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**Embodied Self Pleasure (ESP): A Qualitative, Longitudinal,  
Phenomenological Study of Sexological Bodyworkers' Lived Experience of ESP**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Sonia Waters asserts her moral rights to be referenced as author of the contents of  
this thesis except for the parts attributed to other sources.

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The world will be a better place when politics prioritise pleasure.

## Abstract

Masturbation has been a subject of deep societal tension, marked by centuries of shame and taboos, notably rooted in early Christianity. This study delved into the phenomenon of Embodied Self Pleasure (ESP), a unique fusion of meditation and masturbation that transcends traditional sexual norms and external performance pressures. Eight sexological bodyworkers, all graduates of the Institute of Somatic Sexology, participated in this qualitative and longitudinal study of ESP. Participants were introduced to ESP as part of their training and contributed written accounts detailing their experiences during this period. They also participated in semi-structured interviews conducted eight months after their initial training.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of the data generated one overarching theme: ESP was a journey of self-discovery, characterized by empowerment, diligent self-work, and a profound reconnection with the authentic erotic self. In relation to the experience of ESP itself, three further themes were generated. First, through being present in pleasure, orgasm imperatives were discarded and new pathways to pleasure discovered. Second, resistance was a natural part of the process of transformational learning, and third, ESP was a healing practice of self-love that enabled participants to address issues like porn overuse, arousal difficulties, and past trauma. This study underscores the importance of further research into ESP, particularly its potential therapeutic benefits for sexual and relational healing, extending beyond sexological bodyworkers to the broader public. Recognizing the inherent political nature of pleasure, ESP has the capacity to instigate positive societal change, one profound and delightful moment at a time.

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## List of Abbreviations

CSB: Certificate of Sexological Bodywork

DM: Directed Masturbation

ED: Erectile Dysfunction

EE: Early Ejaculation

EE: Erotic Embodiment

ESP: Embodied Self Pleasure

FOD: Female Orgasmic Disorder

ISS: Institute of Somatic Sexology

OY: Orgasmic Yoga

PTG: Post Traumatic Growth

PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

SF: Sensate Focus

SSEAA: Somatic Sex Educators Association of Australasia

TA: Thematic Analysis

## Introduction

Masturbation is referred to by various terms, including autoeroticism, onanism, self-pleasure, self-abuse, and a wide array of informal expressions like 'jerking off' or 'flying solo'. In early Christianity, masturbation was condemned as a sinful act and associated with themes of immorality and evil (Bennett & Rosario, 1995). In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1978) contended that societal norms dictated that sexuality was only considered acceptable within the bounds of procreation and within heterosexual marriages. Any sexual expressions deviating from these established norms, like homosexuality and masturbation, were effectively silenced and held no place in open discourse of understanding. In other words, there was "nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (Foucault, 1978, p. 4) regarding such matters. Among the suppressed or stigmatised behaviours, there existed myths suggesting that masturbation could result in the growth of hair on the palms of one's hands, induce madness, or lead to blindness (Bennett & Rosario, 1995). Although solo sexual activity is now more widely accepted in contemporary society, it is still viewed as a lesser form of sexual engagement compared to partnered sex, and the enjoyment it provides is frequently intertwined with feelings of shame and societal taboos (Laqueur, 2003).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) "people are sexual beings all their lives" (*Sexual and reproductive health*, n.d.) and sexual health contributes to an enhanced quality of life, not solely defined by or restricted to disease. Interestingly, the WHO did not address the topic of masturbation. The omission reflects a perspective aligned with Foucault's concept of "nothing to see, nothing to know" when it comes to

masturbation. Studies have suggested that masturbation is a natural human instinct and plays a vital role in fostering healthy sexual development (Coleman & Bockting, 2012). However, research in this field remains notably scarce, underscoring the persistent societal taboo surrounding this topic and the necessity for fresh and more open approaches to understanding it.

The practice of masturbation, including the specific actions and thoughts involved, often become habitual, with individuals repeatedly following the same patterns of stimulation and fantasies throughout their lives (Dodson, 2002). Regarding the formation of habits, William James (1890) noted that:

Water, in flowing, hollows out for itself a channel, which grows broader and deeper; and, after having ceased to flow, it resumes, when it flows again, the path traced by itself before (p. 8).

James (1890) further explained that to alter the pattern of a habit, one must engage in new practices, allowing for the creation of a new pathway. This thesis explored the experience of eight people who practiced something new in relation to masturbation.

In the following literature review (chapters one to three), I explore perceptions of masturbation while acknowledging the inherent complexities associated with 'knowing'. Recognising that knowledge is inherently shaped by its context, the community it emerges from, and the power structures in place, understanding is in essence, imperfect, restricted, and subject to interpretation (Haraway, 1988). Within this framework of knowledge, I first reviewed the historical and contemporary context of human sexuality. Second, the evolution of our understanding of masturbation, from its stigmatized history to its more

accepted present-day status followed by what we know about masturbation as a therapeutic intervention. The third and concluding chapter of the literature review, is an overview of ESP, a theoretical framework for contextualising ESP, and concludes with the central research question of the current study.

## Chapter 1: Sex

In this brief history of sex, I have identified first, the historical context of how Christianity came to colonise cultures they encountered and the individual body with the shame and taboo of the 'imperial prude'. Second, the prized and prioritised orgasm as it has been positioned in the body and in partnered sex. Lastly, 'good' sex, what it entails, how it has been normalised, and made being not normal problematic and difficult.

### Colonisation of the Sexual Body

According to St Augustine in 400 C.E., the moment Adam and Eve had sex in the garden of paradise all humanity was condemned to a life of sin (Augustine, 1876; Greenblatt, 2017). St Augustine set out to inform and warn society of the evil nature of pleasure and humanity, pleasures of sex were the 'originale peccatum', the original sin, (Augustine, 1876; Greenblatt, 2017). According to social historian Greenblatt (2017) in his translations of the Bible, St. Augustine declared Eve more evil than Adam for it was she who listened to the serpent, the incarnation of the Devil, and succumbed to his temptations. In this garden of Eden woman became more evil than man. Yet St Augustine (1876) himself was conflicted between the messages of God and his own mortal body, as he said "the temptations of "the lust of the flesh" which still assail me, groaning and desiring" (p. 273). This early 'influencer' of the Christian masses consciously forbade that which he felt strongly in his body.

Strong personal beliefs can develop out of following exactly, or from reacting against, teachings of the time (DeMause, 1996; Mate, 2019). For example, Hitler's childhood of abuse and violence mixed with his sexual feelings for a young woman he had never met

in the flesh, led him to believe his own sperm was poisonous and if he ever had sex with her, his sperm would enter her bloodstream and poison her to death (DeMause, 1996). Hitler projected his own fear of being poison onto Jewish people (DeMause, 1996). Similarly, Saint Augustine (1876) acknowledged that he was “more inclined to all youthful pleasures and vices than to the study of letters” (p. 1) and at the death of a friend, Augustine was “afraid to die lest he [his friend] should die wholly whom I had so much loved” (p. viii). Augustine projected judgement of his own behaviours, that is, love of sex and love of a man, to his teachings that pleasure is sin. He praised God for raising him from his darkest depressed moments in life to one of being saved by the light of God (Augustine, 1876) and encouraged all humanity to follow this path of light.

The consequences of not following the path of Christianity was, for the believers of the time, certain death and condemnation to Hell (Bennett & Rosario, 1995; Greenblatt, 2017). Forbidden erotic pleasures were controlled through fear and associated with darkness. From this Christian framework sexual pleasure was evil (for women and men) and necessary only for procreation, female sexual pleasure was more evil than male sexual pleasure (Winston, 2010), homosexuality a sin worse than masturbation, and people who did not identify as either male or female were deemed invisible as English refused language to identify them (Holmberg et al., 2019).

Language and discourses encapsulate and maintain societal beliefs of the day. For example, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the Catholic Church’s official witch hunting manual (1487) expressed current attitudes to women: “All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable” (cited in Winston, 2010, p. 40). Attitudes have thankfully evolved since then, (but not without sacrifice and effort) yet sexual equity for women remains far

from reach. Feminist scholar Wendy Hollway (1984) identified three dominant heterosexual discourses: 'have-hold', 'male sex-drive' and the 'permissive' discourse (p. 63) in which men were subjects and women objects and often victims of the sexual power dynamic. Almost 40 years later these discourses remain largely unchanged as supported by the abundance of literature on the oppression and suppression of women in sexuality and the maintenance of men's position of power and 'natural' drive for sex and domination (Bennett & Rosario, 1995; Fahs, 2014b; Frith, 2015; Ghodsee, 2018; Hollway, 1984; Tuana, 2004; Winston, 2010).

As discussed in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) regarded Western attitudes to sexuality as inherently prudish and controlling:

For a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today. Thus the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality (p. 3).

The taboos of sex and pleasure and an entire generation of desensitised bodies from the Victorian era (Bennett & Rosario, 1995) were carried on the 19<sup>th</sup> century ships from England to settle on new land and colonise Indigenous people such as Māori of Aotearoa. The acts of colonisation were fraught with conflicting principles and feelings such as those described by Rountree (2000) in the colonisation of Māori through missionaries' wives' eyes (noting that missionaries were men and women's lower status in society meant they could not hold the missionary title directly). Rountree (2000) shared missionary women's written accounts of their experiences in the Bay of Islands early 1800 and noted their belief of cleanliness was a sign of inner purity and godliness. In contrast, Māori "[w]omen's nudity

and their long, unbound hair, along with their apparently greater sexual freedom, were viewed as signs of moral degeneracy” (p. 52). The description of unbound freedom was both apparently attractive and immoral. Similarly, one missionary woman wrote of Māori men: “The tall and muscular forms of the New Zealanders flitted before my mind’s eye whenever I endeavoured to go to sleep” (Rountree, 2000, p. 55). The tension between sexual attraction and fantasy and the rules of religion and patriarchy however, mean that such ‘lust of the flesh’ had to be suppressed. The missionary women were both controlled by patriarchal religious beliefs and agents of that control as they suppressed Māori women’s sexuality by “covering it with English gowns” (p. 61-62) and through forcing compliance embedded shame and taboo on the sexual body.

The colonisation of Aotearoa forced Britain’s patriarchal culture, controlling social structures, and prudish views of sexuality onto Māori, which marginalised and suppressed Māori (Jones, 2017; McIntosh & Workman, 2017; Mikaere, 2011; Pihama et al., 2016; Rountree, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Just as Indigenous cultures were colonised by Foucault’s “imperial prude” of the West, so too has the body been colonised by the patriarchal and controlling culture of Christianity. The one circumstance in which sex was permitted, and indeed necessary for the continuity of humanity, was for procreation.

### **Sex and Orgasm**

As discussed by historian and sexologist Laqueur (2009), early conceptualisations of conception was that the soul of new life entered the body through the experience of orgasm in men and women. Orgasm was understood as a whole body experience of spiritual nature, it was the “material origin of the soul” (Laqueur, 2009, p. 431) in which women ejaculated seed and was necessary for conception (Donaghy, 2020). Identifying the moment of orgasm

became both vitally important and difficult to define (Frith, 2015). In *Orgasmic Bodies* Frith (2015) discussed the elusive nature of orgasm and as science has become more determined to capture its essence, orgasm has continued to evade definition. Nonetheless, many definitions of orgasm exist and they usually include an experience of sexual release, for example, “the sudden, involuntary release of sexual tension” (Marchand, 2021, p. 194), and some include pleasure, such as, orgasm is the “transient peak sensation of intense pleasure creating an altered state of consciousness” (Meston et al., 2004, p. 66) followed by a sense of “well-being and contentment” (p. 66). Yet others suggest it ought include spiritual or emotional experiences, bodily sensations, or feelings of connection with self or intimate other/s (Dodson, 2002). As Frith (2015) said, “orgasm is a mystical and magical thing” (p. 1). Definitions of orgasm fail to be both specific and broad enough to capture the range of lived experiences to be universal (Dodson, 2002). The location of this elusive and magical thing however, is the subject of constant scrutiny, especially in the female body (Frith, 2015).

Realdo Columbus wrote in 1559, that orgasm ought be named “the love or sweetness of Venus” (Laqueur, 2009, p. 431) and at that time, orgasm in women was understood as located in the clitoris (Laqueur, 1986). A dominant discourse that rose from Freud’s studies of orgasm in women was that clitoral orgasms were ‘immature’ and therefore regarded as inferior to the more ‘mature’ vaginal orgasm (Dodson, 2002; Fahs, 2014b; Holland, 2015). Freud’s theory was that young women experienced orgasm through stimulation of the clitoris and as they matured into womanhood they were more likely to achieve orgasm through vaginal stimulation (Brody & Costa, 2008; Wallen & Lloyd, 2011). Marie Bonaparte theorised that anatomically, the closer the clitoris was located to the introitus (vaginal opening) the more readily vaginal orgasm could occur and this distance

extended as a woman aged (Donnenfeld & Hammett, 2020; Wallen & Lloyd, 2011).

Supporting both Freud and Bonaparte's theories was a study of 94 women by Brody and Costa (2008) that found "vaginal orgasm is associated with less use of immature psychological defense mechanisms" (p. 1167). However, in their definition of immature psychological defense mechanisms Brody and Costa (2008) included rationalisation, dissociation, and somatisation which could relate to the thinking mind, traumatised body, and somatically sensitive body respectively; attributes that could relate to women in all stages of maturity. Such definition of what constitutes immature and mature psychological mechanisms is questionable putting the validity of this study in doubt and instead perpetuates pressure on women to orgasm in a particular way. Fahs (2014b) noted that as recently as 2011 doctors pressured women to achieve vaginal orgasm to prioritise stimulation of the penis.

For people with a penis, Friedman (1996) explained that psychoanalytic theories initiated by Freud oriented male sexuality primarily and dominantly on performance of the penis. This penis focus effectively silenced thought and scientific study of the testicles (Friedman, 1996). Winship (2009) discussed the importance of a return to pre-Freudian beliefs that the testes are a 'primary' organ, necessary in helping people with testicular cancer, psychosexual development, and the treatment of sexual trauma. The complexity of male orgasm has been frequently overlooked under the belief that male orgasm is simple as long as orgasm is experienced by the male frequently enough (Frith, 2015). To have enough sex the imperial prude was set aside as a sexual revolution began.

The sexual movement of the 1960s and 1970s both liberated and placed further requirements on the sexual body and its performance. As feminism aimed for equity in

pleasure, such as equal right to orgasm (Potts, 2000) and post feminism fought for sexual agency (Fahs, 2014a), these were accompanied by consequences such as needing to be more 'sexy' and always 'up for it' and an increased pressure to orgasm (Frith, 2015). As Potts (2000) argued, concern over whether the sexual partner 'comes' or not increases pressure on both people to perform in a certain way and undermines the unique experiences of pleasure that might not be identified as orgasm. To escape the pressure to orgasm many women 'fake it' (Fahs, 2014a; Stelzl & Lafrance, 2021).

The excessive emphasis society places on orgasm has become known as the orgasmic imperative, a discourse that means not being able to orgasm is problematic (Potts, 2000). Potts (2000) discussed that while orgasm is difficult to define and does not need be the "be-all-and-end-all" (p. 61) of sex, it frequently "remained the privileged and the desired end-point" (p. 61). On analysis of young people's online discussions about sexuality in the UK, Frith (2013a) noted that congratulatory messages to young women who experienced orgasm helped to "simultaneously disrupt the idea that sexuality is inappropriate for young women while paradoxically reaffirming conventional ideas about the centrality of orgasm to sexuality" (p. 252). In deconstructing hetero-normative penis in vagina sex with orgasm, Potts (2000) suggested the abandonment of orgasm as goal in favour of "a celebration of the unfixedness of both intensification and diminution of pleasure" (p. 70). Orgasm is privileged and complicated, and studies show, easier to achieve in solo-sex than partnered.

In an extensive literature review, Mahar et al. (2020) explored the phenomenon that cis-women have fewer orgasm than cis-men in heterosexual encounters, the difference is known as the 'orgasm gap'. Orgasm was reported to be usually or always achieved in heterosexual partnered sex by 91% of men and 39% of women (Mahar et al., 2020).

However Kinsey et al. (1953) found that 95% of women complete masturbation with orgasm which aligns with a recent study of women in Aotearoa where only 3.8% of women who masturbated said they did not reach orgasm (Csako et al., 2022). Mahar et al. (2020) suggested sociocultural factors that contribute to the orgasm gap include women's lack of entitlement to sexual pleasure and societies priority of coital sex over other forms of sexual pleasure, noting also that "partner sex is inherently more complex and less predictable than masturbation" (McCarthy, 2004, p. 22). Mahar et al. (2020) noted that deprioritising penis in vagina sex, education of genital anatomy and touch for increasing pleasure in the clitoral structures helped increase rates of orgasm in women. In a survey of over 3000 women and men aged 18 to 22 in Sweden Driemeyer et al. (2017) noted that women reported their most pleasurable orgasms were experienced in masturbation compared with partnered sex and both women and men orgasmed more frequently during masturbation than in partnered sex. Masturbation is discussed separately in chapter two, in the meantime, a discussion on what constitutes 'good sex'.

### **'Good' Sex**

People have sex for biological, psychological, sociological reasons, and because it feels good (Dodson, 2002; Frith, 2015). Meston and Buss (2007) conducted a study with 1546 American university students categorised as male and female to understand why people have sex. The students gave 237 unique reasons, with the top three for all gender being: they were attracted to the person, it felt good, and they wanted the physical pleasure. In the top 14 reasons all gender also felt aroused, acted in the 'heat' of the moment, and wanted an orgasm (Meston & Buss, 2007).

People evaluate sex as good, great, or average with binary differentiators that include whether sex was partnered or solo, pleasurable or painful, culminated in orgasm, and embodied meanings of love and connection, or not (Fahs & Plante, 2016; Frith, 2015; Rubin, 2002). Viktor Frankl (1959) noted that “[s]ex is justified, even sanctified, as soon as, but only as long as, it is a vehicle of love” (p. 134). Through the gates of love, partnered, heterosexual, and orgasm-inducing-sex has been constructed by Western society as ‘normal’ and ‘good’, while all other types of sexual connection deemed inferior. Writing about Anglo American culture, Rubin (2002), for example, illustrated the hierarchy of good sex within an inner “charmed circle” (p. 153) which included heterosexual, partnered, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in private, bodies only and vanilla sex. The charmed circle was contrasted by the outer circle which included homosexual sex, solo-sex, multiple-partnered sex, pornography, fetishes, and unusual fantasy. The code of sexual morality is determined and maintained by dominant groups that judge and attempt to police preferences of gender, relationship style, and sexual acts that deemed not normal (Fahs, 2014b; Holland, 2015; Rubin, 2002).

Current discourses of good sex is that it is penetrative, penis focused, and ends with emotional connection and orgasm (Fahs & Plante, 2016; Frith, 2015) and being outside this tightly held norm is difficult. Frith (2015) discussed the social media and self-help industry as driving people to wanting more good sex all the time, needing to ‘work’ on the erotic self to be sexier and better at sex. Big pharma and the self-help industry profit substantially from promoting the ‘lack’ of sexual performance and offering solutions to solve the problem they have actively promoted (Canner, 2008). The social force to be more in all areas of sex was foundational to issues such as negative body image (Piran, 2015; Robinson et al., 2011;

Shulman & Horne, 2003), sexual performance anxiety (Robinson et al., 2011) and negative sexual self-concept (Fahs, 2016).

Sex extends beyond the individual, it is defined by, shared with, and policed by society; sex is political (Frith, 2015; McClelland, 2014). People share their sexual status with society, for example, wedding rings, tags on social media indicate 'in relationship', or introduce others as friend, partner, or husband. Titles and associated assumptions locate the individual and their relationships in social and sexual context (Frith, 2015; Holland, 2015). Partnered relationships and partnered sex were located more favourably than people who were single on Rubin's (2002) charmed circle. Folk situated outside socially accepted norms such as people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI) have been killed, ignored, and persecuted (Juventin; Larson, 1981). While some groups such as lesbian, gay, and queer communities, are moving towards acceptance, and media are more likely to publish sexual-equity-promoting items, such as podcast *The Good Sex Project* (Thomas, 2023), some people and their sexual preferences are still firmly located outside society's notion of acceptability (Morin, 1995; Richters et al., 2014; Rubin, 2002).

In summary, this research highlighted that from St Augustine's day to the present, difficult tensions exist between what society determines as normal and the experience of the individual. Orgasm was central to notions of 'good sex' especially through partnered penetrative sex. Orgasm has become a prescriptive norm which is exclusive for a range of people and sexualities and was experienced as difficult for many people. Rather than addressing the social constructions of sexual difficulties, these difficulties were often radicalised or offered commercial solutions, which shaped understandings of sex that could underpin these difficulties. As sex and sexuality are so entangled with heteronormativity

and mind-body dualism, erotic pleasure has been all but abandoned in performance and goal-oriented sex. In this context, I turn to a form of sex that can be practiced free of gendered power dynamics, orgasm imperatives, and other people's judgement of good or great sex, masturbation.

## Chapter 2: Masturbation

since it is almost always done alone and since in most cases no one is taught how to do it, masturbation provides a source of almost pure biological feedback - it is one of the few forms of instinctive behavior to which we have access (Hite, 1976, p. 56).

An influential study on the matter *The Hite Report* (Hite, 1976) revealed much about contemporary masturbation, not the least of which is its self-taught nature. In this review of literature on masturbation, I seek to understand how self-taught masturbation came to be so laden in shame and taboo. Then, I tour through art galleries and poetry for insight on the experience of masturbation, particularly 19<sup>th</sup> century women as they were suppressed by patriarchal and Christian domination and through the industrial revolution gained small windows of opportunity to have their work made public, early pleasure activism. The last section is a review of studies that portray masturbation as it is in the Western world today.

What really interests people in a particular era can be found in the art and literature of the time (Appadurai, 2006). Depictions of solo erotic practices are found on cave walls, pottery, and modern art. For example, Carlson et al. (2010) discussed ancient Egyptian processes of inaugurating important buildings through bodily manifestation of the gods. They described a statue of a person standing masturbating with hand on erect phallus allowing the god of air, Shu, and the goddess of moisture, Tefnet, to be manifested through the body in ejaculation. In explaining the connection between iconographic and textual female figures known as Sheela na gigs, Dexter and Goode (2002) explained these goddesses as sexually autonomous. They were at the same time young and old, in

sovereignty and prowess, and bestowed their auto-erotic energies on the Irish male gods and heroes through pre-historic, pro-erotic, and pro-feminine values (Dexter & Goode, 2002).

