my best friend with his depravity. While I was his paid guest on theatre trips, he was grooming my family. And while I was playing spin the bottle, he was exploiting my boyfriend in ways I cannot even begin to imagine. Yet I was one of the lucky ones, not singled out for abuse. But he robbed me, he stole my memories of the happiest days of my life, and he tossed them away, because I never can say, "Remember this," or "Remember that" from my school-days, because I don't know what was reality and what was duplicity. I was a stage curtain to hide behind, and I was deaf and I was blind. And he didn't mind that he was stealing my childhood, my memories, my truth and reality. He cared about gratification, fornication, molestation and this, this beautiful genius of a man instead of building a legacy created a fantasy and then real reality, because of his depravity, and, oh, the irony, he was the greatest actor of us all. And so the final scenes were played. The secrets, the lies, the torments were outed. He'd flaunted the law, and the law ensnared him, but instead of a trial we got denial. He ended the drama of his life in a suitably melodramatic manner in a squalid caravan. Too many tablets taken. Too much whisky swallowed. He succumbed to oblivion alone, and thus he awaits the final, final curtain call with his maker. But until then, he at least has his memories."

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