Indigenous cultures transferred cultural knowledge through art and oration (Hart, 2010; Ware et al., 2017). Mikaere (1999) explained the Māori story of Tāne Mahuta and Hine-ahu-one, the first humans to have sexual intercourse, and noted that Hine-ahu-one “possessed an awesome sexual power that came from deep within her” (p. 23). This autonomous feminine sexual power was deeply valued by Māori and Mikaere explained that for many Indigenous cultures, gender roles, sexuality, and positions of power operated within a balance that was free of hierarchical structures. In this context, solo sex was not distinguished from partnered sex, one was no better or worse than the other (Bennett & Rosario, 1995). Indigenous world views prescribed that all forms; animate and inanimate, the environment and all its creatures, are life itself and all human acts must support the natural way of life (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Mikaere, 1999).

Along with the attitudes to sex that came from the rise of Christianity, masturbation was demonised as the most un-natural form of sex. Bennett and Rosario (1995) explained the story of Onan in the Book of Genesis (chapter 38:8) in which God instructed Onan to have sex with his widowed sister-in-law so that there may be an heir to her inherited fortune. Onan had intercourse as God instructed him to, but he withdrew in time to ejaculate to the earth. God decried the wastage of seed a sin and killed Onan. Expending seed for anything other than procreation became known as Onanism (Bennett & Rosario, 1995). Onanism joined sodomy and homosexuality as the most heinous sexual sins of Christianity (Laqueur, 2003).

Campaigns designed to inform and warn society of the sins of masturbation were deeply entrenched through the best-selling publication *Onania; or, the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, and All its Frightful Consequences* in 1715 (Bennett & Rosario, 1995; Donaghy, 2020; Laqueur, 2003). Treatments intended to cure the so-called tortures of masturbation tortured patients through extreme methods of control. For example, Rubin (2002) cited a manuscript from 1881 in which a doctor is quoted to have “succeeded in curing young girls affected by the vice of onanism by burning the clitoris with a hot iron” (p. 143). Further, the young woman said “I will be brave during the operation, I won’t cry” (Sedgwick, 1995). To invent, undertake, and to endure such a procedure was the result of society’s determination to combat “children’s onanism like an epidemic that needed to be eradicated” (Foucault, 1978, p. 42). The young woman’s sexuality was extinguished, and her voice silenced.

While the publication of *Onania* successfully silenced the radical (and normal) passions of masturbation and instilled fear and disgust in the public, it paradoxically promoted masturbation and sent it into the shadows of hiding (Bennett & Rosario, 1995). Priests in confessionals listened to detailed admissions of sinful pleasure, pornographic art hung in private galleries, and acts of masturbation were written about and painted (Bennett, 2020; Bennett & Rosario, 1995) as in the following examples.

Bennett (2020) argued male artists’ paintings of women in their sexuality, such as *The Voice of Evil* by de Feure were associated with “narcissistic corruption, masturbation, and evil” (p. 193). Under the politics of Onanism and threats of death, of course masturbation, especially women’s masturbation had to be framed as evil. However, it doesn’t take much imagination to provide an alternative, opposite reading of this painting.

Figure 1

Feure, Georges de. *The Voice of Evil* (1895)



As de Feure's woman of means gazes upwards and to her right to a woman reclining naked in nature, in colours of blood and warmth, with soft natural forms of circles, a feather, and leaves, notes of seduction and beauty exist. The woman is doing 'the fingers' at the world with one heavy ring on her left hand, while her right hand, free of the bangles and rings left scattered on the pillow, is hidden from view yet erotically imaginable to the viewer. I suggest the 'voice of evil' belonged not to the woman in her autoeroticism but to the controlling patriarchy that defined this person in self-pleasure as evil. The dualities of pleasure and evil, the world and the individual, public and private, socially condemned female and autoeroticism were encapsulated in paint and hung in public galleries for public consumption.

Art galleries and printing presses of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were run by men and occasionally, works by women were exhibited, or published and distributed (Bennett, 2020). Such work however always required a form of disguise, sometimes pseudonyms were employed and language coded so as to step carefully through the taboos of masturbation to share prose such as Harriet Prescott [Spofford]'s "Pomegranate-Flowers" (1861), a 27 stanza poem of which the following is one (Bennett, 2020):

And when the perfect flower lay free,  
 Like some great moth whose gorgeous wings  
 Fan o'er the husk unconsciously,  
 Silken, in airy balancings,  
 She saw all gay dishevellings  
 Of fairy flags, whose revellings  
 Illumine night's enchanted rings.  
 So royal red no blood of kings  
 She thought, and Summer in the room  
 Sealed her escutcheon on their bloom,  
 In the glad girl's imaginings. (p. 195)

Prescott's 'revellings' that illuminated the flower-like genitals of a girl on her own, described an experience in the shadows of the night that illuminated through supernatural vibrations into the heat of summer. Artists such as Prescott were pleasure activists speaking

in thinly coded language to share secrets and shed light on women in their erotic power. Erotic is discussed further in chapter three. In the meantime, I provide a review of studies that give insight to masturbation today.

### **Contemporary Masturbation**

Existing research on masturbation is dominated by quantitative data on who masturbates and who doesn't, heteronormative gender differences and whether people orgasm or not (Arafat & Cotton, 1974; Driemeyer et al., 2017; Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991; LoPiccolo & Lobitz, 1972; Marchand, 2021; Shulman & Horne, 2003). Given most studies of sexuality privilege heteronormative heterosexuality and given masturbation is a private activity that is culturally stigmatised, reliable data on prevalence and experiences of masturbation across all gender and sexual styles is difficult to attain. With that in mind, the following covers rates of masturbation, age, attitudes, cultural beliefs, body image, and finally how self-concept is imbricated in masturbatory habits.

In reviewing self-reported rates of masturbation, patterns of inconsistency are notable. In the USA, 1974 61% of women said they masturbated in the last year (Arafat & Cotton, 1974) and 1976 that was 95% (Hite, 1976). Forty years later in Australia 42% of women said they masturbated in the last year (Richters et al., 2014) a further eight years later in Aotearoa 94% of women reported they masturbated in the last year (Csako et al., 2022). Such vast discrepancies were not explained yet perhaps they suggest masturbation maintains its historical shame and is therefore inconsistently reported. Similar anomalies were be found in data for men. An infamous study by Kinsey and associates in 1948 shocked the scientific world revealing 92% of men self-reported as having masturbated in the last year (Kinsey et al. 1948, cited in Coleman, 2003). Other studies of male masturbation

reported 80% in 1974 (Arafat & Cotton, 1974), 62% in 1994 (Coleman, 2003) and 74% in 2014 (Richters et al., 2014). While fluctuations in data on male masturbatory habits vary less than that of female, they likely reflect the difficulties of gathering reliable data on a subject that is enmeshed with shame and taboo.

On the matter of taboo in masturbation, Richters et al. (2014) noted inconsistent findings across studies. In their study of 20,094 participants in Australia aged 16-69 years, Richters et al. (2014) found masturbation in younger women (age 16-19) was relatively uncommon (30% compared with 85% for men of the same age) and noted that other studies showed while younger men joked about masturbation with friends, often disparagingly, and sometimes believed masturbation to cause sexual dysfunction, younger women often never spoke about it, even with friends, yet in online sexual health forums, young women spoke more positively about masturbation.

Age, gender and sexual identity made a difference to masturbation patterns in the Richters et al. (2014) study. Half the men (51%) and a quarter of women (24%) had masturbated in the past four weeks and most likely to masturbate were men under the age of 30 and women between ages 20 and 50. Both men and women masturbated less after the age of 60. In both gender groups people who identified as bisexual, or homosexual masturbated more than their heterosexual counterparts. Further, women were more likely to use a sex toy for stimulation and men were more likely to watch pornography. Differing attitudes on the use of toys, porn, and masturbation can be the cause of conflict in intimate relationships (Dodson, 2002).

People's attitudes to masturbation influence whether they 'do it' or not and how they judge others. In a qualitative study of 20 women aged 16-18 by Hogarth and Ingham

(2009) attitudes to masturbation ranged from extreme negativity, disbelief, and disgust to delight. Reasons people gave for choosing to never masturbate included inhibitions, guilt, fear, shame, and religion (Arafat & Cotton, 1974; Hogarth & Ingham, 2009; Thorpe et al., 2022). In their study, Hogarth and Ingham (2009) said negative views included shock at being asked about masturbation and participants used words such as 'disgusting', 'not right', 'slags', and "do girls really touch themselves? I can't believe that" (p. 561) and "sex is only part of a relationship" (p. 562) echoing historical norms discussed in chapter one. In the same study, positive views on masturbation included comments such as "Giving myself so much pleasure and orgasms when ever I want one is just great and I can't imagine being without that ... I think every girl should be encouraged to do it" (p. 563). Hogarth and Ingham (2009) discussed the participants social, religious, familial, and experiential contexts were important to how they perceived masturbation. There is a lacuna of qualitative studies on male masturbation.

The importance of cultural beliefs of morality were discussed in the Shulman and Horne (2003) study of masturbation in African American and Euro-American women. They noted that the women in their study received different messages about self-pleasure from their cultural groups either supporting and encouraging masturbation (dominantly in the Euro-American group) or ignoring and condemning masturbation (in the African American group) which reflected in how often or infrequently they masturbated. Driemeyer et al. (2017) reviewed studies from China, Croatia, Sweden, Great Britain, and the United States and found "lower reports of masturbation experience have been found to be associated with higher levels of religiosity and lower levels of education ... and that gender differences in masturbation are smaller in countries with greater gender equity" (p. 632).

Regarding body image in relation to masturbation, Shulman and Horne (2003) noted that in their study, Euro-American “women who masturbated 7-10 times per month had significantly higher levels of body satisfaction” (p. 267) than women who masturbated less frequently. African American in the same study reported greater body satisfaction and no relationship between body image and masturbation. Shulman and Horne suggested that cultural restrictions may have influenced masturbation practices and it remained to be “investigated whether the sexual self-pleasuring contributes to better body image or vice versa” (p. 267). In a study with trans people assigned female at birth, Engelmann et al. (2022) said they found masturbation was the kind of sex that allowed them to let go of self-consciousness and thoughts of poor body image. Masturbation provided a place without judgement from other people where only self-judgement remained.

Sexual self-concept is part of a growing area of research in sexual selfhood, which is defined as “how individuals perceive themselves as sexual beings” (Deutsch et al., 2014). In their study of young Australian women noted earlier, Hogarth and Ingham (2009) said participants had a lack of understanding about their sexual bodies, for example one participant said of masturbation, “I sort of know what to do but it never seems to work” (p. 152) and noted that many participants in their study had never spoken with anyone outside the study about masturbation which made it difficult to learn more about their sexual bodies. Csako et al. (2022) noted in their study of women in Aotearoa, reasons for masturbating were wide ranging and included learning about their body and helping them reconnect with their body. Self-connection was important to child sexual abuse (CSA) survivors in the study by Guyon et al. (2023) in which they studied dispositional mindfulness (an inherently mindful disposition) in relation to sexual self-concept. They concluded that

CSA survivors who were more mindful and aware of internal and external stimuli in their lives (or, were more embodied) may have evaluated themselves more positively in relation to their sex lives and sexual self-concept. Guyon et al. note that further study in this field will be important to advance trauma research, a useful avenue to pursue as mindfulness practices are generally accepted as having only positive outcomes on life.

In a search for possible negative consequences of masturbation, it was the sense of guilt and shame associated with masturbation that haunted people more than the act of doing it (Coleman, 2003; Thorpe et al., 2022). It was noted that any behaviour can be taken to an excessive extreme and be a pathology, including masturbation (Coleman, 2003). Masturbation in its extreme may cause harm to the self and to others, for example compulsive public displays of masturbation exposed others to sexual scenes they found disturbing (Morin, 1995). Additionally, interpersonal relationships have been affected by a difference in attitudes to masturbation, for some people to have their partner masturbate was considered on a par with extramarital affair (Coleman, 2003).

In summary, masturbation has come a long way from the tortures of onanism and its gruesome cures, yet it has travelled with its share of shame. Data on the matter seemed vague at best but one thing is certain, throughout time, people have masturbated and continue to do so in vast numbers. As noted in the opening passage, masturbation is instinctive and the source of pure feedback to the self. As peoples understanding of their sexual selves develop so too does the sexual self-concept. Masturbation may help people appreciate their sexual selves, in which case, the tide may be ready to turn from masturbation as needing treatment, to masturbation as treatment.

## **Masturbation as Sex Therapy**

Onania, the Confessions, Freud, and other canons of modern Western thought shaped a focus on categorising behaviours as normal and those that were not normal became medicalised as illness (Bennett & Rosario, 1995). Following is a review of sexual difficulties, pathologies, and some of the problems with the ways in which they have been defined and categorised. Then a discussion on the economy that has been constructed around the pathologized sexual difficulties and the lack of research into finding non-medicalised therapies to help resolve sexual difficulties. Lastly, masturbation is reviewed for its therapeutic potential.

Research that sought to explain sexual illness in women exists in abundance, much of it conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by White heterosexual cis-gendered men and pathologized as deficiency or disease (Frith, 2015; Tuana, 2004; Winhall & Porges, 2022). This research focused dominantly on women's sexual desire with both low and high desire being problematic, and frequency and location of orgasm as discussed in chapter one. Conversely there is a paucity of research on men's sexual desire and difficulties (Sungur & Gunduz, 2014).

The prevalence of women identified as having sexual difficulties varies. In a survey of 356 women aged between 20 and 70 in Australia Hayes et al. (2008) using different instruments of measurement, hypoactive sexual desire disorder (an absence or lack of sexual fantasy or desire) was experienced by 12% to 58% of women, sexual arousal disorder (lack of lubrication) by 5% to 32% of women, female orgasmic disorder (difficulties reaching orgasm) by 6% to 33%, and dyspareunia (painful intercourse) by 0.5% to 23% of women. The conclusion of this study was that the instrument type makes a difference to the results.

Similar discrepancies were reported by Marchand (2021) in that orgasmic difficulties were experienced by up to 28% of women in Westernised countries and mainland China and up to 46% in other Asian countries. Such differences in data shown to be impacted by research methods (Hayes et al., 2008) has significant impact on the reliability of data and means women's sexual difficulties may be vastly over or under reported. Furthermore, definitions of 'problem' need to be questioned when more than half the studied group present with that problem (as exemplified above where 58% of women reported sexual desire disorder). Reliable data is important to science and for the people it aims to help.

The modern scientific tome of mental health is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (Association, 2013). The DSM-5 is a living document subject to revisions that aim to keep it current with societal beliefs. For example, homosexuality, previously deemed a disorder has been deleted from the current version. The risk of over diagnosing, especially in relation to sexual issues such as female orgasmic disorder (FOD), delayed ejaculation (DE), genito-pelvic pain/penetration disorder (GPPD) and early ejaculation (EE) now require at least six months of the issue being problematic for more than 75% of the time and the sexual difficulty needs to be experienced by the person being diagnosed as opposed to a sexual partner (Association, 2013). Sex therapists have welcomed inclusion of the word 'pleasure' in DSM-5 (Zeglin, 2016), for example, sexual dysfunction has been updated to "a clinically significant disturbance in a person's ability to respond sexually or to experience sexual pleasure" (APA, 2013, p. 423). Further advances are required to deconstruct heteronormative definitions in current definitions, such as the requirement for penis in vagina intercourse to be the cause of pain in GPPD or ejaculation in EE (Sungur & Gunduz, 2014).

Categorization and definitions of problematic sexual behaviours in DSM-5 has also been cause for debate. For example, De Alarcón et al. (2019) point out that behaviours such as excessive masturbation or porn use, have been categorised in DSM-5 as hypersexual disorder (HD) which is sometimes considered a behavioural addiction, however, HD does not include tolerance or withdrawal, which is required to meet the definition of an addiction. A significant issue with HD is its current lack of adequate definition, for example “some set the limit between normal and pathological sexual behavior at more than seven orgasms in a week” (De Alarcón et al., 2019, p. 4) which places the emphasis on frequency not distress and risks pathologizing individuals unnecessarily.

A significant issue that sits within DSM-5 is the lack of context within which difficulties may be pathologized. For example a person who believes they are unable to experience orgasm may be diagnosed with female orgasmic disorder (FOD) regardless of factors such as existing relationships, prior sexual trauma, or their definition of what constitutes orgasm (Meston et al., 2004; Meston et al., 2012). The DSM-5 requires the symptoms of sexual disorders to cause distress in the individual, but does not require a questioning of what causes the symptoms (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). People are diagnosed with disease for difficulties that are compared with socially constructed standards of what is ‘normal’. The construction of disease and cure for female sexual disorders was the subject of a documentary *Orgasm Inc.* in which director Elizabeth Canner (2008) said the “key to greater sexual satisfaction lies in a changed society “ (p. 491).

Industries and economies have been built out of cures that have often been the cause of further difficulties (Frith, 2013a, 2015; Ghodsee, 2018; Stelzl & Lafrance, 2021). For example, media have encouraged individuals to question their ability to maintain erections,

experience orgasm, perform as long, hard, and loud as porn stars (who performed in photoshopped movies and were only able to perform such acts with medications and hours of lubrication) (Canner, 2008). As Canner (2008) explained in the making of a documentary on FOD, marketing campaigns designed to promote 'Big Pharma' products deliberately aimed to reshape societal perceptions of sexual health and illness.

The DSM-5 is the backbone on which diagnosis are made, insurance is paid out on, and research funding granted (Ross, 2015). For example, insurance for gender reassignment surgery currently requires a diagnosis of gender dysphoria. While many people sought to exclude gender dysphoria in the last edit of the DSM (Bailey et al., 2022), the unintended consequences of such a deletion would likely be significant reduction in funding for research into gender realignment surgical and hormonal treatments (Ross, 2015; Zeglin, 2016). People with sexual difficulties have become wedged between structurally unethical systems that define what is normal and not normal and allocate money.

The development of treatment methods that do not rely on Big Pharma, insurance, and medications are important to helping people in sexual health. Wurn et al. (2004) noted the dearth of research on solutions to female sexual disorders and aimed address the gap with a study on site specific soft-tissue massage therapy for women who had scar tissue legions that caused pelvic pain. Wurn et al. (2004) discussed the positive effects of massage on resolving dyspareunia, unexpected benefits on "desire, arousal, lubrication, and satisfaction" (p. 7), and noted their surprise that soft-tissue massage in the pelvis was pleasurable for the client.

While I found it surprising that researchers had not anticipated caring and therapeutic touch within the depths of the pelvis might have been pleasurable for the client,

this study was done within the context of DSM-4 where ‘pleasure’ was absent from the vocabulary of sexuality. As Fine (1988) identified the ‘missing discourse of desire’ this missing discourse of pleasure was congruent with the underlying shame and taboo on the practice of masturbation at the time (Barnett, 2022; Kraus, 2017; Richters et al., 2014; Thorpe et al., 2022). Some researchers have managed to move past this roadblock, following is a review of studies investigating masturbation as a therapeutic modality for improving various aspects of sexual functioning.

### **Directed Masturbation**

In 17<sup>th</sup> century England, masturbation was promoted as a way to practice the process of conception prior to marriage (Donaghy, 2020). This masturbatory art was described variously through metaphors that included household activities and objects, such as playing a musical instrument like a violin or fiddle; “fiddling” with oneself was slang for masturbation and a “poking stick”, a stick of wood or bone used to stir the fire was slang for penis or dildo. Donaghy referenced John Cotgrave’s 1655 poem “The Violin,” in which he gave masturbation instructions for virginal women, “She first of all must know her cliff, and all the stops therein. Her prick she must hold long enough, Her backfals gently take; Her touch must gentle be, not rough, She at each stroak must shake” (p. 216). Following medical knowledge of the time, the cliff represented the mons pubis and “her prick” Donaghy argued may refer not to a penis or dildo but to her clitoris. Medical knowledge has made significant advances in the last 400 years, yet the anatomy, instruments, and language remain much the same. The intention to enhance sexual knowledge through masturbation also remains relevant.

In a review of literature exploring psychological treatments for FOD, Marchand (2021) suggested there were two treatments worth considering, directed masturbation (DM) and sensate focus. Developed by Masters and Johnston in the 1960s, the practice of sensate focus was designed for couples in the treatment of sexual anxiety difficulties in which they were present with the sensations of touch which they could control rather than aspects of sexuality outside of their control, such as arousal (Avery-Clark et al., 2019). Important to note was the touch was given on a “non-demand context” (Marchand, 2021, p. 207), that is, without a goal oriented agenda such as penetrative sex or orgasm. While sensate focus was designed for couples therapy the principle applied also to individuals in masturbation practice.

Directed masturbation (DM) is a form of therapy used by sexologists to help treat sexual disorders. Marchand (2021) described DM as a solo practice that involves mindfulness, cognitive awareness, stimulation of the genitals, use of tools such as vibrators, fantasy, and erotic materials to build arousal, psychological tools to help reduce anxiety, challenge unhelpful beliefs, increase relaxation, and develop awareness of sexual cues. Interestingly, the word ‘pleasure’ was absent from their definition. In a literature search for studies reporting on treatments for FOD, Marchand (2021) detailed the years in which DM was studied, 13 were conducted in the 1970s, 10 in the 1980s, one in the 1990s with no further studies in the 2000s reported. This surge of studies in the 1970s and 1980s and neglect thereafter was supported by Heima and Meston (1997) in their review of studies on treatments for sexual dysfunction. While there was a range of methodological approaches across the studies, they all applied DM to sexual difficulties in some way.

The following data are sourced directly from an extensive literature review by Heima and Meston (1997). Eighteen studies between 1972 and 1995 used DM as treatment for orgasmic dysfunction in women (FOD) and two applied DM for the treatment of erectile disorder (ED). Of the FOD studies, all reported significant increases in ability to orgasm in masturbation (61%-100%) and sexual intercourse (47%-91%). The Heinrich (1976) study 100% of the 44 participants became orgasmic in masturbation and 47% coitally orgasmic. Another study with large sample size was by Barbach (1974) with 83 participants, 91% of whom became orgasmic in masturbation. A further study reviewed by Heima and Meston (1997) was the Riley and Riley (1978) study of 37 participants which compared two therapeutic methods, DM combined with sensate focus (SF), and SF only; 18/20 of the DM/SF group were able to orgasm after therapy and 8/15 of the SF group were able to orgasm. It was unclear if SF helped improve the benefits of DM or vice versa but SF alone had significantly less gain compared with the DM/SF combination. Of the ED studies, both had one participant and both reported success in sustaining erections during sexual intercourse and that ability was maintained one year after treatment began.

In the following years only three group studies of treatments for FOD were published, none of which included DM as a possible treatment (Marchand, 2021). As discussed by Marchand (2021) DM has been consistently shown to have positive effects on FOD yet question, “why have there been no significant innovations in the treatment of FOD since the 1980s?” (p. 2009). Marchand suggested changing trends of interest in the field and changes in funding structures may have had an impact. Taking that a step deeper, such changes may have been due to a reinstatement of masturbation taboo, as exemplified in the sexual health politics at the time. It was in 1994 that Jocelyn Elders, surgeon general of the

United States was fired for developing a sex education programme to protect children from disease (including AIDS) and unwanted pregnancy by encouraging masturbation (Schonfeld, 2016). In this political context, it is not surprising researchers and funding abandoned further research. Except for one, the case study of Jane.

A case study published by Robinson et al. (2011) examined how one woman worked through her complex psychosocial sexological issues through a multidisciplinary approach that included DM. They named her Jane. DM was one of ten key components of the Sexual Health Model developed by Robinson et al. (2011) which combined talking about sex and its challenges, personal history and beliefs, education on sexual functioning, genital anatomy, sex health, sex safety, sensate focus, and directed masturbation to help people work through sexual difficulties. Jane had complex psychosocial factors of depression, anxiety, religious beliefs, and trauma. Robinson et al., (2011) encouraged Jane to be curious about her body and experiment with touch to understand more about what turned her on what “leads to orgasm” (p. 471). Jane moved from “feeling defective and believing that she had not tried hard enough to fix her sexual “hang-ups” (p. 470) to experiencing sexual pleasure and happy relationships. She had group therapy, did solo DM practice, and learned to improve communication about her desires. As Jane gained confidence and said ‘no’ to her partner on several matters, the power dynamics in their relationship shifted. Robinson et al. (2011) noted that her partner was used to dominating decisions and Jane’s newfound ability to say ‘no’ marked the end of their relationship. On opening the memories of childhood and teenage sexual abuse and realising these were still impacting her adult relationships, depression returned. Supported by a multi-disciplinary group of therapists and a group peer

support Jane discovered pathways to sexual pleasure not previously accessed and developed loving and positive intimate relationships (Robinson et al., 2011).

The multi-disciplinary approach taken by Robinson et al. (2011) in treating Jane helped her work through complex comorbid factors. This approach was supported by the findings of the international consultation by Althof et al. (2005) with over 200 multidisciplinary experts from more than 60 countries, which strongly concluded that sexual difficulties were unlikely to be resolved with one method and that working with multiple disciplines and modalities was required for lasting effects. Given concerns about the orgasm imperative outlined in chapter one, questions remain around Robinson et al.'s focus on the orgasm as goal.

In summary, research has shown the benefits of masturbation in helping to resolve sexual difficulties, especially when used alongside other modalities. Given its obvious sexual health advantages, such as being free of pregnancy and infection risks (Coleman, 2003), masturbation has been a useful therapeutic intervention for improving ability to orgasm, maintain erection, and improving intimate relationships (Hurlbert & Whittaker, 1991; Richters et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2011; Thorpe et al., 2022). Despite these benefits, studies of masturbation have been few since their peak in the 1970s and 1980s and further research is needed to fill the crevasse-like gap in knowledge. A practice that addresses some of the issues raised earlier is ESP. In the following chapter ESP is described and a theoretical framework is detailed within which ESP may be conceptualised.

### Chapter 3: ESP

In this chapter I provide a brief historical context from which sexological bodywork grew and outline what sexological bodywork is as taught in Australasia today. Second, a description of the practice of ESP which is one of the key elements of bodywork taught to trainee sexological bodyworkers. The third section of this chapter is a theoretical framework for conceptualising ESP which closes with the aims of the study and research question.

In Euro-American cultures, the 1960s and 1970s were times of sexual liberation, psychedelics, free expression, and the beginnings of the LGBTQI rights movement. In 1981 as this movement was gaining momentum the HIV virus broke out and young gay men started dying from AIDS (Greene, 2007; Rubin, 2002). Friends and lovers of these men were dying for no apparent reason and fear quickly spread throughout gay and queer communities. Greene (2007) explained that, as this already marginalised group of people struggled to understand what was going on around them, in the absence of immunological knowledge of the HIV virus, wider society blamed the LGBTQI community for AIDS leading to severe stigmatisation and widespread fear (Greene, 2007; Juventin). During 1982 epidemiological evidence indicated the HIV virus spread through bodily fluids and contaminated blood (Greene, 2007).

In response to the dangers of sharing sexual fluids, Annie Sprinkle, Joseph Kramer, and Chester Mainard developed erotic pleasure practices that excluded penetrative sex. Instead of traditional penetrative and genital focused sex they used touch on the whole body while focusing on sensations of subtlety as well as intensity. They developed various breathwork patterns to raise and lower arousal and expanded the erotic body through

breath, touch, sound, and movement (BTSM). In this context of body exploration Joseph Kramer developed the Body Electric School and Sexological Bodywork.

Sexological bodywork as it is taught today is a hands-on therapeutic modality using BTSM to help people expand their capacity and vocabulary for sexual pleasure. Therapists coach their clients in BTSM in relation to erotic pleasure, as well as genital anatomy, regulating the nervous system, communication, boundaries, consent, and ESP. The Institute of Somatic Sexology (ISS) has been teaching sexological bodywork in Australia, United Kingdom, and United States of America for over 13 years. The training for the Certificate of Sexological Bodywork (CSB) is a six-month programme run by the ISS designed to teach students sexological bodywork through online material as well as personal somatic practices and hands-on work with volunteers.

The CSB programme was taught in three modules. In module one, a series of topics were introduced to students through online study materials, group Zoom calls, and at-home practices on themselves and with volunteers. Students wrote about their experiences and posted those to an online forum. Module two was a two week in-person intensive in Australia where faculty teach, and students practiced hands-on bodywork with fellow students. In the third module students practiced bodywork on volunteers in their local communities with the ongoing online support of faculty and supervision from certified sexological bodyworkers. ESP is a practice that students were required to do in module one and encouraged to maintain throughout the training.

ESP is an embodied exploration of pleasure that is practiced alone. Students were encouraged to set a regular time for practice in which they were free of interruption (in a private place and without phones), and to set a timer so they didn't need to think about

time. They were asked to set an intention for the practice, such as to explore the whole body for sensitivity to light touch and encouraged to do pleasure differently to their 'normal' pathways, for example, standing when one would normally lie down to self-pleasure. The tone of the practice was one of curiosity. Goals (such as orgasm) were abandoned in favour of deep intentional exploration of the body. Being solo in the practice meant there was no need to impress or please others. ESP is a fusion of masturbation and meditation with embodiment and erotic curiosity central to the practice. Sexological bodyworkers coach ESP to their clients in the wider community. ESP has been included in the CSB training since its inception.

The ISS gathers feedback from students at every CSB training and on consideration of this feedback their coursework is annually reviewed and updated. As a result of student feedback ESP has evolved in name from Orgasmic Yoga (OY), which yoga practitioners said was not traditional yoga to Erotic Embodiment (EE). In approaching this study, I felt OY and EE did not capture the nature of the practice adequately and developed the term ESP. The ISS faculty support this suggested name change. In terms of the practice itself, ongoing student and client feedback to the ISS has suggested that ESP is a useful practice and is therefore maintained as part of the CSB training going forward. While this evidence is supportive of ESP there are no academic studies on ESP as a practice for trainee sexological bodyworkers, nor as it is taught to the wider public.

In summary, sexological bodywork emerged as a response to the AIDS crisis and is a growing professional body of people helping others in expanding their access to pleasure. ESP is an important part of the CSB training and of the sexological bodyworkers offering to

clients. To support this initial description of ESP, the following section provides a theoretical framework within which to ESP may be conceptualised.

### **Theoretical Framework for Conceptualising ESP**

Theoretical bricolage is described as an “eclectic and political approach to inquiry”, (Rogers, 2012, p. 2) in which study is viewed through multiple theoretical perspectives. Given there is no one theory that applies to the study of ESP I engaged in theoretical bricolage and stitched together five theoretical perspectives to provide a framework for conceptualising ESP. First, theories of embodiment (Glenberg, 2010; Marion, 2016; Tolman et al., 2014), the soma and sensate focus (Gendlin, 1969). Second, trauma and Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) are discussed and third, erotic power (brown, 2019; Lorde, 1993) and pornography. Fourth, theories of habit, practice, and becoming (Braidotti, 2008; Butler, 1988) and fifth, the theory of transformational learning (Mälkki & Green, 2014). Lastly, this chapter concludes with the aims of the present study and research question.

### ***Embodiment and the Felt Sense***

Contrary to Western science that divides the mind and body, embodiment theories embrace the woven together mind with inner senses of the body, as located in space, experience, and culture (Merleau-Ponty, 2012/1945) . According to Merleau-Ponty (2012/1945) the embodied person is shaped by their experiences and in turn shapes the world around them, or as Reventlow et al. (2006) explained “bodily experience is presumed to both construct and be constructed by life” (p. 2723). To be embodied then means to have awareness and perceptions in and of the body in its physical and social context and experience in the world, acknowledging the experience and the world around is always

changing (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014; Tolman et al., 2014). The changing body includes the physical, emotional, and spiritual bodies and has knowledge of its own, a consciousness, subjectivity and awareness “our bodies themselves experience sensations and awareness” (Tolman et al., 2014, p. 761). These various changing and sensing bodies and the living processes of the body, such as the nervous system, are the soma (Pelmas, 2017; Strozzi-Heckler, 2014). Somatic therapeutic modalities such as sexological bodywork, are grounded in embodiment. Embodiment therapists will frequently and regularly ask the client to feel for sensations in the body (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014).

Feeling for sensations in a regular ongoing way encourages what I call somatic agility, the capacity to ‘dance’ between the thinking mind, the feeling body, emotions, and all the sensations available within and around the soma. Developing somatic agility means the embodied person can feel something, talk about it, and return to feeling without breaking for example, the ‘magic’ of sex. The embodied sexual person produces knowledge through the somatic experience in the body and makes sense and meaning of the experience. Embodiment theories are therefore about the phenomenon of the subjective, lived and somatic experience (Tolman et al., 2014).

Eugene Gendlin (1969) promoted the ‘felt sense’ as a method to guide clients in therapy. He would encourage the client to “get into the concrete felt version of their troubles (instead of talking about them)” (Gendlin, 1969, p. 6). Gendlin (1969) noted such work was not easy for the client and they would likely feel resistance to doing it. He noted also that the resistance was as much worth feeling for as the trouble itself. Unlike social constructionists view that language forms first and constructs what the body does and feels,

philosophers such as Gendlin and Carl Rogers (Kirschenbaum, 2007) encouraged the body to be felt for all its sensations and then allow language to form from that felt sense.

This somatic approach to therapy meant the client's body and sensations leads therapeutic work (Pelmas, 2017; Strozzi-Heckler, 2014), not the language and discussion of traditional talk therapies. For example, in sexological bodywork the practitioner may encourage the client to breathe long and slow, hum on the exhale, and feel for vibrations in the body and after some time doing that, they would talk about the sensations and locations in the body, which would lead to the next level of noticing and experiencing in the body. As client work evolves and a somatic sense of safety develops, according to pioneers of trauma therapies Levine (1997) and Porges (2011) the clients body will have more access to feeling sensations in the present moment and with that is an opportunity to heal from trauma (Winhall & Porges, 2022).

### ***Trauma, Safety, and PTG***

The tone of language and actions of others influence the child in the womb (Leung & Robson, 1993) and continue to influence how humans think and bodies respond throughout life (Kolk, 2015; Mate, 2019). Traumatic events happen in the soma and for some people, some events remain unresolved and reappear as if the original event is being experienced in the present (Levine, 1997). As individuals experience sexual intimacy with another, there can be 'voices' in the head and bodily reactions that they are unaware of (numbness), or excessively aware of (pain, hypertension, hypervigilance). Voices of parents, siblings, peers, punishers, media, stars, priests, and other teachers may be heard as if they are happening in the present (Isobel et al., 2019). Narratives and trauma affect the mind and body (Kolk, 2015; Levine et al., 2018; Mate, 2019; Pelmas, 2017; Strozzi-Heckler, 2014) leaving an

ongoing, inescapable, felt sense (Gendlin, 1969) of trauma (Levine, 1997), such as experienced by survivors of war and sexual abuse (DeMause, 1996; Mate, 2019). Trauma affects the nervous system and can hold survivors back from experiencing sexual pleasure (Fiala et al., 2021; McGregor, 2001; Pelmas, 2017; Pihama et al., 2016).

The nervous system is the body's wiring network that connects the outside world with the soma. Levine (1997) explained the human's nervous system response to trauma by comparing that with other animals; they run away or freeze with fear in the sympathetic flight or fright mode of the nervous system and immobilise or dissociate like an antelope being attacked by a tiger as the parasympathetic system takes over and disassociates by shutting down sensations and awareness so that the attacking tiger thinks the antelope dead and walks away in disinterest. Levine's (1997) theory is that after such a near death experience animals allow the body to shake, wake, look carefully around, and when the coast is clear to run to safety. Humans frequently do not experience the full natural processing of trauma and so become stuck in the loop of dissociation and mobilisation. Somatic Experiencing (Levine et al., 2018) is a therapeutic process where people are encouraged into the full resolution of the traumatic sequence.

Stephen Porges (2011) developed the Polyvagal Theory to explain how the Vagus nerve manages trauma. It has two branches, the ventral Vagus which attaches to the nose bridge (oxygenated by nose breathing), passes through the larynx (activated by voice) and connects with organs above the diaphragm. The Vagus nerve passes through a small hole in the diaphragm (which is also activated by diaphragm breathing) where the dorsal Vagus connects with organs below the diaphragm, including the genitals. According to Porges (2011) activating the Vagus nerve allows the body to feel connected with others and

cultivates a sense of safety. For example, an activated Vagus nerve can make the difference between being disassociated, numb to sensations, and being fully present in the moment filled with curiosity and active sensations. The Vagus nerve requires a sense of safety to be active.

Establishing a sense of safety is a key element of trauma therapy (Winhall & Porges, 2022) and somatic sex therapies (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014). When safety is felt in the body, the nervous system responds with relaxation, restoration, (Winhall & Porges, 2022) and enables erotic domains of arousal (Morin, 1995). In the felt sense of safety the erotic body is more likely to rise in arousal states such as orgasmicity, and to surrender into states of bliss (Frith, 2015). Porges (2011) argued that psychological safety is threatened by judgement and shame. In *Whole-Body Sex* Walker (2020) explained that if we don't feel safe in sexual encounters we not only struggle to connect with others but also fail to connect with the self. Furthermore, without self-connection, arousal and erotic connection move further from reach. Safety is key to reconnecting with ourselves (Walker, 2020) and to healing trauma (Porges, 2011; Winhall & Porges, 2022).

There is extensive research in trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) yet Post Traumatic Growth (PTG), the phenomenon of growth following traumatic events, is an important yet understudied field that would likely benefit treatments designed for PTSD (Perel, 2023; Tedeschi et al., 1998). In their research and theories in PTSD and PTG Tedeschi et al. (1998) noted that people who appreciate the small pleasures of life often survive major trauma better than those who find the 'inconsequential' a waste of time. That key aspects of PTG was the capacity to see beauty in the mundane and find pleasure in the

subtleties of life (Tedeschi et al., 1998) supports embodiment theories. What happens then, when embodied pleasure is erotic?

### ***Erotic Power and Porn***

The most common understanding of the word erotic is limited to sex. However, erotic originates from Eros, the Greek god of love giving rise to the erotic as life force, creative energy, and joyfulness (Perel, 2023). It is the creative life force that Audré Lorde (1993) wrote of in her essay *The uses of the erotic: The erotic as power*: “The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (p. 87). Further, as Hollway (1984) explained, sexual power is “not unmediated biological properties of men, but rather that power relations rely on what sex means” (p. 68). Through the meaning of sex and intimacy, all people can therefore realise power in the erotic, and, we can access that power through embodiment (Frith, 2013b; Strozzi-Heckler, 2014; Walker, 2020). Strozzi-Heckler (2014) explained that being conscious of and embodied in the erotic means erotic power can be harnessed and ‘used’ to build for example, confidence or a sense of agency.

Erotic power may also remain ‘unused’, held in a kind of energetic silence such as that found sitting in front of a digital device. Lorde (1993) said that to be unaware of erotic power is “to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd” (p. 91) and that “[p]ornography emphasises sensation without feeling” (p. 88). In their literature review on problematic use of online pornography, De Alarcón et al. (2019) noted that the use of online pornography is rising, which is unsurprising given it is accessible, affordable, and anonymous, and that most users masturbate while watching porn. The use of porn and toys in sexuality are more likely to

distance the body from the mind than to unite body and mind (Fahs, 2014b; Lorde, 1993; Richters et al., 2014). De Alarcón et al. (2019) discussed the challenges in gathering reliable data given that anonymity and accessibility are a key risks in pathological online porn use, however they support the general consensus that porn is likely harmful to the sexual development of young people (Coleman, 2003).

Pornography is thought to divide the body from mind and silence the sexual self. Embodiment theories on the other hand, suggest there is a creative and joyful power in the erotic that is available to everyone should they be willing to pause long enough to feel into the body.

### ***Becoming***

Judith Butler's (1988) theory of gender proposes that the repetition of performative acts construct and constitute gender; "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman" (Simone de Beauvoir cited in Butler, 1988, p. 519). Butler (1988) proposed that through doing and repeating acts that are regarded by society as appropriately feminine, or by being admonished for, and then stopping acts that are 'unladylike', the young girl becomes a constructed form of woman. Furthermore, as certain acts are repeated over and again they solidify into defining what it means to be non-binary, woman, man, or gender fluid, and eventually appear to be the "natural configuration of bodies" (Butler, 1988, p. 524). In appearing 'natural', such constructions become taken for granted and 'normal'. They become society's specifications of what constitute right, wrong, good, bad, and shameful. Butler (1988) noted that changing gendered 'norms' requires "a different sort of repeating" (p. 520). In addition, a practice that enables change or mastery, that is different to prior

practices, requires conscious intentionality (Williams, 2003). The intentional repetition of different acts then, is a process of 'becoming'.

The notion of 'becoming' offered by Rosi Braidotti (2008) is a process of compassion that is deeply committed to transformation, it is the "freedom to affirm one's essence as joy" (p. 31). Aligned with Lorde's (1993) erotic power, Braidotti (2008) encouraged the transformational process of becoming through a passion of positive empowerment that is both embodied and relational. As pleasure activist adrienne maree brown (2019) said, through the politics of pleasure as can "reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy" (p. 13). As the individual becomes a new being through pleasure and affects the world around them (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) they enable social transformation.

### ***Transformational Learning***

To think about transformational learning, it is useful to think about important moments of transition in life. In 1909 Arnold van Gennep wrote *Les Rites de Passage* (Turner, 1967) in which he discussed rites of passage; rituals humans develop to mark transitions from one stage of life or place in society to another. Examples include weddings to mark marriage, funerals to mark death, or lighting candles to mark a special occasion. Liminality (which comes from Latin *limina* meaning 'threshold') is a concept further developed by Victor Turner (1967) that proposes change occurs in three main stages. The liminal stage is the transitional stage between life as it was (pre-liminal) and the new way of being in the world (post-liminal). Being in the liminal stage can feel disruptive and ambiguous (Stenner, 2017; Turner, 1967). Stenner (2017) said that liminal experiences are those which happen during "occasions of significant transition, passage or disruption" (p.

14) and noted the importance of 'novelty', or new experiences in their ability to transform pre-existing patterns. For example, if a person is working to reduce porn consumption, they might disable their online porn apps, mark the transition by turning on meaningful music and try something physically new like to stand to self-pleasure (intentional practice of something different).

Rituals have been used throughout history to help people process, heal, and move through the stages of liminality to heal from troublesome and traumatic experiences (Kolk, 2015). Rituals change with the times (Grimes, 1992) and symbols are often used to help mark rituals as different to everyday events (Grimes, 1992; Stenner, 2017; Turner, 1967). For example, the person exploring standing masturbation may light a candle before turning on music. Combining ritual in sexuality is known as sex magic (Dixon, 2022) which can be elaborate with props and processes and can be a simple intention to explore the erotic. As philosopher William James (1890) said in his seminal work on habits and the principles of practice, "Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day" (p. 65). Through practice, transformational learning can happen.

Mälkki and Green (2014) introduced the educational theory of transformational learning around 1978 and focused that not on the 'glorious' end results of learning, but on the phenomenological process of transformation. They explained that going through existential change involves "psychic turmoil" (p. 7) and significant disruption to daily life. Mälkki and Green (2014) say challenges of transformational learning involve feeling resistance as the student steps past the comfort zone of knowing into the uncertainty of not knowing noting that "although one may glimpse the possibility to stepping into a new world, one also resists it" (p. 11). Mälkki and Green (2014) reference Berger's (2004) work on

emotions felt in the space between knowing and not knowing and refer to these as 'edge emotions'. Edge emotions may include anxiety, fear, or depression and are indicators that the edge of knowing is approaching, or there already. This edge of knowing is where transformation takes place. In transformational learning the individual journeys through the passage of liminality to a new form of knowing and takes up a new form of being in society.

In summary, embodiment is a way of being in the whole body in all its aliveness, including eroticism. People's access to erotic pleasure can be limited by trauma and social concepts of what constitutes 'normal' in terms of gender and sexuality for example. Disruptive traumatic events of the past can be experienced as if in the present so that the nervous system may shut down sensations in the body. Through re-learning the sense of safety and focusing on the present felt sense in the somatic body, the body's response to trauma and other social conditions may change. Practicing new ways of being in the body, particularly with acts of ritual help people enable change and enter a state of liminality through which transformation may occur. Active participation in pleasure and the embodied process of becoming is therefore transformational and political. It is on this theoretical framework that the current study is grounded.

### **Aims of Study and Research Question**

The literature on masturbation and its location in the field of sexuality in Western cultures, acknowledges that while masturbation has historically been a criminal affair with consequences of burnt genitals, if not death, it is moving towards being tolerated by society. Studies and the arts have revealed that all the while, people have continued to masturbate. They have done so however, within a complicated field of being highly taboo and within some discourses it is considered a healthy sign of sexual development and the opposite of

constrained by prudishness, which remains healthy for as long as one doesn't 'do it' too much. Sex and sexuality are so entangled with heteronormativity and mind-body dualism that erotic pleasure has been all but abandoned in performance and goal-oriented sex. Embodiment is a key element in somatic sex therapies and has been shown to help people heal from trauma and other social constraints on accessing pleasure. Sexological bodyworkers are trained in ESP and practice ESP as part of their studies. However, there is very little research on therapeutic experiences of masturbation, and none in the last decade specifically on ESP.

Therefore, research is needed to understand the nature of the experiences this practice may produce, what is it enabling, what people find difficult, and the outcomes of experience. To address these issues, the present study asked:

What was the lived experience of sexological bodyworkers as they practiced ESP?

## **Chapter 4: Methodology and Method**

To understand the experiences of trainee sexological bodyworkers as they practiced ESP, an embodied, solo, erotic, pleasure practice, this chapter outlines the methodological principals that underpin this study. That is followed by the methods of design, participants, data, and procedures of recruitment and data collection. Then the analysis method and procedure, ethical considerations, researcher's reflection, and finally, quality criteria that helped to establish trust with the people involved and maintain integrity in the data.

### **Methodological Principles**

This study aimed to understand the nature of masturbation when it is free of shame and taboo and asked, "what are the experiences of trainee sexological bodyworkers when they practice ESP?". Care was taken to give the intimate and personal nature of this subject matter the respect it deserves and aimed to "raise up" (Lavie & Willig, 2005, p. 117) participants voices without imposing preconceived ideas of the researcher. In the following sections the ontological and epistemological positions that underpin this qualitative study are discussed, along with the theoretical paradigm of phenomenology and how this informed the methodologies of data collection and analysis.

### ***Ontology and Epistemology***

The standpoint of this thesis is that the experience being studied comes from and belongs to the participant and that experience is situational, contextual, and interpreted. The nature of the experience and the making sense and meaning making of it is of particular importance to this study. Where ontology is the philosophy of what we know to be true or real (Braun & Clarke, 2022), critical realism understands reality is an interpretation of the

lived experience as it is shaped by the material and social world (Burr, 2015). As Burr (2015) explained, critical realism lies somewhere between realism where importance is given to the material and measurable and relativism where language is the foundation of truth. Further, Burr (2015) noted that critical realism is 'critical' in that it seeks to understand the implicit and underlying meaning of the lived experience, which are gathered through participants' and researchers' interpretations of the lived experience (Riley & Chamberlain, 2021).

Epistemology is the nature of knowledge, it asks for example if 'truth' is an objective fact or an interpretation; it is the study of knowledge itself (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Burr, 2015; Crotty, 1998). At the risk of oversimplifying the work of Packer (1985), realists produce knowledge through the study of behaviour, relativists study language, and critical realists orient their study to the phenomena of lived experience. Critical realism according to Patomäki and Wight (2000) is:

committed to ontological realism (that there is a reality, which is differentiated, structured, and layered, and independent of mind), epistemological relativism (that all beliefs are socially produced and hence potentially fallible), and judgmental rationalism (that despite epistemological relativism, it is still possible, in principle, to provide justifiable grounds for preferring one theory over another) (p. 224).

Critical realists therefore acknowledge truth as the individual's experience, their story is the vehicle in which it travels but the experience remains 'out there', subject to the conditions of the social environment in which it is located (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). Reality for critical realists then, is affected by context, history, and culture. Further, critical realists prioritise the embodied experience (McHugh, 2020) which important to the study of

sexuality (Tolman et al., 2014). These foundational aspects of critical realism align with the research goals of this study in which the participant's voice, context and embodied experience are vitally important.

The present study also draws on critical naturalism which is an epistemological stance that supports critical realism (Gregoratto et al., 2022). In their manifesto on critical naturalism Gregoratto et al. (2022) noted that:

Culture means care of nature. Critique means care of the relationship between culture and nature. Critique must not be thought of as a judgement, but as a coming to terms with oneself and each other as natural and cultural beings. Critique promises a non-violent mode of cultural transformation, the possibility of transforming our lives with care (p. 118).

Critical naturalism has the potential to decolonise the colonised and to return socially constructed forms of being to their original (or authentic) ways of being. Some of the key components of critical naturalism as outlined by Gregoratto et al. (2022) are paraphrased as: nature has the power to return from colonisation (to decolonise), natural catastrophe (global and personal) can be perpetuated by the structures that caused the devastation, to consider independence and separation from nature perpetuates catastrophe, subjective experiences such as drive and affect have the power to liberate against "encrusted social norms and structures" (p. 109). Further, critical naturalism is committed to social transformation and is "geared to mutability and variation ... it has a transient character" (p. 109). While this epistemological stance is more often applied to environmental and economic issues, the key aspects of critical naturalism, its alignment with critical realism, that it gives voice to the creative, affective, embodied, thus lending

itself to the study of sexuality when framed within the theoretical approach outlined in the previous chapter.

Central to critical naturalism is contextualism, a framework that accommodates the individual in the production of knowledge and the researcher as part of that knowledge production, through social phenomena and their sociological context (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). Jaeger and Rosnow (1988) referenced William James and other early philosophers in developing their foundational assumptions on contextualism being, “human acts or ‘events’ are active, dynamic, and developmental moments of a continuously changing reality” (p. 65). Phenomena occur within social, historical, and cultural contexts that are forever changing. Where constructivism tends to intertwine experience and context, contextualism identifies them as influencing each other but separate phenomena (Patomäki & Wight, 2000). Contextualism therefore recognises an individual’s reality as phenomena that are ‘out there’ and that those phenomena have been influenced by external contexts (Gergen, 1985a; Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988).

Understanding the human in their for ever changing context, through the progressive nature of interpretation, and evolving reality (Burr, 2015) is a complex affair. Experience is interpreted by the individual at the time of the experience, again in recalling it, and further interpreted by the researcher in analysing data. The formation of water from the combination of oxygen and hydrogen is an example of nature being changed by nature (Williams, 2003), and changes in temperature change the form of water; liquid, ice, or vapour. Nature is and depends on its environment. In a human example, someone may be diagnosed with anorgasmia while in an abusive relationship, then after separation, practicing ESP, and with a new intimate partner they may experience orgasms. The critical

naturalist may infer the capacity to orgasm was developed through practice (Williams, 2003), changed context, 'freedom to' experience as they wish and 'freedom from' oppression (Fahs, 2014b), and "tries to understand the imaginative, critical, and transformative dynamics of affects and emotions" (Gregoratto et al., 2022, p. 121). The phenomena being studied in this example is the individual's experience within their changing context and the meaning they give to their experience.

### ***Phenomenology in Psychology***

Phenomenology is congruent with critical realism and critical naturalism and is the theoretical paradigm of this study. This section provides discussion on Cartesian dualism and the mind-body division or union, and how it relates to phenomenology, before discussing some of the principles of phenomenologically informed research.

Phenomenology is a paradigm of discovery in the meaning of human experience (Lavery, 2003). Cartesian dualism is the philosophical and scientific division between the mind (psyche) and body (soma) originating from the philosophies of René Descartes (1596-1650) (Brown, 1989). Positivist, empirical, scientific paradigms have evolved from this underpinning belief of the mind as distinct from, separate from, and superior to, the body. Brown (1989) explained the mind-body division was misunderstood as Descartes' philosophies went much deeper than scientists of the day interpreted and that Descartes did not intend a "severing of mind from body, but a close interaction aimed at exposing the deep somatic underpinning of perceptual and affective states" (p. 327). Brown (1989) identified the medical world's persistent misreading of Descartes philosophies as Cartesian myth. Descartes' true emphasis was on the close interaction of the human psyche and

soma. This interaction between the human psyche and soma is fundamental to considering the embodied human experience (Tolman et al., 2014).

The human experience was greatly contemplated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1958) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), the founders of phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology respectively (Lavery, 2003). In both phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology, the mind and the body are viewed as one connected being and are situated within their context of culture, history, and experience. Phenomenologists are interested in the meaning of experience and seek to dive deep into understanding the lived experience of human beings yet, as Lavery (2003) discussed, these two similar theoretical paradigms differ in fundamental ways with hermeneutic phenomenology focused on the interpretation of the language used to convey the experience and phenomenology focused on the experience itself.

Phenomenology pays attention to the lived experience of the individual in the person's experiential context and, in alignment with critical realism, identifies there is a reality 'out there' to be understood (Lavery, 2003). This reality depends on the human's consciousness, their capacity to think, remember, gain knowledge. Since people compare one experience with previous experiences of similar nature (Gergen, 1985b), a phenomenologist may ask "what was it like?" and the individual may call on what they know to be already true to liken this experience to something else, for example, an orgasm may be described as waves rolling in the ocean. The things that are known to be true or taken for granted are of particular interest to the phenomenological researcher (Lavery, 2003).

These taken for granted aspects of knowing stem from contextual frames and psychosocial factors such as religion, culture, trauma, or shame (Fiala et al., 2021; Pihama et

al., 2016; Westin, 2022). For example, a child quickly learns to hide their genital rubbing from parents whose religion and upbringing framed masturbation as sinful. An individual's understanding of their experience is always changing as one experience builds on and sets the context of subsequent experiences (Gergen & Davis, 1985; Lavery, 2003). Through this accumulation of experiences the individual can have an effect on their own being, something Martin and Sugarman (2001) explained is a feature of being human. When two people with their associated actions and beliefs interact together, they influence each other's experience (Martin & Sugarman, 2001). To further the above example, after being told by a parent that masturbation is not to be done in public the child might create new ways of understanding pleasurable experiences as bad. The same may apply in the research context, where talking about masturbation and ESP in the interview might allow the participant to further understand embodied pleasure in a different way. In the context of research, it is important to consider the researcher – participant relationship with its inherent power dynamic and how this influences the knowledge produced (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Riley & Chamberlain, 2021).

In phenomenological studies the researcher aims to acknowledge their presence in the study and reduce their influence as much as reasonably practicable (Lavery, 2003). The identification of researchers positionality and beliefs is known as reflexivity and efforts to remove bias from the research process in phenomenology is referred to by Husserl as 'bracketing' (Lavery, 2003). While true bracketing is unrealistic, maintaining some separation between the interviewer and interviewee is important in going 'deep' into the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2019). The contextual nature of

phenomenological research means, therefore, that the researcher is part of the data gathering and analysis but aims to identify and limit their influence (Packer, 1985).

The study of sexuality requires a theoretical and methodological framework that repudiates norms of sexual orientation, interpersonal relationships, gender, and dualistic dichotomies, and instead embraces theories rooted in feminism, queerness, and the embodiment of sexual experiences (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Tolman et al., 2014).

## **Method**

The following section details the methods used support this study which is positioned from an ontology of epistemological phenomenological

## ***Design***

The design of this study is a phenomenologically informed thematic analysis of individual semi-structured interviews and forum posts of eight participants who had a daily practice of ESP as part of their training in sexological bodywork. Forum posts gave insight on their real-time experience of practicing ESP. Semi structured interviews, conducted eight months after the ESP practice. The use of multiple methods deepens understanding of a topic (Riley & Chamberlain, 2021) and this combination of during training forum posts with post training interviews provided a longitudinal aspect to the data (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Jhangiani, 2019) This method offset weakness in both data sets and helped create a robust design to explore this issue.

## ***Participants***

Eight graduates of the Certificate of Sexological Bodywork (CSB) from the Institute of Somatic Sexology (ISS) participated in this study. To be accepted into the CSB training the organisers screened applicants for their willingness to participate in and discuss sexuality openly and safely, and for their capacity to manage trauma (discussed further in the ethics section of this chapter). On acceptance to the CSB programme students were coached in ESP and worked in the various modalities of sexological bodywork before graduating in January 2023. Selection criteria for participating in this study required only that participants were graduates of the CSB training.

The participants were from Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Latin America, Spain, United Kingdom, and United States of America. Their pseudonyms and pronouns were Bejewelled (she/her), CB (she/her), Celeste (she/they), Demi (she/her), Johnny (he/him), JT (he/him), Starfish (she/they), and Vanessa (she/her). Pseudonyms and country of origin have been intentionally not connected and identifying features such as careers have been deleted to preserve anonymity. English was the first language for seven of the eight participants.

## ***Method of Data Collection***

### Forum Posts.

During their CSB training, participants were required to write about their experiences of ESP and to post those to their online training forum, these are data set known as 'forum posts'. Forum posts were much like diary entries in that they were written in an intimate space, independent of researcher influence (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Coyle, 2007).

The strengths of forum posts were their specific focus on the research topic and being written at the time of practice meant their accounts were immediate, less subject to re-interpretation.

The forum posts provided insight on ESP as it was experienced at the time that the participant was first introduced to and being coached in ESP. In their training ESP was referred to as erotic embodiment (EE) or orgasmic yoga (OY) so in the data these terms were used interchangeably. Students received feedback from their peers and supervisors on their written accounts of the practice. The feedback was not included in the study, but some participants acknowledged the importance of this feedback to their learning.

#### Online semi structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews are conversational style interviews where pre-prepared questions help guide the discussion to ensure the research question is addressed while also allowing the participant to share what was important to them (Jhangiani, 2019). For conversations of a sensitive nature this interview style of co-creation allowed rapport to grow between interviewer and participant and flexibility in the discussion (Roulston, 2010; Smith & Osborn, 2007). Following up what was said with probing open-ended questions gave depth to the data and an ability to include unexpected areas of discussion (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This method is suitable for small participant numbers but limited by the researcher's interview skills and ability to create rapport.

The sensitive nature of the topic of study meant developing rapport between the participant and researcher was important to gaining trust and eliciting in depth conversations about personal and intimate experiences (Leavy & Brinkmann, 2020; Thorpe

& Farrell, 2016). Just as mindfulness and somatic awareness practices are encouraged to help build connection in the therapeutic client-psychologist relationship (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014; Thorpe & Farrell, 2016), methods of embodiment, such as breathing together and pausing to notice sensations in the body, were used to help build rapport and help facilitate an embodied conversation. Given both the researcher and participant had done the CSB training which included this way of communicating, it was a shared language which further helped build rapport. As discussed by Jowett et al. (2011) online interviewing provides more anonymity and potentially allows less inhibition than in-person interviews which makes it suitable for discussing sensitive topics such as sexuality. Online interviews also helped overcome issues of distance and cost which is suitable for studies recruiting participants across a wider geographical area.

As researcher, my intention in facilitating the interviews was for the conversation to be led by the participant as much as possible. The pre-prepared questions (refer to Appendix C) were therefore designed to stimulate conversation when needed and ensure the relevant questions were raised (Leavy & Brinkmann, 2020; Roulston, 2010). Example questions included “Before the CSB training, what were the main challenges and highlights you found in sexuality, intimacy, and pleasure?”, “As your ESP practice developed did anything shift in your experience of pleasure?”, and “If we talk about orgasm as a peak experience and orgasmicity as all heightened sensations, emotions, and pleasures, did ESP change orgasmicity for you in any way?”.

## ***Procedure***

### **Participant Recruitment.**

Confirming the number of participants for this study was an organic process. In qualitative phenomenological research, four participants is often considered a reasonable number to achieve analytical depth and be a manageable workload for one researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In this study, options of participation were offered to allow for four interview participants and a further six participants to contribute their forum posts. However, given the enthusiastic response of people wanting to be interviewed, the options were abandoned, commitment made to an increased workload, and a maximum of eight agreed.

After Massey University ethics committee approval was given (1<sup>st</sup> February 2023), ISS faculty emailed details of the study to their 2022 cohort of students requesting volunteers to contact me directly. The email included the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A), Consent Form (Appendix B), website link for background on my work ([www.wildself.nz](http://www.wildself.nz)), a note that payment of NZ\$150 would be made to participants for their contribution to the study, and highlighted the potential for this research to advance their chosen field of somatic sexology.

Individual introductory calls were held with twelve volunteers by Zoom. The discussion included where the volunteer was physically located, corresponding time zones, the CSB training and life after it. I also talked a little about myself, such as being in New Zealand, a graduate of the CSB training, studying psychology and wanting to support somatic sexology through this research project. We talked about how to participate, by sending their forum posts to me and participating in a semi-structured interview. Through a shared Zoom screen, we talked through the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form to discuss anything that needed clarification.

Eight of the 12 volunteers promptly returned their signed consent forms, provided pseudonyms for the data, and confirmed interview dates. To the remaining four I sent an email thanking them for their time on the intro call and noted I had sufficient participants for the study so would not require their continued assistance. The outcome was that eight participants were confirmed for this study.

### Data.

Participants emailed me their forum posts ahead of the interview. They were sent in Microsoft Word format and ranged from 679-900 words (average 752 words). To prepare for the interview I read the participant's forum posts and printed the interview questions.

The interviews were held on Zoom with participants in various countries and time zones. After a brief introduction that included an embodiment practice (three breaths noticing for sensations) I started to record the conversation by voice and video. Interviews lasted between 33 and 71 minutes (average 51 minutes). In the interview with Bejewelled I forgot to push the 'record' button until about half an hour into the interview. I had no way to recover the unrecorded part of this interview so unfortunately, that data was lost. During the interviews I read a few excerpts from the interviewee's forum posts which prompted further discussion and occasionally referred to the prepared questions.

For some participants, talking about their experiences brought up memories and emotion. When I noticed their body or voice change, or my own body responding to their story, I invited the participant to pause and notice what was happening in their body and emotions. Sometimes the participant released tears or stood up to shake their body, and then the conversation continued. Othertimes, there was uproarious laughter or long pauses

searching for appropriate words to describe what happened. In some instances the discussion went off track covering other unrelated sexual activities. These were encouraged for the participant clearly wanted to share them but were not included in the data.

Interviews were video and voice recorded in Zoom, transcribed by Otter.ai and then I checked the transcript for accuracy by reading them while playing the video. Corrections I made to the transcripts included notes on laughter, sighing, and added [...] to indicate long pauses. In transcripts and forum posts I changed names to chosen pseudonym, removed town names, number of children and any other identifying features. Once I was sure the transcript was a true representation of the interview I emailed each participant their transcript asking them to review and reply with any changes they wanted to make. All signed consent forms, forum posts and approved transcripts were uploaded to secure online storage.

### **Analysis Method and Procedure**

The method of analysis chosen for this study was thematic analysis as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2022) for its characteristics that align with phenomenology and therefore critical realism. Other methods suitable for phenomenological study, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis or discourse analysis would have constrained the data through a strict focus on linguistics and discourse which was not the focus of this study. The research question placed less emphasis on the language used or unconscious beliefs and focused more on embodied experience and underlying meanings.

Thematic analysis (TA) is a data driven analytical process that identifies patterns, themes and meanings across participants data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Braun and Clarke

(2021) described thematic analysis as a technique that maintains an element of flexibility for the researchers to apply to their various methodologies, compared with interpretative phenomenological analysis for example, in which its strict structure must be adhered to (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The flexibility of thematic analysis was useful in this study, accommodating both theoretical bricolage and analysis of forum posts and interview data concurrently. Braun and Clarke (2021) described themes as “patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept” (p. 39). Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasised themes are not ‘out there’ waiting to be found but are a product of the researcher’s study of the data, they are ‘generated’ by the researcher across the multiple sets of participant data. Themes are generated by the researcher in their embodied engagement with the data; their immersive, curious process of being in complete presence with what the participants said, and in the subtleties, ‘reading between the lines’ of what was not said (Laverly, 2003). The generation of themes is an in-depth process that is cyclic not linear (Martin & Sugarman, 2001) and requires the researcher to group and regroup the data into clusters of common concepts until it seems to make sense (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The data of this study was interpreted through TA.

Forum posts and transcripts were uploaded to the analysis software NVivo. Each participant’s data were analysed separately from the other to form an understanding of the individual’s experience and then drawn together to generate themes for the combined data through the following steps (Braun & Clarke, 2022):

1. familiarisation coding
2. initial descriptive codes

3. interpretative conceptual codes
4. interpretative codes into subordinate themes
5. clustering into superordinate themes

Initial descriptive codes and associated extracts were written in NVivo, printed on paper, and each line of coded data was cut into strips and manually sorted into piles of related topics which eventually felt like interpretative conceptual codes. Feedback on the first three sets of data analysis highlighted a need to revisit the process with more codes. Braun and Clarke (2022) noted this iterative process of TA is necessary to developing a practical understanding of TA and phenomenology and to going deeper into the meaning underneath what was said. Eventually, each participant's transcript and forum posts were assigned between 85 and 178 initial descriptive codes with the variance in code numbers reflecting the concise or broad nature of the conversation. The re-coded interpretative conceptual codes (step 3) were manually sorted into themes (step 4). With time and shifting piles of paper, I generated clear subordinate themes which I then clustered into superordinate themes (step 5). Superordinate and subordinate themes and coded text were then copied into a Word template and emailed to Sarah Riley for further review.

Once I was happy that each participants themes were as close to representing their experiences as possible, using NVivo, I combined all the participants coded and themed data through the following steps:

6. each participants subordinate and superordinate themes
7. data set subordinate and superordinate themes

## 8. final superordinate and subordinate themes

The final stage of clustering data, generating subordinate and superordinate themes, and returning to the original data to ensure my interpretation remained true to the original data was done entirely in NVivo. The themes and coded data required several iterations of refinement of the titles of themes and selection of representative data. For example, the superordinate theme 'pleasure is not a luxury' (inspired by Audre Lorde's "Poetry is not a luxury" (Lorde, 1985)), became 'ESP as (magical) meditation' to reflect the words used by participants, and in the final stages of developing the superordinate themes this became incorporated into the theme, 'a healing practice of self-love'.

As Braun and Clarke (2022) warned, the process of coding and developing themes took significantly longer than planned. It was however made easier by having a large table for sorting the paper strips and several computer monitors for working with the large amount of data. NVivo provided a useful database for organising information and Microsoft Word became the tool for fine tuning the themes and extracts and file sharing with my supervisor. Examples of the final analysis table and NVivo are in Appendix E and F respectively.

In writing up the analysis I followed each theme with its own discussion relating the analysis to the literature. This enabled a deeper understanding of the phenomenological experience described by the participants in that theme. In referencing extracts from the data, I have specifically noted when they are from forum posts, all other extracts are from interviews.

## **Ethics**

The following section outlines the key ethical considerations of this study oriented to the four principles set out in the *Code of Ethics for Psychologists Working in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (Code of Ethics Review Group, 2012). First, under “Respect for the dignity of persons” (p. 4) are considerations of informed consent, non-discrimination, sensitivity to diversity, privacy, and confidentiality. Second, “Responsible caring” (p. 13) covers ensuring no harm came to participants, benefits of the study, ethics approval and considerations of Tiriti o Waitangi. Third, the principle of “Integrity in relationships” (p. 21) and the fourth principle “Social justice and responsibility to society” (p. 25) in which security of data and sharing the findings of the study are discussed.

### ***Respect for the dignity of persons and peoples***

Written information about this study and a consent form (Appendix A and B) detailing participants rights and support details were provided to the CSB graduates by email and discussed by Zoom. In the introductory calls with each volunteer discussion included the interview recording and transcription process, that they would have the opportunity to review and approve the transcript before analysis began, security of data, and any questions they had about the study were addressed. I noted that they could withdraw from the study without explanation at any time before a certain date, after which data analysis would have started and redacting it from the study would compromise the research so could not be approved except by special circumstances.

On emailing the transcripts to participants for their review I reminded them they could make changes to the data they felt needed and acknowledged that after an interview

it is common to feel something important was missed or question what was said. One participant made changes to their transcript noting that with hindsight, they chose not to share some detail that had been discussed in the interview and another confirmed they wanted their country of origin to be deleted. The adjusted transcripts were uploaded, and previous versions deleted.

As an organisation, the ISS has welcomed people of all gender identity and sexual preferences in their somatic sexual learning. As discussed in the literature review, existing sexuality research has focused heavily on cis-female sexual disorders and studies of sexual pleasure are rare across all gender. At the outset I considered basing this study on pleasure for trans and cis-female participants. When considering recruiting participants however, as cis- and trans-men have been the minority groups in CSB training, it seemed unethical to exclude participants because of their gender. Therefore, participants of this study were CSB graduates of all gender and sexual orientation.

At the time of returning signed consent forms, participants also confirmed the pseudonym they wished to use. People working in sexuality sometimes use pseudonyms in their work and on social media. One participant changed their chosen pseudonym as they realised they would be recognisable by their clients, so all their data was adjusted accordingly.

The identity of participants remained confidential in the data and there were no communications with the ISS about the identity of volunteers or participants. Having students collect their own data from their training forum meant there was no need for me as researcher to enter their online forum to gather the data thereby avoiding any need to request consent from the rest of the 2022 cohort of students.

### ***Responsible caring***

In screening applicants for entry into the CSB training, ISS facilitators met with applicants in one-on-one interviews. They discussed trauma to understand if they had difficulties in their past and if so, how the applicant had resolved or was able to regulate and manage their trauma. People who were at risk of being retraumatised during the CSB training were guided to other more suitable training options. People who were accepted into the CSB training were relatively safe from trauma and willingly participated in sex education and ESP. The risk of harm being caused by the research itself was negligible. Nonetheless, participants were given contact details for Sarah Riley, my research supervisor and told they were free to contact her should they have questions they did not want to ask me, or if they needed further support because of this study.

Participants contributed up to two hours of time to reading the material, the introductory call, sending forum posts, participating in the interview, and reviewing the transcript. The benefit they spoke of included appreciating being able to reflect on their experiences and being given an opportunity to voice the benefits they experienced from ESP. For many, being part of this study and sharing their experiences with the wider community felt important. A donation of NZ\$150 was given to participants in appreciation of their time and sharing their experiences of a deeply personal nature.

The Massey University Ethics Committee reviewed and approved this project. The application submitted for approval included considerations of the Treaty principles of “partnership, participation, and protection” (Code of Ethics Review Group, 2012, p. 19) which are briefly outlined below. This study was conducted online with three of the eight

participants from Australia. One participant was non-Māori from Aotearoa New Zealand and I am Pākeha.

***Tiriti o Waitangi, Treaty of Waitangi***

The following key principles of kaupapa Māori research that relate to non-Māori have been important this research project:

Aroha ki te tangata (a respect for people)

Kia tupato (be cautious)

Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata (do not trample over the mana of the people)

Kaua e mahaki (do not flaunt your knowledge) (Jones et al., 2010, p. 2)

Henry and Foley (2018) have drawn kaupapa Māori and Australian Aboriginal research practices together noting that a fundamental aspect of Indigenous research is the relationship between the researcher and researched whereby they “encourage non-Indigenous researchers to engage with Indigenous knowledge, research and peoples in a mutually safe and respectful environment” (p. 224). This is in line with phenomenological philosophy and a point of continual reflection on my axiology (values and meaning) and the culture and context of the participants in this study. I found no requirement to seek cultural advice during this study, but I had access to Australian cultural advice through the ISS and had there been Māori participants, Massey University Māori culture advisers were available.

Tikanga Māori (values and principles) were followed in this study through the Tiriti o Waitangi principles of protection, participation, and partnership. Protection refers to taking

care of Māori whenua (land), kāinga (home), taonga (treasures), and the practice of tikanga (traditional rituals and practices) Māori. For example, had there been Māori volunteers they would have been invited to bring a support person to the interview and to open and close the interview in te reo. Participation refers to providing equitable access and inclusion of Māori in this study. This was supported through open invitations to participate, encouragement during the recruitment process, the use of te reo where appropriate, and being ready to seek culturally specific support for Māori participants through connecting with Māori professors at Massey University. Partnership refers to article one of Tiriti o Waitangi and the partnership between Government and rangatira Māori. Partnership between myself as Pākehā researcher and participants was to be supported through active communication, a flexible approach to integrate tikanga Māori with, for example, the interview processes and review of transcripts. Before starting to gather data, I planned to meet with Māori participants to explain the research design and see if there were ways the design could be developed that allowed the research question to be addressed while co-designing the project in partnership with Māori. For example, interview questions could have been modified or a more collaborative korero (conversation) may have been an improvement over semi-structured interview.

Māori attitudes to sexuality have been influenced by colonialism (Pihama et al., 2016; Rountree, 2000) so this research is likely to have relevance to Māori in the wider community. If Māori choose to read the report it is possible this study may initiate further discussions on ESP within Māori communities.

***Integrity in relationships***

Selecting volunteers from the 2022 cohort of trainee sexological bodyworkers meant as researcher, I was not involved in the CSB training nor the ESP coaching and entered their contextual framework only after their training was complete.

There were no conflicts of interest in conducting this study.

***Social justice and responsibility to society***

The storage of data has been treated in line with university ethics committee requirements in which access to consent forms and data is limited to the research team only and made available in the future if required for data validation or legal purposes. Consent forms have been securely stored under password access on SharePoint, in a folder separate from the data. All data was securely stored under password access on SharePoint so it could be shared with my supervisor and once data was anonymized a backup was held under password protection on my personal computer. Interview data gathered through software including Zoom and transcribed through Otter.ai was held under password access however this is less secure so was promptly transferred to SharePoint and deleted from those platforms. Data loaded to NVivo was anonymised. Anonymised data is being stored by my supervisor on one drive for five years in accordance with university ethics committee requirements. My supervisor will be responsible for its safekeeping and eventual transfer to the archives on Massey University SharePoint and deleted after five years.

Participants confirmed their approval for this study to be published and presented to the public. Participants will be sent a digital copy of this report by email along with messages of gratitude for their participation. The findings of the study will be disseminated

to the ISS and their 2022 cohort in an online presentation with an opportunity for questions and discussion. Presentations have been made to the 2023 psychology conference and the sex therapists of Aotearoa. Further presentations will be offered to members of Massey University and the public.

The community of sexological bodyworkers and associated training providers may benefit from this study in broadening the reach of information about their work and the benefits they and their clients experience from them.

### **Reflexivity**

Researchers influence the research they create (Gergen, 1973). They design the interview questions, encourage conversation, and it is their imagination that is sparked in generating themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher's subjectivity is considered a resource in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Shaw (2010) described the position of the researcher on a spectrum where at one end the researcher is separate from and objective to the research (as in quantitative research) to being deeply immersed in the process of data collection and analysis acknowledging the researcher's inclusion on the findings of qualitative research. While the researchers involvement in qualitative research is to some extent unavoidable they must not project their own views onto the data and must instead allow the data to tell its own story (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As researcher in this study I am positioned in the middle of this spectrum, involved in the interview yet separate from the ESP training and forum posts and immersed in the data to ensure findings are data-driven.

To understand my researcher-story I share some of my back-story; what interests me and why, my values, and observations of my own sense-making throughout the study.

I am Sonia Waters, student of the master's by thesis course at Massey University and my supervisor is Professor Sarah Riley. I am a somatic sexologist certified with the Somatic Sex Educators Association of Australasia (SSEAA). As a somatic sex educator I have regular supervision and work to the SSEAA's code of ethics (SSEAA, 2022). As a student of psychology, I have completed undergraduate and post-graduate courses in methods of qualitative research (175203, 175303, 175738, 175743, 175750), ethics (175730) and work to the *Code of Ethics for Psychologists Working in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Code of Ethics Review Group, 2012).

This is my first academic research project. For research experience I am guided by the experience and professionalism of my supervisor Professor Sarah Riley who leads the Health Psychology programme at Massey University, specialises in qualitative research and is supervisor to numerous research projects. Our backgrounds are vastly different yet our interests in the human body and the private matters of being human are aligned and present a unique and creative opportunity in this research project.

Earlier in my career I trained as an architect and have over 20 years' experience as a project manager in construction. I am a mother of two young women now aged 22 and 24. I have a strong sense of integrity. I believe before I doubt. I appreciate the wild and creative nature of being in this world. I am not aligned with a specific spiritual belief system however I do believe the universe has a plan of sorts, one in which there are no coincidences, we can influence our own path through effort, and life's events can be appreciated as being in the greater order of things.

I trained in somatic sex education with DeeJ and Uma, the creators and facilitators of ISS, and concurrent with this study am completing an internship at the ISS. In 2020 we ran the CSB training despite the world being in lock-down from Covid-19. We learnt to do embodiment sessions by Zoom and facilitated the in person intensive module with people in houses connecting by Zoom who made it to the intensive as lockdowns lifted. We played 'patience' with airlines and cancelled flights and when I finally made it back to Aotearoa on Christmas day, I spent two weeks in managed isolation. In the quiet retreat of isolation with a bag of sex toys from Blacks in Sydney, an intention to explore porn (something I had never done before), and create erotically themed music playlists, isolation was the perfect opportunity to deepen my personal ESP practice.

This backdrop and knowing how beneficial ESP has been in my personal erotic and relational journey has shaped the focus of the current research project. My continuing education in this field was important to the connection with DeeJ and Uma who gave access to the CSB graduates who participated in this study. I am grateful to the participants for their willingness to contribute intimate details of their personal experience and inspired by their passion for life. None of this would be possible however, without DeeJ and Uma who bring to their trainings such passionate enthusiasm and unconditional positive regard (Kirschenbaum, 2007) for humans in their erotic nature.

I feel privileged to be the conduit of these collective voices.

## Quality

The study's structural design and researcher commitment to reflexivity ensured the quality of the research, while the integrity of the data was preserved through continuous engagement with the dataset.

Longitudinal data in qualitative studies provide a more reliable dataset than, for example, single interview methods (Jhangiani, 2019). The forum posts provided experiential data on ESP generated in the 'heat of the moment' of learning. The interviews followed eight months later and gave participants time to integrate and reflect on the learning in daily life. The combination of during and after data gave a more accurate representation of how ESP affected participants overall.

In the collection of data, researcher influence was minimised through two elements of design. First, forum posts were generated prior to the study meaning they were generated entirely free of researcher influence. Second, by intending for the interviews to be led by participants and calling on the pre-prepared questions only to maintain focus on the primary research question, the conversations were guided more by what the participant wanted to share than the researcher. Braun and Clarke (2013) discussed the importance of researchers stepping back from their 'taken for granted' beliefs to become consciously aware of them and critically reflect on how such beliefs influence the knowledge produced.

Researcher reflexivity is therefore essential in qualitative research to establish rigour to the process and quality in the data. Journalling throughout this project which gave intentional time for reflection and learning as exemplified in the following journal extract written during data analysis stages of this study:

Taking the advice of Braun and Clarke (2022) I took a break and slept on it. Two steps back to go one step forward I step back to re-organise Johnny's codes. In the re-doing, new themes formed. The iterative process of doing, re-viewing, and re-doing is exhausting but after a rest, it is now inspiring, as more certainty comes to what I am producing.

The systematic doing, checking, and revisiting each of the stages in TA and reflecting on patterns and assumptions were important to generating quality data. My ongoing reflexivity as researcher and guidance from the more objective and experienced view of my supervisor meant the analysis was data-driven; the experience and words of the participants were the primary voice in the findings.

The term 'saturation' of themes means the point reached where adding more data does not generate any more themes (Laverty, 2003). Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022) discussed this widely used term as problematic and instead consider data in terms of its 'richness' and promote the term 'information power'. To evaluate the information power of the superordinate themes generated for the collective data the individual datasets were revisited multiple times (Laverty, 2003). Theme titles were adjusted, and the selection of data text was refined throughout the process. Theme descriptions were similarly expanded and reduced to reflect both the individual and collective data until theme titles, descriptions and data selection were a true representation of the phenomena. It was an exhaustive process in which Sarah Riley's words "stay with the data" were an important reminder that quality analysis comes from the researcher's deep presence in the data; a process that cannot be rushed.

## Chapter 5: Analysis

The analysis generated four themes, with one overarching theme within which other themes were situated, 'a journey of self-discovery'. In this theme participants described the erotic self as evolving, discoverable, and inextricably linked to a broader sense of self-concept. The journey of discovering the authentic sexual self was hard work but worth it for a deep sense of self-knowing. After describing this theme, the analysis explores three themes that offer unique insights into specific elements of this journey, particularly as they relate to ESP. These themes are: (1) 'present in pleasure', which described participants experiences of moving away from erotic productivity and orgasm imperatives towards embodied, sensate-focused pleasure; (2) 'resistance is part of the process', which described how participants felt resistance to starting ESP and understood that as part of the learning journey; and (3) 'a healing practice of self-love', which explored the value of unconditional acceptance and how participants found ESP helped improve mental health and resolve sexual difficulties through self-acceptance and self-love.

Following the analysis of each theme are discussion sections related to that theme. This approach allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenological experience by bringing discussion with the literature into the analysis section.

### **Theme One: A Journey of Self-Discovery**

The overarching theme of this study was a journey of self-discovery. As participants grew to understand their authentic erotic self, they reflected on their childhood and the ways in which the prudish and judgemental world they grew up in worked to divide them between what felt good in the body and what society deemed appropriate. The divisions

continued through key moments in the lifespan of self-development such as in young adulthood, branching out from the family into the world of sexuality. Participants found the journey of self-discovery hard work, but worth it for the valuable insights that changed many aspects of life. They experienced ESP as an accelerated moment of self-development that allowed them to view themselves in a different light - slowed down, embodied, and self-confidence and self-connectedness. They felt ESP was a profound tool of self-development that helped participants discover aspects of their erotic nature in the ongoing, challenging, and rewarding journey of self-discovery.

As participants spoke of knowing their authentic self, they often told stories of what they were like as a child. They remembered their parents' comments and attitude on behaviour, especially behaviour of a sexual nature. In response to their parents' disapproval of signs of masturbatory pleasure from them as young children, participants recalled how they changed what they did to please, hide from, or provoke their parents.

In the following excerpt, Celeste remembered her parents' responses to her early masturbation, "before the age of four" she enjoyed orgasmic pleasure freely, regularly, and publicly:

Celeste: I would use like friction against like, the arm of a sofa or Yeah, kind of like a sofa back or something like that just kind of draped myself over it. And I guess in a sense, if I think about it, it's kind of like an ab-gasm is what people talk about. So it's like a contraction of the abdominals, but also like pelvic friction, which would I assume, stimulate the clitoris, and result in an orgasm. And I would do that fairly often. Weekly, definitely, several times a

week, probably. Just because as a kid, I'm like, Well, why would, this is awesome. Why wouldn't you do this all the time? It's just brilliant!

SW: How did, how ... were your family around that?

Celeste: I think when they finally clocked on to what I was doing, there was a lot of shame and or concern about sexual behavior from from someone who was so young and also doing it in public, because I would just do it in front of everyone, because you don't know as a child that sex is socialized to be like private. Yeah. And so throughout the years, the things that I recall is, my parents, maybe like my dad would kind of make fun of me for doing it. And my mom told me at some point that it was not wrong, but something that was best reserved to do in private and maybe after, like, like, on a good day as like a positive reward or something.

At a young age, without anyone showing them how, Celeste had discovered various ways to orgasm, through the abdomen and the genitals. It felt good in their body which meant they wanted to do it more often whenever and wherever possible. Young Celeste had no idea pleasure was problematic until their parents said so. There was an attempt at acceptance by Celeste's mother, but it was qualified with limits on location and frequency and combined with a lack of acceptance from their father who made fun of their masturbatory acts. Celeste said the conditional acceptance and teasing continued "throughout the years" well after they had stopped pleasuring in public. The consistent ongoing messaging meant shame became deeply embedded in young Celeste's psyche and continued to influence their developing concepts of sexuality. Celeste felt the shame of being too sexual as a child as a need to hide, rather than stop, the good feelings in their

body. That “there was a lot of shame” meant Celeste hid this delightful and meaningful part of life from their parents, as Celeste said, “definitely, it was something that I had to hide from my parents. And I felt like I, Yeah, it was important to kind of not to get caught”. Similar messages of being caught for doing something bad were reflected in Johnny’s story, which was set against a backdrop of a religious family:

when I have those changes in my body and I start touching myself and start masturbating or recall, like obviously it was like the whole hormones I was touching three times a day and at then I was actually praying to God that I was not going to do it. And then the next day that was doing another three times, [it] was like, sort of like a confusion you like a guilt and pleasure in the body because it was actually, you know, feeling good, you know, so that that contradiction (Johnny).

Johnny described the contradiction of feeling both good and guilt for pleasurable sensations in his body. In the religious context masturbation was sinful which meant Johnny’s self-worth was entwined with the sinful nature of his behaviour. The tension between pleasure and guilt led to a sense of helplessness; his inner desire to feel pleasure through masturbating was stronger than his prayers to God to stop. In masturbating ‘too much’ Johnny was letting down both his parents and God. Feeling like a disappointment to important figures in life set the scene for a sexual identity journey fraught with confused feelings that were divided between what his body desired, and what society permitted.

Societal permits of pleasure determined how parents projected their shame onto their children which meant children limited what they shared with parents. As children, some of the participants soon discovered friends who did want to talk about masturbation,

such as Celeste who said, “as you get older, you kind of you share this with friends. And so you find out that everybody was you know, using their electric toothbrushes or showerheads just really getting their hands on anything they could”. Celeste’s description had a sense of urgency combined with the delightful discovery of new ways to bring pleasure to their bodies; they found fun common ground with friends. In so doing, the young Celeste separated their sexual selves from parental disapproval and developed a sense of belonging through their friend’s acceptance on which their sexual identity grew.

Through time, participants’ sexual identity became imbricated with their sense of self-worth. Johnny’s religious background and gendered understanding of sexuality determined much of his early adult ways of being. He learned to suppress emotion and use his sporting prowess to attract women. Johnny said, “because I was always emotionally repress, I guess I was following. I was following my dick”. Johnny used his masculinity to mechanistically do sex and looked for sexual satisfaction, as he said, “just looking for sexual satisfaction. Not even looking for pleasure. It was more like because I didn't know what pleasure in the body was it was more like sexual just sexual”. Being unaware that his body could access sensations of pleasure meant Johnny’s relationships remained on the surface, without depth. He contrasted this with his sisters’ relationships which he said were based on “love [and] connecting in other ways that could be spiritual”. The absence of deep connection in Johnny’s relationships combined with earlier descriptions of being overly sexual meant he was both too much and not enough.

Demi also described having a high sex drive that meant she too felt ‘too sexual’ compared with acceptable norms, this affected her sense of self-worth and sense of attractiveness, which she sought to support through validation by having sex:

My promiscuity when I was younger, definitely was a self-worth thing. So um, if someone would have sex with me, I must be okay. And if I can please them I must be doing it was I get, I definitely get, it's like an ego, it's a self-worth. It's an affirmation for me, because I didn't see myself as attractive. So for me, that's that if someone will have sex with me, then I must be attractive, I must be okay. And if I can please them, then I must be doing the right thing.

For Demi, having someone want sex with her was a measure of her attractiveness, and attractiveness was a measure of her being “okay” or acceptable. This vulnerable young woman with a lack of self-worth needed other people’s affirmation of value by having sex. Through giving multiple people sexual pleasure she was “doing the right thing”, she learned to understand herself as ‘good’ and built her self-worth on others valuing her sexually. In working to please others Demi learned to fit their conventions.

In time, the participants described coming to recognise their authentic sexual self as opposed to one that worked to meet the constraints and norms of societal expectations. One way Demi achieved that was through trying marriage and monogamy and realising conforming to these societal norms was not for her:

Being someone who's highly sexual. I don't fit in that conventional box. I don't, I don't fit in the box of conventional relationships. So I've sort of come out of my second marriage and realized that monogamous relationships don't work for me. And so I live a poly life. But, you know, for years, I tried to fit myself in that box. (Demi)

A significant turning point in Demi's journey of discovering her authentic sexual self was in realising the life she had been trying to conform to did not allow her full self-expression. She tried monogamous marriage twice and described her sex life then as "quite vanilla". As a highly sexual person she felt increasingly confined by monogamy. Similarly, JT found monogamous marriage did not match with his desire for intensity in life "I found it like it was being in a prison cage, it felt very restricting, it felt very, like I wasn't able to explore the intensity of life".

Wanting intensity and being confined by monogamy placed a great deal of strain on Demi and JT's relationships. Once Demi broke free of the conventional relational 'box' she worked to find new ways of relating and created a polyamorous life that suited her sexual style; a "poly life". JT found that the more he lived in alignment with his true self the more he preferred open relating as a relationship style. In time, JT found he attracted people who related in similar ways to him, "as I'm going farther down the track the community of people that I'm interacting with are much more my shaped box".

For Starfish who also grew up in a household that problematised sexuality, they escaped confinement in a toxic environment through aggressive reaction:

my family has like a lot of toxic shame, about a number of things. And one part of it, one sort of strand of it is kind of sexual. So kind of breaking out of that somewhat aggressively at a certain point was a big part of my life journey. Yeah. I decided to become non monogamous and kind of get quite, I don't know, yeah, quite sort of provocative in my family's context about sex.

Starfish described “breaking out”, “somewhat aggressively” and provocatively from their family’s sexual rules as a forceful journey. Starfish said talking with their family felt like a “hardcore kind of shame trial” and left home to discover the world in their own way. Where Demi and JT described a journey of discovering a life truer to their authentic sexual self, Starfish’s experience was initially a push-back against their parents’ norms rather than an active engagement with an authentic self. However, Starfish later engaged with a deeper understanding of self, and in a forum post wrote they felt “A lot of shame dissolving [...] there's a significant change in the level of shame here [...] the relaxation is palpable, more now”. This deeply embodied relaxation supported a journey of sexual maturation.

In their journey, Demi realised something entirely new about her sexual identity, “I started exploring my sexuality, exploring kinks exploring, folks, I realized I'm bisexual. So I actually kind of say that I'm fluid”. In her exploration of non-conforming ways of relating with others, and exploration of sexual styles, such as kink, Demi discovered new ways of ‘doing’ and experiencing pleasure, like reaching orgasm through playing with no-touch breath on her genitals and learned that categories of male/ femaleness were not important for her sexuality.

Discovering new ways of accessing pleasure helped people who wanted to change their use of porn. Participants who watched porn regularly, initially loved the intensity and orgasmic highs that came with it. In time though, they found porn damaging and became reliant on it for orgasm. Celeste for example, described how they “had this long-term experience of masturbating with an orgasm focus with vibrators and the use of porn. It's pretty textbook. Pretty textbook, disconnected experience”. That porn was typically a performance disconnected from reality and the body meant Celeste found their porn use

dissatisfying and something they wanted to change. Johnny said that since he was visually aroused and focused on performance not a felt sense of pleasure, porn suited his sexual style at the time, but he came to understand it as limiting his ability to find more embodied sexual pleasure. JT enjoyed intensity in life generally which was initially supported by the intensity of porn, but in time, porn lost its fire; “porn is pretty uninteresting. It's all it all looks the same, really”. JT referred to masturbating with porn as “fantasy friction based masturbation” and felt its long term use was harmful:

my experience with fantasy friction based masturbation has been that actually, I don't feel it's good for me emotionally, or physically. My, my body does not function. You know, like, I have difficulties getting erections. When I'm when I've been using too much fantasy based masturbation. It's almost a desensitizing, it desensitizes my imagination that desensitizes my engagement with the real world, and it and it desensitizes my body.

JT's emotional and physical states were affected by the ongoing use of porn. He felt desensitized to the world around him and needed increasing drama in porn to maintain interest. The numbing nature of this engagement led to boredom, erectile difficulties and meant he wanted to find other ways to pleasure.

Participants said the problem with porn was that it disconnected them from their bodies and built a reliance that was uncomfortable and damaging. Discovering a pathway to pleasure that aligned with their embodied erotic self was part of the journey that practicing ESP helped them with. As JT said, ESP “allows me to come out of my head out of the fantasy and into my body and actually feel the pleasure” and “the most important thing is, is to actually focus more inwardly on our bodies rather than what's going on, swirling around in

our head. And any tools that we can use to do that I think are good". While JT used porn as a tool for intense arousal, as I show in subsequent sections, the participants were able to develop more embodied pleasure through ESP. Through expanding their inner language for pleasure participants found they became less reliant on porn and could watch it from choice rather than necessity.

While the journey of self-discovery was described positively by participants and improved their sense of self-worth, it was also hard work and took a long time.

It's like, I can't remember one point, but just year after year layer to layer, the more I embody these practices, and therapy, lots of therapy, to, you know, begin, that I'm aware that I can identify the patterns in me that I may not have known, you know, been able to link somatically before [...] it took a lot of therapy, a lot of triggering [...] it takes a long time right to actually become aware of what's actually happening (Bejewelled).

Bejewelled described her journey like an unwrapping of self, "layer to layer". She spent a lot of time doing therapeutic work and went through the stress of triggering old trauma patterns to make progress. Eventually, through the work, Bejewelled said she was able to recognise what was happening in her body, understand why, and developed tools to take care of herself. The process of discovering the real self was fraught with difficult emotions, as Bejewelled said, "there was a lot of emotional, sad, I was angry", and Starfish, "I felt deep sadness coming up". In Demi's forum posts she said after "3 days of practice... This process has brought up a whole range of feelings, thoughts and emotions for me". Demi said "I worked a lot on myself. So I cleared out a lot of my emotional baggage". Participants dug deep below embedded thoughts and practices. They released a lot of emotion and worked

hard to access and understand their authentic sexual self. It was a long journey taking years of work and inner reflection.

Once they were ready for significant change, participants found ESP was a tool that accelerated inner focus and allowed deeper connection with the sexual self. They found new ways of accessing pleasure, “There's other ways to feel pleasure, that don't necessarily have to be intense” (JT) and new ways of understanding themselves as sexual beings. Referring to before the training, Demi said, “I can look back and my self-worth, it impacted the people I attracted to my life, it impacted the jobs I chose. It impacts everything that you do”. After the training, Starfish noted a shift in self-perception, “I would say, like that kind of perspective shift from that very embodied place, or whatever you're gonna call it, really rippled out into my whole life in in such a great way”. Vanessa’s shift in self-perception included a new inner confidence, “I kind of see it as feeling differently towards yourself, like having more of a kind of internal confidence and connected with yourself around just accepting what is there”. The ripple effect of doing the work impacted participants’ relationships with themselves and with others:

How I show up at work, like it really kind of integrates into the everyday parts of your life, [...] you go to work on your kind of sex stuff, and then it ends up changing you as a person in a positive way. In that really feeling connected and being present with everything around you. (Vanessa)

New self-awareness spread beyond sexuality to all aspects of life, more connected, confident, and present. Starfish found they were more “compassionate and kinder to others like much more, and much less demanding, or much less needing other people to be some kind of ego object for me, much less”. Celeste discovered a sense of joy and contentment

“Joy in the micro moments and contentment, and really just, it's not about an end goal. It is about the micro and taking, taking in the little things and allowing them to mean more”. For CB, doing the work “changed my like daily existence” and Demi felt better resourced to manage life’s stresses “I was better equipped to kind of deal with the shit I had going on in my life”. Beyond daily life spirituality opened up, as Starfish said, “It was as if I came face to face with myself on the outside. It has catalysed a kind of ongoing enlightenment experience for me”. The enlightenment state was not a single moment but one that continued and changed their way of being in the world, Starfish said, “The practice greatly deepened my presence in daily life”.

Participants experienced profound changes through ESP, but it was difficult to integrate newfound ways of being into daily life. As Starfish said, “it’s been very difficult to integrate, my learnings from the training and from ESP into relational sexual experiences really, really difficult” because, “what doesn't feel good and what doesn't feel okay and I can't just sort of barrel through the bad bits [...] and basically I just can't have sex with people so easily”. Being more embodied and having greater access to sensations in their body meant old ways of sex didn’t work for Starfish anymore, they had less sex, but it was embodied with expanded sensations of pleasure; they traded quality over quantity. On returning home Vanessa she said she was “thinking about how that new self was going to merge back in with that old life” and when asked about connecting with her intimate partner she said “that was hard. We actually broke up for a few weeks after I got back because I just needed some space to kind of reevaluate everything”. When new ways of being in the world were discovered, participants found they just didn’t fit into life the same

as before. They developed new ways, like having less but better-quality sex, or took time out to consider what was important in life. The personal changes were significant.

Adjusting to broader aspects of life was also difficult; societal judgement in the wider communities they lived in had not changed with them. Johnny had a corporate job and outside of work he did tantra, nude modelling, and sexological bodywork. Johnny did not talk about life outside of work with corporate colleagues for fear of judgement and potential legal consequences “I don't really talk about it [...] because there could be some, you know, like, consequences like legal consumers”. Johnny dressed differently and had different conversations in his sexological and corporate worlds. These two worlds even showed in how he organised his home:

It's like living in two worlds. So sometimes it's like a struggle. So if you see my, like, for example, my room, my two rooms, one is, you know, got all the sexological things. And then you come here to this one, and it's all computers and anything. So it's like, two worlds that is representing the two worlds the struggle between between two worlds (Johnny).

For Johnny it was important to maintain the division with separate rooms for the different work, each with their own ‘tools of trade’, for the consequences of mixing them up could have meant him losing his job. The struggle of living in two worlds was a constant internal battle. Like the child hiding from their parents for fear of being caught, the adult hid corporate life from the life of acceptance. Society’s judgement even determined how participants made a living. Escorting in Australia is legal and Demi had a registered company for her escorting business, but as Demi said, “I tried to open a bank account, [...] saying that my business provided escort services, I was turned down by two banks on moral grounds”.

The journey of self-discovery was thus always in reference to negotiating an external judgemental world.

### ***Theme One Discussion***

The following section provides discussion on the key findings of this overarching theme, a journey of self-discovery. A recurring pattern in participants' experiences was of having an instinctive and inherently sexual body that was stigmatised by important actors in their life (including parents, God, financial institutions, work organisations), with the outcome that several participants describe separating from their authentic sexual self. They described how connecting with the erotic self in a safe, judgement free environment, was empowering and noted that the journey of self-discovery was a lifetime project, within which ESP was essential transformational moment. ESP therefore carries the hallmarks of transformational learning practices as it encouraged a new way of being in the world.

Participants recalled how growing up in a prudish society entrenched them in shame which restricted their inherent erotic nature. Celeste and Johnny spoke of the tension between being too sexual as young children and trying to be acceptable to their parents' beliefs that masturbation was either condemned by God or to be reserved for private. These childhood experiences support the theory that the humans are naturally instinctively sexual (DeMause, 1996; Hite, 2003) and that sexual inhibitions are socially determined (Dodson, 2002; Potts, 2000). In adulthood the desire to obtain society's acceptance led participants to choose paths such as marriage to conform to heterosexual, monogamous relationship norms, while others found acceptance through promiscuity that reinforced ideas of being attractive. Ultimately, conforming to these social obligations was damaging and participants

did a great deal of work to push through these constraints to further their personal journeys.

By the time the participants arrived at the CSB training, many of them had done a lot of inner work and had already stepped through the shame and taboo of masturbation. Nonetheless, when they practiced ESP, they had startling and life changing experiences that changed their daily existence. Important to doing ESP was the 'container' provided by the training; faculty and students were collectively and unwaveringly supportive and accepting of each other and their vulnerabilities. The training offered an environment that encouraged healing through the Rogerian theory of unconditional positive regard (Ikemi, 2005; Kirschenbaum, 2007), practices of embodiment, the felt sense (Gendlin, 1969) and ongoing development of safety in the group (Porges, 2011; Winhall & Porges, 2022). Through this context and the ESP practice, participants learned to re-accept themselves as erotic beings and learned to elicit a wider range of positive sensations in the body and in so doing, discovered their authentic sexual selves.

The steps participants described in their self-discovery journey supports the theory of 'becoming' (Butler et al., 1989) where practice and doing acts differently is a way to change old habits and discover new ways of being in the world (Butler, 1988; James, 1890). The participants described how the journey of self-discovery involved being challenged by needing to do pleasure differently, however, in time, by trying new and creative things they had fun and learned to access new pleasure pathways, as noted in this forum post by Celeste, "I incorporated vulva and anal exploration with lube, which I rarely, if ever, do, and I was excited and satisfied with the ritualistic aspect of play". Using ritual such as lighting candles, turning on meaningful music, or being very intentional in the practice, helped

participants generate new pathways to pleasure. Whether participants became something 'new' or were returning to their pre-socialised and natural way of being could be viewed through expressions such as 'clearing out emotional baggage' which reflected the journey of self-discovery, not as a reinvention of a new self but as a return to the more authentic and original self.

The sexual self is inextricably linked to the broader self-concept (Larson, 1981) and this was evident in the participants' descriptions. In discovering their authentic sexual-self participants became more self-knowing and self-accepting which built their self-confidence and sense of self-worth. Combined with the notion that the erotic is a life force energy a power of its own (Lorde, 1993), this deepening connection with the self, was empowering. Wider society had not changed with the participants as they evolved in their personal journey leaving participants to navigate 'two worlds', one public and one private.

Through this journey the participants felt better resourced with a new sense of empowerment, a resource that participants with trauma and porn difficulties appreciated. Supporting Lorde's (1993) theory that porn is an absurd form of abuse, participants found porn desensitised their physical and emotional bodies and that the deepening sense of self connection and elements of intention and creativity that came from practicing ESP were important shifts in their erotic journey and self-perception. They moved from reliance on external erotic input to being able to make porn a choice and be self-reliant with creativity and sensitivity.

Under the umbrella of a journey of self-discovery, the following themes are discussed as they account for how ESP was experienced as a powerful tool of

transformation: present in pleasure, resistance is part of the process, and a healing practice of self-love.

### **Theme Two: Present in Pleasure**

An important element of the self-discovery journey was being present in pleasure. Through practicing ESP, participants moved away from sex and masturbation as productive with goals of orgasm, towards being present and in the embodied experience of pleasure. Participants described ESP as an intentional but goal-free practice with permission to explore their erotic nature. The following forum post by CB is an example of goal free intentional ESP practice:

I had to keep coming back to my breath and just allowing myself to be present with what was happening in my body. I did feel aroused, however I didn't want to do my "usual" masturbation practice. I felt for the sensation in my body and just stayed with that, gently caressing myself without any pressure or expectation.

While feeling some arousal, CB remained true to her intention of being present with sensations and wanting to do something different to her usual. This meant CB's attention stayed with sensations in her body, present in the journey, free of goals or destinations. The nature of this experience was gentle and nurturing, quite different to how she described previous masturbation where the goal was to orgasm for release. Maintaining presence in sensations in the body and being a solo practice helped participants in all manner of ways. It meant ESP was the perfect location for participants to work through their various issues,

such as porn use, orgasmic difficulties, feeling disconnected, body image issues, and poor sense of self-worth. ESP was free of anyone else's expectations or judgement.

Participants' descriptions of previous masturbation and partnered sex was framed around pressures to perform in certain ways, quickly and with orgasm. Demi described her earlier masturbation habits as "definitely about a release. And it was usually like a switch, wham, bam, Thank you, ma'am". This aim for orgasm to release pressure in her body was much like for Starfish in their account of masturbation, "my one chance to get satisfaction!! quick quick make it work!!!!". Masturbating for satisfaction and release meant participants were 'grasping' for an outcome and making the body 'work' to get there. The desperate nature of the experience was exacerbated under the pressure of time.

Vanessa noted the disappointment of orgasm being gone almost as soon as it came, "just that kind of quick, really?". This did not imply masturbation was unpleasurable, but it did seem to miss something crucial. In the following extract, JT described the distinction between orgasm focused masturbation and being present with pleasure in ESP:

My definition of masturbation is much more genital focused. And it is much more goal oriented towards sort of classical sexual orgasmic release. Where self-pleasure is, is also a conscious, a conscious decision to do something with my body that brings me a sensation of pleasure in my body but doesn't necessarily need to result in a sort of typical orgasmic experience.

JT's exploration of sensations of pleasure throughout the body, without the goal of orgasm, meant he discovered ways to consciously access new pathways to pleasure. In a forum post JT wrote "It felt good to send love and kindness to my genitals", something he hadn't previously

experienced. Being present in the sensations of the body meant pleasure could be found anywhere, for example, in a river of cold water, “I was touching myself under the water and I was noticing what was different being in the water compared to when I did that in the in the dry air” (JT), or in different kinds of erotic adventure, such as when Celeste discovered that after practicing ESP, things that had been off-putting, “like choking or slapping or impact play kind of things” became turn-ons.

Being present in embodied pleasure brought a deep sense of satisfaction that far exceeded participants’ previous ‘wham-bam’ approach of masturbation. Both the capacity for pleasure and the way participants learned to think about pleasure changed as illustrated in this extract from Vanessa:

I even think differently about, Yeah, what orgasm is because it is that whole body experience as opposed to just that kind of quick, really? Yeah, like the whole build up to it is probably now what I like more just feeling all of those sensations continually building up. And also afterwards as well. Just kind of that integration period I find is really, really important. And just kind of lying there and being and all of those sensations and being aware, I guess yeah, just being present with everything is something that we don't generally do. And when you are present with all those amazing sensations, it makes such a difference.

Vanessa stayed with the pleasure and enjoyed the build-up and the integration of sensations in the long slow afterglow. Orgasm was far from her thoughts in this account, its absence wasn’t any sort of disappointment, orgasm at that moment was not important to her. What mattered to Vanessa was an expanding awareness of what her body was capable

of through being present in the moving and changing sensations of pleasure. Embodied presence in pleasure was a key difference between masturbation and ESP.

Setting an intention for ESP meant if participants became distracted, they would return their attention to the intention and focus on sensations in the body. In the example used to introduce this theme, CB described how she would return to her intention of being with the breath and stay in the sensations of her body. Being present in her gentle, goal free touch meant she could simply allow the body (rather than her mind) to guide her touch. Celeste described movement from a sense of deep listening to the body in which she would “move from the felt sense, as opposed to what I consider to be a necessary movement or an appealing movement”.

Celeste used the term ‘felt sense’ which as discussed in chapter three, means paying deep attention to the feelings, sensations, and subtleties of the body. Participants all spoke of tuning into the felt sense and allowing the body to lead the discovery of pleasure.

Vanessa wrote this in a forum post:

Day 3: I really enjoyed this practice, and my intention was to play with the rhythm of my body. I was dancing naked to high energy sexy music and when I added the blind fold, I felt I was able to really drop deep into my body and connect with my eroticism, breath, and the sensations that the movement aroused. My body felt electrified and when I started to use long strokes of touch it really helped to create an erotic flow through my body as if I was teasing the energy. I’ve learnt that it’s important to meet my body where it’s at in the moment and stay with the flow of sensations without wanting to change the experience.

In this extract Vanessa explained it was the body that had rhythm, not the music or any other external element, it was her body's rhythm she was moving to. Being goal free and intentional in her practice meant Vanessa could stay with the sensations long enough to discover the subtle nuances of how they flowed like electricity through her body. This experience felt authentic, like a human in their natural setting following their innate way of being. Johnny wrote of a similarly authentic intention that acknowledged a need to be free of self-judgement, "I set up my intention to let go of any judgments, be opened to any new experiences and surrender to the unknown". In intending to be free of his own judgement, free of any shame he may have harboured from his past, it was as if he was clearing inner space for new ways of being. On having spaciousness and an intention to do something different Bejewelled wrote in a forum post, "One session standing up was dedicated only to breast massage. Wow, I tried a bunch of new techniques and was blown away by how much my breasts can feel". All the participants wrote in their forum posts about the surprise of discovering new sensations in their bodies.

Participants spoke of the permission they felt in doing ESP. They had instruction from coaches, encouragement from peers, and acceptance from themselves which gave them permission to explore anything and everything they wished, "It's like permission to explore, like permission to switch off from what you normally do, like permission to play and experiment and touch your body every day" (CB). Bejewelled said, "I felt full permission just to feel my body energy tingling and allowing it to move and flow just the way it wanted, with no agenda for sex or orgasm". To feel she had permission to feel her body meant that previously without permission, she did not feel the same depth of sensation in her body.

In having permission, Johnny moved beyond his usual genital focus and felt empowered to explore all the body's senses, "to use all the senses, you know, from the smell, to catch different sorts of touch, not just visual, you know, like an absolutely everything". Being connected to the senses meant their perceptions of sensations in the body changed. Starfish said, "there was a big change on the level of sensation and like what I, what I perceive and the clarity, the resolution, the subtlety of what I feel in my body". This discovery of subtle sensations was shared by all participants which meant an expansion of possibilities in their erotic landscape.

Having permission and focus on the subtle encouraged a kind of erotic creativity.

I incorporated vulva and anal exploration with lube, which I rarely, if ever, do, and I was excited and satisfied with the ritualistic aspect of play. I also fully engaged with individual dirty talk, playing both dom and sub roles with myself for the first time ever (Celeste).

Celeste adapted familiar partnered play for their solo erotic adventures. In doing things they had never done before, being 'allowed' to explore uncharted territory in their bodies meant participants found they could expand their erotic landscape with new 'acts' and discovered new locations in the body that brought pleasure, or as Johnny said, "it has opened multiple windows to pleasure in my body". This discovery of new acts is discussed later as part of participants' process of 'becoming' in their journey of self-discovery.

In feeling 'for' or 'into' the body, participants described a conversation between mind and body. As Demi said, "I enjoyed tuning into my body... taking the time to ask what I needed and realising that my body wanted love and nurturing through touch and

movement". Tuning into the messages of her body was an enjoyable self-nurturing experience meaning she wanted more of that and continued to practice this pleasure. The more participants practiced tuning into the body the less satisfying old-style masturbation became. As CB said:

[I used to] paint some kind of image or movie in my head to kind of like, really make it hot and like, go through my reel of dirty shit in my head. [laugh] Whereas now I find that I, actually, if I stay in my body, and like, really breathe and notice the sensations, I can't even most time do that anymore. I'm like, No, I want to like, I want to like just be like, super aware and present.

CB's embodied approach to being in the pleasures of her body meant she could choose to leave fantasy out of her practice and be simply present and embodied in autoeroticism. JT also wanted to access pleasure without relying on external fantasy. When asked about why he found being embodied was important, JT said, "it allows me to come out of my head out of the fantasy and into my body and actually feel the pleasure". For CB and JT, being embodied meant pleasure was experienced in a significantly new, internally resourced way. In the following extract, Celeste highlighted the importance of embodied experience to believing in what was previously impossible, "I think that when it comes to something like erotic embodiment, or self-pleasure, it's, um, Yeah you believe it when you feel it".

The states of pleasure that were experienced in this goal-free, intentional, embodied, do-something-different, erotic practice were described variously as "erotic trance" (Bejewelled, Celeste, Starfish, Vanessa), "whoa" (CB), "mind fuck" (CB), "euphoria" (Starfish), and "heron orgasm" (Starfish). For all participants, their experiences of pleasure

were deeply joyful as expressed here in a forum post by Bejewelled: “Breath, sounding and PC contractions felt super charging the sparkles and had me giggling with glee”. This ESP experience embodied delightful childlike joy. Bejewelled said she could regularly reach super-natural states through ESP and preferred them over orgasm focused masturbation. CB described the changing nature of her orgasmic experiences:

now I've got less focus on orgasm that they are ... I want to say bigger than, they are like a lengthier and more ... kind of ... exciting. Hate using expansive because I use it all the time. But like a more expansive experience, you know, like it's kind of like, because there's no pressure on it because I'm never like, oh, I have to come now. Then it is generally like a bigger build up. So it is generally like sometimes just like a bit more. Yeah, a bit longer and a little bit more like whoa, that was kind of like a mind fuck process [laugh]. Wow, what the fuck like, you know, like, oh, like whoa, (CB)

CB's orgasmic pleasure was bigger, more expansive, and lasted longer. The real expression of pleasure she felt in her body was beyond words; 'whoa', 'mind fuck', and laughter were the best the English language had to explain how it felt. Starfish captured something extraordinary in this forum post:

a “softer” orgasm. I'm gonna nickname this a heron orgasm - it feels like a heron gracefully gliding in and landing on a rock, less like an “up” movement. It feels more “lucid” and graceful and afterwards I feel a kind of soft, expansive euphoria.

Starfish's description of how it felt in their body, the graceful movement of elevation and settling, being filled with light, intense happiness of the refractory period, had a super-natural quality. This experience was so powerful Starfish named it after the heron, a bird that symbolises joy and contentment.

Along with feeling super-natural worlds opening up, participants often described a meditative state of pleasure and entering states of trance and flow. For example, in a forum post Bejewelled described a meditative state where her body moved of its own intuition, "The mind is quiet and calm. My hands move of their own intuition and exploration". Similarly, a forum post by Vanessa described her body moving intuitively, in flow:

I felt tingly all over my body and I went into a trance like state. I included music and dance. I felt like the music really helped me enter a flow state where my body was moving to its own rhythm.

For participants to feel the body had intuition meant they were attuned to the body. Such deep attunement was accessed through the felt sense and being present with pleasure. Vanessa described the flow of body, movement, and intuition, as a trance like state. Bejewelled too described her experience as trance-like, a state in which time and the outside world seemed to disappear:

I open the space, connect to my mirrored gaze and breathe my intention.

Once I start I'm completely immersed. Delightfully surprised as to how easily my mind can slip into a trance state as I caress and dial into the sensations evoked.[...] Body twitching, breathing deep, mind floating as the

inner architecture of my body expanded. I come back to look in the mirror, my face and eyes softer.

The trance states described by Vanessa and Bejewelled had an other-worldly quality. One that was beyond nature, super-natural. Vanessa said the ESP experience was on “a bigger level, that kind of meets, I don't know, like this soul hunger”.

Being deeply immersed in these states bought ease and calm, which participants felt in the body and observed in the mirror. Starfish said of ESP, “I felt like I accessed different levels of consciousness through the practice” to the extent that ESP and meditation blended into one “I feel that my self-pleasure is really a meditation and meditation is really a pleasure”.

### ***Theme Two Discussion***

Moving away from old habits of masturbation driven by performance and orgasm imperatives, and instead practicing goal free ESP allowed participants to develop a new capacity for pleasure that was only understood when experienced, as Celeste said, “you believe it when you feel it”. Supporting theories of habit and practice (James, 1890), ESP encouraged participants to re-wire old orgasm-as-goal masturbation habits through regular practice of new erotic acts. Regularly practicing being present in pleasure meant participants developed new pathways to pleasure, they discovered new pleasurable acts, and found new locations of pleasure in their bodies. They felt they had permission to explore and be creative in their erotic adventures. By practicing new acts in new ways and being present in the expansive nature of pleasure meant participants were re-wiring who

they were 'becoming' (Butler, 1988), to something more aligned with the authentic erotic self.

As noted earlier, appreciation of the small pleasures in life is an important feature of people who thrive after traumatic events (Tedeschi et al., 1998). Participants' intentional focus on the felt sense encouraged them to notice subtle sensations in the body and pleasurable aspects of their environment such as the qualities of nature. They developed a capacity to feel pleasure in new and powerful ways and felt elevated to higher levels of consciousness. Participants said the benefits of ESP extended to all aspects of life, including how they related with intimate partners and people at work. Being present in pleasure in the practice of ESP aligned with the hallmarks of a practice that may help in PTG (Porges, 2011; Tedeschi et al., 1998; Winhall & Porges, 2022).

### **Theme Three: Resistance is Part of the Process.**

In this theme, resistance is part of the process, participants described feeling resistance to starting something new and understood that to mean a potential for growth on the other side. They used words such as fear, reluctance, challenging, or struggle when describing how they felt as it came time to begin ESP practice. Bejewelled wrote in a forum post:

I noticed a small hesitation/ resistance to the practice each day. Other tasks, work, and chores deemed to be "more important" must be done first. Even though I know this is a priority, I notice my mind weave my body in a dance avoiding the task of self-pleasure.

For Bejewelled resistance was a noticeable hesitation that marked the beginning of every practice session. Familiar tasks came first as the mind took control. Despite the focus on pleasure and creativity, ESP practice became viewed more like work than play. It would have been easy to not do it at all had it not been a requirement of the CSB training. Being accountable for the practice meant participants did find ways to work through the resistance to do ESP but for some, there was an added reluctance that came from doubt.

Celeste said:

I'd say there definitely was resistance to engaging I, I had seen and I knew that it was possible to be, I guess, really connected to self-pleasure and to expand the concept and capacity for self-pleasure. But I didn't think, I was very sceptical about it being possible for me, because of my long standing, like masturbatory habits, and the ways in which I experienced partner sex.

Doubting the usefulness of the practice and their capacity to change longstanding habits meant Celeste questioned whether ESP was worth bothering with at all. Starfish said that having done the practice, resistance came before pressing 'publish' on their forum post:

I'd done my first sort of deliberate ESP practice. And I needed to write about it and then post that for other people to look at, the shame and the resistance in the sense of like, Ohhh ahh, no!

Resistance was felt in the fear of judgement from their peers. In the context of 'knowing' sexuality as a private affair, airing erotic experiences with others meant internalised shame spoke loudly to Starfish, giving further reason to not do the thing that felt so difficult. In

each instance however, participants worked through the resistance of starting, persisted with the practice, and submitted forum posts despite their fears and doubts.

To work through the thresholds of resistance, participants said they pushed and forced themselves.

I noticed a sense of urgency to force myself into this as I had a late start for this practice. There was some resistance as my mind wanted to know what to do and it was my first time. I noticed a sense of fear. Also noticed the distractions of the unknown. My mind was trying to control the process and I learned to let go of the stories in my head and dropped into my body.

(Johnny, forum post)

Even though Johnny felt fear and distractions pull him away from doing the practice, he put 'mind over matter' and forced himself through the resistance. The stories in his head were holding him back. Once he let go of shame and fear of judgement, he was able to allow the experience to take over. This kind of mind-body-battle was consistent with all the participants in various ways. Ultimately though, once the mind quietened and the body was allowed to lead, the experiences that followed were always positive:

once I got into it and kind of forced myself through at the beginning. I always felt really wonderful after, but then the next day, I kind of had that resistance again. So it was interesting. Pushing through that resistance ... but then feeling really amazing afterwards (Vanessa).

As the cycle of resistance, pushing, and then feeling good became apparent, Vanessa found the pattern interesting. Developing a sense of curiosity meant she engaged with the process

with a little more ease each time, as she moved from 'forcing' to 'pushing' through resistance.

Knowing that good feelings would follow encouraged participants to continue the practice. As Johnny said:

I always recognize when my body's saying that is something like, oh, shit, this is like, a big for me. So I'll do that, because I know that there is when there is something like that there is potential growth there, you know, there is some fear, there is something that is a potential. So it was beautiful.

Johnny described resistance as an "oh shit" moment of fear and recognised his experience of resistance as a sign of potential personal growth. Through knowing this about himself he found the whole experience, including feeling and forcing through resistance, "beautiful". Johnny also said that adding curiosity to the experience helped his learning process, "by bringing that curiosity is the only way we're actually learn new things". Learning was important for Celeste too:

a baby giraffes first attempt at walking? I'd say that's what it looked like for me. Sure. I was really floundering. But you know, how badly can you flounder when it comes to self-pleasure? you're still probably going to have a good time and an insightful time and learn new things.

While the irony of resisting pleasure and having fun did not escape Celeste, the resistance they felt was in anticipation of the difficult and uncomfortable nature of learning new things.

The reason for resistance was predominantly around the requirement of ESP to 'do' pleasure differently. Consciously changing their old masturbation habits to explore new pathways to pleasure was a real challenge. Both Bejewelled and CB said their usual pleasure practice was lying down and they found being asked to practice standing up extremely confronting. CB said, "You have to stand up. And I was like, What? Like, ... I was, it was just such a big mindfuck". Bejewelled wrote in her forum post that after meeting the challenge of standing up she was "curious to explore hands-free standing masturbation with the rigs that hold the toys". Moving through the challenge and trying something outside their norm, meant participants expanded their erotic vocabulary, supporting Johnny's theory that there really was learning on the other side of resistance. Further to the learning, Starfish said, "writing the reports about ESP and sharing them and commenting on my classmates was a big deal and I could feel how liberating it felt". Pushing through the resistance to do the practice and then pushing through another layer of resistance to share that experience with others was for Starfish, part of the breaking through of shame into liberation. In this process, participants came to recognise their shared experiences of vulnerability in each other. A sense of trusted community developed which supported their ongoing learning journey.

### ***Theme Three Discussion***

In the theory of transformational learning (discussed in chapter three) feeling resistance was recognised as a threshold between the comfort zone of 'knowing' and not knowing, and 'edge emotions' often mark this transition into liminality (Chakraborty, 2016; Mälkki & Green, 2014; Stenner, 2017). Participants experiences of resistance, difficult emotions, and 'Oh shit' moments marked this threshold and some saw that as a sign of

potential learning and liberation. The journey from resistance to learning was described in these extracts: Bejewelled said in her forum post that as she started the practice she felt “deep sadness and regret” rise in her body to which she “held still, breathed, and slowed the emotions to pass”. Celeste wrote about being on the “brink of an anxious emotional breakdown” and through their ESP practice they found ways to “bring the energy up and throughout my body”. Participants’ ‘edge emotions’ felt strong and difficult as they started ESP but as they pushed through the resistance participants grew the capacity to sense, allow, and move the emotions that rose in the body. Their experiences of being embodied in pleasure was worth the effort of learning.

#### **Theme Four: A Healing Practice of Self-Love**

In this fourth and final theme, participants identified ESP as a healing practice of self-love. ESP is first described as a self-love practice that brought a deepening sense of self-connection. Then, experiences of being free of judgement in unconditional acceptance meant participants felt safe in exploring ESP which helped them step through shame and taboo. Lastly, ESP was described as profoundly healing as the practice helped participants address issues such as negative body image beliefs, arousal difficulties, and trauma.

ESP was experienced as a self-love practice, “I prefer to think of my daily orgasmic/erotic embodiment sessions as self-love sessions... they are not always a sexual experience but more a check in with self” (Demi). This checking in was a time for inner reflection while holding the self in tenderness. It was also not a one-off experience, but a regular and ongoing practice, as Demi said, “I don't think that ends I think, I think that's the value of kind of trying to have at least, you know, a daily or weekly practice”.

Through self-love participants experienced a deepening self-connection. Johnny said he would “go to the waterfalls, and just immerse myself in cold water, you know, that's very pleasurable, and how I connect with myself”. Through taking time for pleasure in nature Johnny felt he became more connected with nature and himself. Vanessa said, “I just felt like a different person. Just so much more connected and slowed down”. Being connected and aware of subtle shifts in their inner landscape meant participants became increasingly self-aware. Bejewelled said, “I definitely feel, just being more connected with myself in general helps, you know, my self-esteem and confidence. It helps me to, I guess, understand myself better”.

Self-understanding, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-connection were experienced by all participants to some degree, and this was empowering. Johnny said, “definitely [ESP] empowered me to move sexual energy throughout my body”. Johnny moved this energy himself, without porn or partners, which helped him develop a sense of agency. Similarly, Demi felt empowered:

there's been times in my life where I've reached to others to fulfil my needs. So it was nice to go. No, actually, I have the capacity to fulfil some of my needs. Obviously, there's always need for interaction with others, but my love and my nurturing, I can actually take care of myself. Yeah. So it's quite, it was quite empowering. (Demi)

Demi recognised her increasing capacity to take good care of herself, becoming more self-loving meant she was more self-determining and self-reliant.

Through the training, participants explored sensitive and vulnerable aspects of their sexuality together. The course structure supported the participants learning in a cycle of sharing and positive feedback which grew trust and a sense of safety with their peers. Starfish said, “everyone is affirmed and welcomed in a slightly unique but basically universal way”. Learning they were free from society’s judgement was an important factor in the participants’ learning journey. Further, as Johnny said in the interview, “because you've done ISTA <sup>1</sup> already and you work in sexuality, thank you for sort of I feel safe to be able to open and to be able to just be myself”. As Johnny and I, the interviewer, had done similar sexuality trainings, Johnny felt understood and accepted without judgement which meant he shared stories he otherwise might not have.

Participants previous experiences of society’s judgement meant the experience of unconditional acceptance came as a surprise, as Starfish said, on receiving feedback from fellow students:

their responses come and, and, and ah, it's, it feels so good. Like it feels so relieving like, like, I'm seen, and everything is like unconditionally just welcomed and, and encouraged and, and I haven't been lynched and I haven't been ridiculed. I haven't been told that I did it wrong. It's just so good and, and I live to see another day.

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<sup>1</sup> ISTA International School of Temple Arts is an immersive on site training in practices of shamanic, sexual and spiritual arts.

Starfish felt good in their body, seen for who they were, welcomed as part of the larger community, and encouraged to continue the practices and learning experiences. They compared this with their more familiar past in which being lynched and ridiculed for doing wrong was normal. Unconditional acceptance from their peers meant participants relaxed knowing they could be their authentic sexual self.

Furthermore, Starfish said having their authentic sexual self unconditionally accepted was an “important threshold of stepping through the shame and the taboo. ... And to feel like it really was true that you couldn't do it wrong. They weren't lying, it wasn't a trap”. Having confidence that the pathway was free of judgement meant they could step past shame and taboo safely. As Johnny said, “When people start judging, you don't feel safe [...] it's a place where I don't feel comfortable to open, because, you know, I don't feel safe”. Being in unconditional acceptance meant participants felt safe enough to be able to step through shame and taboo, be their authentic sexual selves, and felt encouraged to explore the challenging and sometimes confrontational terrain of ESP.

From this location, participants became able to let go of self-judgement. Bejewelled said she felt, “emotions of deep sadness and regret, I held still, breathed, and allowed the emotions to pass without judgment. The tissue beneath would soften after this”. As she let her emotions pass free of judgement, her body physically let go of tension. Similarly, when JT let go of judgement, his body responded, “Initially I was holding judgment about the lack of arousal but once I dropped the judgment, I became aware that the weight of my cock had increased, and it was thicker and more substantial”. JT had been concerned about erectile difficulties making this an important moment for him; the body responded differently when in unconditional self-acceptance. CB extended noted that, “if I'm upset, it's like permission

to be upset. And to be in that feeling, and I'm not trying to change it. [...] I'm feeling this, and this is what it is". Being self-accepting and not imploring change helped participants work through issues and discover more of themselves. Further to self-acceptance Vanessa said, "I felt a deep sense of compassion and wellbeing from meeting my body where it was in the moment".

ESP helped participants' sense of wellbeing in a multitude of ways. Both JT and Johnny spoke of improved mood and ESP being like a tool that helped them when they needed it, as JT said, "in terms of general mental health, I know that if I do, if I am feeling low, I know what I can do to actually bring myself up". Celeste said of ESP, "it helps with stress and mental health". Vanessa found ESP and the training environment generally helped relieve anxiety, "I have pretty bad anxieties. And being at the training. For those couple of weeks, I had no anxiety". Furthermore, the personal work throughout their journey of self-discovery, including ESP, helped participants resolve arousal issues. Demi had anorgasmia in her married life and said "my body's highly responsive now [...] it kind of was like it learnt what it was capable of. But again, it was almost like that permission". While anorgasmia may have been related to the context of marriage, Demi's post-marriage explorations of sexuality and different relationship styles combined with ESP so that she became able to experience orgasm regularly and in multiplicity.

As discussed in theme one, porn had a desensitising effect on participants physically and erotically. This theme expands on that to realise ESP helped participants re-sensitise and discover new sensations in the body. Johnny previously depended on porn for a "quick" ejaculatory release and said that through ESP he found "other ways to be able to explore and even just explore different sensations, different pleasure, throughout my body". Johnny

extended beyond genital stimulation to explore his whole body in ESP. For JT, being embodied was the most important aspect of moving away from his reliance on porn.

All participants developed greater access to sensations throughout the whole body for erotic arousal rather than being purely genital focused. Being able to expand the capacity for self-pleasure in this way, Celeste said, “focusing on my own pleasure without the use of like an aide or a story. And I found that very exciting”. CB noticed her previously declining libido reignite, “doing that every day was actually so healing as well, for me. Really kind of kicking back in that that turn on”. The pleasure experiences of ESP had a powerful impact on resolving all manner of sexual difficulties, as Demi said, “it's something that I see such value in”.

Additionally, survivors of sexual trauma benefited from ESP. With PTSD Bejewelled said she felt “completely dysregulated to the point of just like in complete chaos, like I, I don't know what's smaller than a nanoparticle. But that's what I felt like I was smashed into”. While in this state of dysregulation it was difficult to be embodied as even her own touch could be overwhelming. Bejewelled said “the biggest thing that really helped me in my working with my trauma, and my journey was to become aware, when I wasn't in my body and wasn't in this time, in the present moment”. With greater awareness of what was happening in her body she learned to understand the meaning of the ‘resilient edge of resistance’:

[Deej] did the demo on the ground with the pillow saying, like, here's home, here's your edge. And that's like, chaos out there. And that is, it finally landed for me that, Holy shit. For this last year, where I thought, where I thought I was at my edge where I thought I was home, and resourcing and

nourishing, I was probably just outside my edge. And when I thought I was at my edge, I was in complete chaos. And I was there for two years (Bejewelled)

Being in the state of “chaos” while living with trauma was damaging. As Bejewelled learned to experience deep sensual pleasure within the resilient edge of resistance, she developed an embodied understanding of boundaries, as Bejewelled said, “being able to just like be with the presence of light touch, like it's creating these boundaries [...] knowing what I can do completely and fully”. Having experienced the sense of safety, she was then able to extend trust to partnered pleasure, “I can be completely present and, present with them. And that trust is continually being like reinforced into my body of like, okay, I can have this”. Moving from a state of disassociation and chaos to embodied safety and trust was like a physical re-wiring for Bejewelled; a deep sexual healing.

ESP was also valuable in working through negative body-image beliefs. Society defines the ‘ideal’ gendered body shape and the performance of sex through media such as porn where the actors are predominantly white, slim, fit, young, and sex is loud, hot, and sweaty. Celeste and Demi spoke of battling negative body image beliefs throughout their lives, as Celeste said, “I've been chubby or fat my whole life”. Demi described external judgement as something that became internalised and limited the way she experienced pleasure. On practicing ESP Demi said:

I've battled body image challenges most of my life. And so looking at myself naked in the mirror can be one of my things, but it was actually quite beautiful. And I could admire myself move. And so that was really interesting for me, and kind of setting the scene and playing with my

breath. And taking the time to explore myself in that capacity, changed how I took that time for myself, changed how my body responded to my own touch, it changed that kind of wham, bam, Thank you, ma'am, to something like a little bit more of a process and that seduction, and that taking that time for myself.

Demi's self-perception changed through ESP, she saw herself in the mirror as if through a different lens, one that recognised her own beauty. Similarly, her body changed the way it responded to touch, moving away from quick release to self-seduction and a longer gift of time. Even though Demi was paid for how her body looked in her work as an escort, she still found her inner critic difficult to shake, as Demi said, "when you get to the quiet mind, those demons can still exist". Through connecting with the self through embodied pleasure the perfect and imperfect were no longer differentiated. Further, Demi described the shift was from hate to love, as she said:

sometimes, it's just putting music on and you know, looking at yourself in the mirror and loving your body when normally we look at it and hate ourselves [...] So there's self-pleasure and self-love. And taking the time to nurture yourself wherever you're at is a beautiful healing process.

Demi described ESP as being about the simple things, putting on music, making time, being self-nurturing, and appreciating one's own body as it is. She gave herself permission and released the notion of being too much or masturbating too much, "I actually am allowed to touch myself and give myself pleasure and there is no such thing as too much". Demi also noted that what is important, can be felt in the body, "feel into what you need, self-care, self-love, healing. And that's powerful".

In summary, ESP was experienced as a healing practice of self-love. It invoked senses of safety, relaxation, and gratitude. As Johnny said, “this allowed me to feel safe and abandon the worries of the day and the week and stay in my body”, and Starfish said, “I feel ... relaxed. I feel, I feel ... calmer. I feel grateful for what's here”. ESP could be simple and comforting, “I can just like sit around and like, hold myself and like comfort myself. And that's, I think that's really important" (CB). Further, participants identified ESP as healthy and healing, “This felt more of a healing session” (Bejewelled forum post) and “a daily self-love practice actually is phenomenally healthy” (Demi). This was an important practice for all participants in healing various troubles they were working through.

#### ***Theme Four Discussion***

In this theme, a healing practice of self-love, participants’ experiences of unconditional acceptance allowed them to feel safe, both in the group container of the training and individually as they accepted and explored their erotic selves. The somatic sense of safety was described as re-wiring the body and provided the foundation on which participants could release their own judgements, feel more connected with the self, and step fully through the barriers of shame and taboo to practice ESP in the freedom of unconditional acceptance. These experiences support embodiment and somatic theories in which connection with the self and with others came through a felt sense of safety which in turn provided access to sensations in the present body for the resolution of trauma and deeper self-connection (Levine et al., 2018; Levine, 1997; Porges, 2011; Walker, 2020; Winhall & Porges, 2022). Unconditional acceptance was a fundamental gateway to the participants’ new way of being in the world.

The theory of transformational learning (Mälkki & Green, 2014) continued in this theme as the experiences that followed the necessary (and previously discussed) resistance were described as ‘becoming’ a new being, they were transformational. The process was described as bringing a sense of enlightenment, deeper self-understanding, and expansion of their erotic potential. These reflect the stages of liminality (Turner, 1967) in which the participants moved from the pre-liminal state of knowing to the liminal state of not knowing, through to reintegration into society as a new being, or rather their authentic and perhaps original being. In the liminal state, while exploring new experiences with curiosity, participants discovered senses of compassion, wellbeing, resilience, and resolved long-held sexual and emotional difficulties.

Important to sex research and implicitly embedded in ESP is that sex and intimacy are not limited to heteronormative penetrative sex (Fahs & McClelland, 2016). ESP encouraged participants to extend their erotic vocabulary to include the subtle, creative, and slow motions of eroticism. An important aspect of PTG is the ability to appreciate the small things in life (Tedeschi et al., 1998). This was something participants regularly noted with comments such as “when you are present with all those amazing sensations, it makes such a difference” (Vanessa) and others who had been previously focused on intensity came to appreciate subtlety, “I want to like just be like, super aware and present” (CB). Being present in the subtle sensations had significant value for the erotic and authentic self and are important attributes in PTG (Mälkki & Green, 2014). Through the practice of ESP participants developed awareness of subtle sensations, techniques of self-touch, the felt sense in the body, and discovered a greater capacity to be more embodied and present in the subtle and important aspects of their erotic nature.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In the previous chapter each of the four themes were followed by a discussion on the findings in relation to existing literature. This chapter provides further engagement with that discussion by addressing the question of this present study and integrating the findings into a model of ESP. Then how this study adds to the existing literature, limitations of the present study and recommendations for future research are considered, followed by a final concluding statement.

The question posed in the present study was “What was the lived experience of sexological bodyworkers as they practiced ESP?”. The participants’ experiences recorded at the time of practice and discussed eight months later were analysed through a phenomenological lens. Four themes were generated, one of which was an overarching theme highlighting ESP as a journey of self-discovery. Located within that journey were three important themes; practicing ESP was about being present in pleasure, resistance was part of the process of transformational learning, and practicing ESP was a healing journey of self-love.

Important elements of ESP have been illustrated as a ‘wheel of ESP’ to capture what it is and how it was experienced. Primarily, ESP is a solo practice of embodied, intentional, and agenda-free pleasure. In this location, unconditional acceptance of the self and of others and unconditional acceptance from others, was vital to the participants’ healing journey. Through the process of learning within the felt sense of safety and trust, participants released shame and taboo to discover their authentic erotic nature. The hard work of moving through resistance and doing the practice was rewarded with good feelings

in the body along with amazing and sometimes super-natural experiences. These feel-good pleasurable moments were fertile ground for self-love from which self-confidence and agency could flourish. The analysis of this study showed that understanding and being connected with the erotic self was empowering and ultimately healing, providing the individual with an authentic erotic knowing of the self from which they engaged with the wider world. The ripple effects of this positive erotic energy, therefore, make ESP a political practice. One that quells the shame and taboo of masturbation and celebrates pleasure of the erotic, the sexual, the creative, and collective life force.

*Figure 2*

*The Wheel of ESP*



## Literature

The findings of the present study support and advance existing literature on DM as a healing therapy. Riley and Riley (1978) (cited by Heima & Meston, 1997) found that participants who practiced DM and SF together had higher success in achieving orgasm in both solo and partnered sex than when they practiced only SF. While the intention of ESP was not to achieve orgasm, ESP is a combination of DM and SF and advances Riley and Riley's study with additional elements of ESP such as embodiment and intentionality. Similarly, the Robinson et al. (2011) case study of Jane who practiced DM to work through multiple sexual difficulties was supported by the present study and advanced as ESP eliminated the previous Robinson et al. goal of orgasm and added distinct elements of embodied safety in the practice.

On gender, the 20 studies of DM reviewed by Heima and Meston (1997) two had male participants and no further studies reviewed had male and female participants. The current study of ESP defied gendered norms of research by combining male and female participants' experiences. With the exception of discussions on erectile difficulties, differences between how the participants experienced ESP were not discernible, for example, acts such as lighting candles and preparing serene spaces often attributed to women were discussed by men and women, and difficulties with porn, often attributed to men (De Alarcón et al., 2019), were experienced by women and men. The present study has developed the literature on masturbation and DM by removing unhelpful performance goals and including ESP as a novel approach to masturbation for people of all gender.

The theory of transformational learning (Mälkki & Green, 2014) borrowed from educational literature presented an ideal framework for ESP to be navigated within.

Theories of habit and practice (James, 1890) and becoming through practicing new acts (Butler, 1988) were integrated with transformational learning. This study of ESP adds to the body of literature on these theories and may itself be considered a modality of transformational learning.

Further, the present study adds to literature on embodiment, body image, and somatic theories. As ESP has been founded on concepts of developing deep awareness of the felt sense in the soma, and supporting the self and others in unconditional acceptance this study adds to the literature on the felt sense (Gendlin, 1969; Ikemi, 2005) and Rogerian theories of unconditional positive regard (Ikemi, 2005). In addition, this study adds to the literature supporting theories of self-concept (Deutsch et al., 2014; Larson, 1981) as ESP enabled a reconnection with the authentic erotic self and deeper self-knowing, self-acceptance, self-confidence, and self-worth. As ESP was shown to enhance body image for some participants this study adds to the positive body image model presented by Piran (2015). To theories of the soma (Porges, 2011; Walker, 2020; Winhall & Porges, 2022) the present study presents a new term, 'somatic agility' (refer to page 38 for definition), which may also advance embodiment theories for its dance between all aspects of the self. Finally, this work contributes to the work of Lorde (1985) and brown (2019) and other pleasure activists by raising ESP as a political act, a practice of pleasure that both connects and empowers.

It is anticipated that the findings of this study may be useful for individuals wishing to practice ESP as part of their own self-discovery journey and to furthering sexological bodyworkers' understanding of ESP in their work with clients. The findings of this study may be useful for researchers and practitioners in the field of psychology as the collective health

and healing professions reclaim the importance of the body with the mind, the soma with the psyche, the unity of being, and in doing so, discover more ease in exploring the personal and professional, powerful nature of the erotic.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The participants of this study were sexological bodyworkers trained in ESP and made ideal participants. Given the researcher was a graduate of the same programme, the participants and researcher had shared understandings of ESP and somatic sexology which helped build rapport and meant conversations quickly went deep. These factors also however presented limitations when looking to apply the findings to the wider population. As Sexological bodyworkers, the participants had done a lot of personal development work prior to the CSB training. They had already worked through a lot of shame and trauma to be accepted into the programme so when undertaking the ESP practice, they may have been at different locations in their healing journey than people who have not done similar inner work. That the researcher was known to have graduated from the CSB programme may have influenced what the participants chose to share in the interview. For example, it is possible that stories could have been exaggerated to impress the interviewer. Forum posts that were free of researcher influence helped reduce that risk, but it cannot be completely mitigated. For the above reasons caution should be applied when viewing ESP as a tool for general use.

Future research may seek to resolve these limitations by developing a study that involves people with no prior sexological training and a willingness to develop their personal erotic vocabulary. Such a study could present ESP in a similar framework to that set up by the ISS for the trainee sexological bodyworkers that included coaching in embodiment and

ESP, a safe container, ongoing accountability, and feedback on ESP as a practice. Such training would also need to take care that people who are survivors of sexual abuse are appropriately resourced to ensure they are not at risk of psychological harm. Given ESP is self-guided, self-determined, and solo it has the potential to help survivors of sexual abuse. Research into known trauma therapies may provide useful guidelines on which to further develop ESP to become a more trauma specific therapeutic practice.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to understand what happens when the shame and taboo of masturbation can be set aside, and ESP becomes a regular practice. Existing literature on ESP is non-existent and masturbation data was limited to measures of frequency, association with orgasm, and DM as a therapeutic intervention. There were no specific theories that applied to ESP, however, a bricolage approach meant transformational learning, becoming, and erotic power were woven together with embodiment theories to provide a network of ideas on which to understand ESP. Embodiment theories take feminist and queer positions that are located in a non-heteronormative standpoint and prioritise the somatic body, and contextualism, the epistemological framework that acknowledges the sociological context of phenomena, formed the landscape on which this phenomenological study was firmly grounded. As a solo practice of embodied pleasure ESP was experienced by participants as an integral part of their journey of self-discovery, particularly the erotic, creative, empowered, and sexual self. ESP was an important element in the discovery of new pathways to pleasure which helped participants resolve difficulties in arousal, overuse of porn, and unwind old and unhelpful narratives of shame and taboo. This study has shown ESP to be a powerful practice in sexological bodyworkers' self-discovery journey. Future

research is needed to understand how ESP may help the wider population in resolving sexual difficulties and discovering their authentic erotic being.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A – Information Sheet



### Information Sheet

#### **Embodied Self Pleasure (ESP): Longitudinal qualitative study of how trainee sexological bodyworkers experience ESP practice**

You are being invited to take part in a study which seeks to understand trainee sexological bodyworkers' experience of embodied self-pleasure (ESP) practice. ESP is known as orgasmic yoga or erotic embodiment in the Certificate of Sexological Bodywork (CSB) and Certificate of Somatic Sex Educators (CSSE) training. Before you decide to volunteer, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following carefully and ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you in advance for taking the time to read and consider if participating in this study is for you.

#### **What is the purpose of the project?**

The purpose of this project is to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of people who choose to step through the shame and taboo often associated with masturbation and develop a regular ESP practice. The CSB training invites students to regularly practice ESP and to write about the highs and lows of those experiences and post them to the online training forum. This ESP practice makes CSB students such as yourself, ideal participants in this study.

I am the researcher, Sonia Waters, a somatic sexologist certified with the Somatic Sex Educators Association of Australasia (SSEAA) and a Masters student at Massey University in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The final thesis from this study will be part of my Masters of Arts (Psychology) qualification.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. If you do not want to take part, please say so or simply do not reply. If you do decide to volunteer, please let me know directly and I will invite you to a Zoom meeting to talk through the study process, details such as the types of participation you can choose from, and any questions you may have. You will then be asked to sign a consent form to return to me confirming your participation. You can change your mind at any time and withdraw from the study, without explanation, up until 1<sup>st</sup> May 2023. After this date the data analysis will be under way and your data cannot be redacted. The course coordinators will not be given participants names or any identifying details so taking part in the study or declining this invitation will have no impact on your CSB and CSSE training or certification.

#### **Who can participate and what does participation involve?**

All CSB and CSSE students of the 2022 cohort are invited to participate and can choose one of two types of involvement which I refer to as X and Y. All participants (groups X and Y) will email me the posts they submitted to their training forum during 2022. People in group Y will participate in an interview in which they may reflect on any aspect of ESP and their experiences before, during and after developing the practice.

If you choose to participate in group Y, the interview will be 60 minutes on Zoom, at a time that is convenient to you. The types of questions you will be asked will be about how you felt, what was challenging, fun, new, or curious about ESP practice. If there are any questions that you do not wish to answer, you do not have to. The interview will be recorded as I will be required to transcribe the discussion for the analysis. You can also talk about your posts to the online forum if you wish. This information will be analysed with the other conversations in this study to find recurring themes, anomalies, or comments that provide insights into the range of experiences people have while doing a regular ESP practice.

All data gathered will be made anonymous through using pseudonyms and any identifying features in the data will be removed. Data will be used for the purposes of my thesis which may be published as academic research. As a CSB or CSSE student you will be well aware that the subject of sexuality is one of much public interest and with shows such as “Sex, Love and Goop” and podcasts like “The Trainee Sexologist” by Morgan Penn who has also completed the CSB training. It is likely the findings to this study may be published on social media platforms. The consent form following this information sheet seeks your permission to publish in these media.

People of all gender and sexual orientations are welcomed in this study. To ensure I have the capacity to give participants’ data its due attention, numbers will be limited to the first ten confirmed participants in group X and the first four confirmed participants in group Y.

#### **What’s the interview process and will my information be kept confidential?**

I will conduct the interview via Zoom from a private office space, and encourage you to find a private space, or a space where you feel comfortable speaking on the subject matter for the duration of the interview. The interviews will be audio-recorded on Zoom and transcribed through software such as Otter.ai. Security is not guaranteed on these platforms so immediately after the interview and transcriptions I will transfer the data to my personal computer and then permanently delete the file from the online platforms.

The transcripts and posts will be anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and any identifying information will be deleted so that you cannot be identified in the research in any way. For example, if you say something in the interview that might give away your identity, such as where you live, this information will be removed from the transcript. The audio and transcript files will be password protected so that no one else can access them.

I will send you the transcript of our interview by mid-April and you will have the chance to redact, correct, change, or add to this in any way before 1st May 2023. Sometimes after an interview people reflect on what they said and want to change it to better reflect their actual lived experience so you will be encouraged to make any changes you feel are needed. Your updated transcript will then be analysed by me. Forum posts and interview transcripts will be analysed through a systematic process as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2022) called Thematic Analysis.

All personal information relating to you such as your consent form and your chosen pseudonym will be kept separate from the data, will remain confidential, and will be stored on Massey University’s highly secure, password protected, cloud system Sharepoint. Data will be backed up and protected against viruses and other attacks. After official marks for this thesis have been received, all audio files will be permanently deleted. Transcripts and the posts to the training

forum submitted for this project will be kept for five years and then destroyed by my supervisor according to Massey University policy.

**What are the possible benefits and risks I might experience in taking part in this study?**

There are minimal risks associated with this study and it is hoped that you enjoy taking part. Sometimes talking about even everyday situations in an interview can bring up emotional memories. If this occurs for you, I will ask if you want to stop the interview. At any time while participating in this study, if you think that you would like some support or if you have cause for complaint about the study, you are invited to contact my supervisor Professor Sarah Riley ([s.riley@massey.ac.nz](mailto:s.riley@massey.ac.nz)) and at any time you are welcome to contact me directly.

I hope the main benefit of participating in this study to you personally is that you find it enjoyable. It is possible that findings may be useful to Deej and Uma and might allow them to further refine their training programme to benefit future students and subsequently, their clients. If you are a CSB student and go on to do the ISS's second year of training, the Certificate of Somatic Sex Education, the findings may also benefit you directly in that training.

**Who has reviewed this project and who do I contact if I have questions or am concerned?**

This project has been reviewed and will be supervised by:

Professor Sarah Riley  
 Professor in Critical Health Psychology and Senior Lecturer  
 Free phone inside New Zealand: 0800 627 739  
 Phone outside New Zealand: +64 6 350 5701  
 Email: [s.riley@massey.ac.nz](mailto:s.riley@massey.ac.nz)

Researcher:

Sonia Waters

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

If you seek further information about Sonia's work: [www.wildself.nz](http://www.wildself.nz)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 22/74. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact A/Prof Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800, x 43347, email [humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz).

## Appendix B – Consent Form



### Consent Form

#### Embodied Self Pleasure (ESP): Longitudinal qualitative study of how trainee sexological bodyworkers experience ESP practice

##### Researcher: Sonia Waters

I have read and understand the Participant Information sheet. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from participating in the study at any time before 1<sup>st</sup> May 2023.

	Please select one:
I agree to participate in this study as detailed in the Information Sheet provided.	Yes / No
I understand participation will have no impact on my CSB training or certification.	Yes / No
I understand that consent includes agreeing to have my anonymized data used in the researchers' project and published in their final thesis.	Yes / No
I understand the thesis and anonymised findings of this study may be presented in person and shared on social media or on research journal webpages that are accessible to the public.	Yes / No
I would like to review my interview transcript ( <i>group Y participants</i> ).	Yes / No
I would like to receive a summary of the findings from the study.	Yes / No
I would like to receive a copy of the final thesis.	Yes / No
I understand I may withdraw my data from this study before 1 <sup>st</sup> May 2023 after which time my data will be included in the research findings.	Yes / No

#### Declaration by the participant

I, ..... volunteer to participate in the above named study.  
*[insert full name]*

Signed ..... Date.....

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 22/74. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact A/Prof Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800, x 43347, email [humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz).

## Appendix C – Interview Schedule

### Interview Schedule - Indicative questions

#### **Embodied Self Pleasure (ESP): Longitudinal qualitative study of how trainee sexological bodyworkers experience ESP practice**

##### Introduction

Welcome to the Zoom room [insert person's pseudonym] for this chat about ESP. Before we begin, in line with your sex-bod training, I invite three breaths together, inhale through the nose, long slow exhale, and notice sensations in the body. How are you feeling?

Are you ready for me to press 'record' now?

Can you tell me a little about yourself and what brought you to the CSB training in the first place?

I have some questions about your experiences before, during and after the six months ESP practice and CSB training. You don't have to answer all or even any of these questions, we can instead ad-lib the conversation in whatever way suits you.

If semi-structured questions suits the participant then:

##### Before

- Before the CSB training, what were the main challenges and highlights you found in sexuality, intimacy, and pleasure?
- How did you feel about masturbation?
- Shame and taboo often hang over masturbation, did you feel any of those?

##### During

- During the CSB training you were taught things like anatomy, boundaries, consent, and sensate focus which were woven into your ESP practice. Was this information useful or fill any knowledge gaps for you?
- And the ESP practice, what was your experience of that?
- I have your forum posts here, we can talk through those if you like, or keep chatting and see where we go. (if so I will share my screen with their posts and we can discuss directly, if not the following questions can help prompt conversation)
- As your ESP practice developed through the training did anything shift in your experience of pleasure, like did you have any 'awe-some' moments?
- Were there any challenges in the practice for you?

- Being female/male/non-binary, how do you feel that impacted on your experience?

After

- If you have had intimate partner or partners during this training, do you think ESP practice helped or hindered your intimate relating in any way?
- If we talk about orgasm as a peak experience and orgasmicity as all the heightened sensations, emotions, pleasures around that peak, did ESP have any influence on orgasmicity for you?
- We mentioned taboos around masturbation earlier, how do you feel about masturbation taboo now?
- Do you feel ESP practice is a useful thing to maintain and carry forward?
- Is it something you would encourage your sexological bodywork clients to practice?
- Is there anything in the CSB training or ESP practice that you would like to change, improve or make better in some way?

Closing

- We are coming to the end of our hour together, are there any other things about ESP that you would like to share or think would be useful for others to know?
- What was the single most important thing you gained through ESP practice?
- Do you have any other questions you would like to ask?
- I invite now three breaths together to close this interview.
- Thank you. I'll turn record off now.

Turn audio recording off.

I am so grateful for your participation in this study and for your time in the interview. I will write the transcript and send to you by Friday 14th April for your review and any changes you wish to make. You might change your mind about some things that you have said, it is okay to re-write what you wish to ensure we record as closely as possible your actual lived experience of ESP practice. It would be great if you could return the transcript to me before the end of April. Remember you can withdraw from this study any time before 1st May without providing a reason. Also, if you want support on anything that might rise from this interview you have DeeJ and Uma's contact details already and on the information sheet you have details of my supervisor and I.

Any last requests?

Take care and thank you.

## Appendix D – Theme Development

### Themes and participants – version 1

Theme	Bejewelled	CB	Celeste	Demi	Johnny	JT	Starfish	Vanessa
A journey of self-discovery	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
A joyful practice	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	X
Freedom from society's constraints	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	X
ESP is a (magical) meditation	x	x	x		x		x	x

### Themes and participants – version 2

Theme	Bejewelled	CB	Celeste	Demi	Johnny	JT	Starfish	Vanessa
A journey of self-discovery	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Present with pleasure	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	X
A healing practice of self-love	x	x	x	x	x		x	X
From resistance to the sublime	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Living in two worlds	x	x	x	x	x		x	

### Themes and participants – version 3

Theme	Bejewelled	CB	Celeste	Demi	Johnny	JT	Starfish	Vanessa
A journey of self-discovery	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Present with pleasure	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	X
Resistance meets transformation	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
A healing practice of self-love	x	x	x	x	x		x	X

**Appendix E - Table of Themes and Extracts**

Part table included to provide example. Full table available on request.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes	Notes	Extracts
<p><b>1.</b></p> <p><b>A journey of self-discovery</b></p>		<p>1.1 A lifelong journey of discovering the self in all its morphing erotic forms. Discovering new aspects of the self (Starfish in maturity, JT in intensity-balance), or uncovering entirely previously unknown versions of the self (Demi fluid). In becoming more self-connected old ways fall away opening to more self-awareness, new possibilities, and sometimes, disappointments. The true (and changing) self is discovered in being present and more self-connected. A lifelong journey of self-discovery; the sexual self starts very young with new experiences such as ESP feeding its evolution.</p> <p>1.2 Empowered with eros, discovering the empowered erotic self through new pathways to pleasure. Finding new pleasure experiences in trust and safety allows a deeper connection and confidence in the erotic self. Erotic discovery is empowering, especially for women. Self-esteem and self-worth grow, agency and independence follow. Empowerment extends beyond the bedroom and into all aspects of life.</p> <p>1.3 Self-discovery; hard work but worth it. The pathway to self-discovery is work, it takes a long time and can be really challenging. In practicing pleasure deep emotions are released, trauma is discovered, old ways of doing sex and pleasure can be difficult and the reason for wanting to do the work. Integrating the work into daily life can be challenging, relationships break up, even if temporarily (Vanessa), relational sex with partners can change, sometimes in disappointing ways (Starfish), and new, more balanced ways of relating can be difficult to find (JT). It is life changing work, and after the struggles, the benefits of changing troublesome habits can be integrated into daily life.</p>	
	<p>1.1 The erotic self is an evolving being which is discovered, or better understood through doing ESP.</p>	<p>Discovering new aspects of the self (Starfish in maturity, JT in intensity-balance), or uncovering entirely previously unknown versions of the self (Demi fluid)</p>	<p><b>(Demi, 00:52)</b> I started exploring my sexuality, exploring kinks exploring, folks, I realized I'm bisexual. <u>So</u> I actually kind of say that I'm fluid because I'm fascinated with trans but haven't gone there yet. <u>So</u> it's not it's not it's more the person as opposed to their gender.</p> <p><b>Demi</b> And I think that was kind of my journey. Being someone who's highly sexual. I don't fit in that conventional box. I don't, I don't fit in the box of conventional relationships. <u>So</u> I've sort of come out of my second marriage and realized that monogamous relationships don't work for me. And <u>so</u> I live a poly life. But, you know, for years, I tried to fit myself in that box.</p> <p><b>Starfish</b> a peak experience and it had like <u>a</u> almost unbelievably gigantic effect on my erotic being for about a year <u>[...]</u>yin sexuality kind of a kind of melting blissful kind of thing that was very available to me just all the time, about a year as ridiculous as that sounds</p> <p><b>Starfish</b> I have a lot less sex and the sex that I have isn't as script fulfilling and there's something less thrilling about it.</p>

			<p><b>Starfish</b> I'm still an erotic person and still a lot of different types of arousal that I'm getting that was like a new phase of applying the things that I had learned or realized in the training in this kind of post bliss state, ... and there's a more of a feeling of like don't feel as much pleasure but I'm more peaceful with what <u>what</u> whatever it is like when I do something like ESP which I still do sort of fairly regularly, it rarely feels like a kind of peak experience but there's a sense of curiosity about just whatever comes up</p> <p><b>Starfish</b> I feel like I'm compassionate and kinder to others like much more and much less demanding, or much less needing other people to be some kind of ego object for me, much less.</p> <p><b>JT</b> I have always found in relationships, that, that just being in a stable, kind of monogamous type of relationship, I found it like it was being in a prison cage, it felt very restricting, it felt very, like I wasn't able to explore the intensity of life, you know, you get that initial intensity of a new relationship. And it's all while it's all fun and great. And after six months, it's just like, there's <u>gotta</u> be more to it than this.</p> <p><b>JT</b> it's very compelling, and that, you know, my body is drawn to that peak, and it's drawn to the fantasy and is drawn to the extremeness of it.</p> <p><b>JT</b> And my experience with fantasy <u>friction based</u> masturbation has been that actually, I don't feel it's good for me emotionally, or physically. My, my body does not function. You know, like, I have <u>difficulties getting erections</u>. When I'm when I've been using too much <u>fantasy based</u> masturbation. It's almost a desensitizing for desensitizes my imagination that desensitizes my engagement with the real world, and it and it desensitizes my body.</p> <p><b>JT</b> when I feel the draw of the intensity and of the, of the sexual release, having the other option to say, hey, like, I don't have to do that. <u>There's</u> other ways to feel pleasure, that don't necessarily have to be intense and, and can undo some of the desensitization, that ...</p> <p><b>Sonia Waters 23:00</b> re-sensitize?</p> <p><b>JT 23:01</b> re-sensitize. Yeah.</p>
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		<p>Example of one person's journey from sex being about connection without orgasm to having multiple orgasmic experiences.</p>	<p><b>Demi</b> I loved sex, and I love the engagement and connection. And for me, it was the experience, it was actually very rare that I would come would go to orgasm.</p> <p><b>Demi</b> my first ever Multiple Orgasm. And my body's highly responsive now. And so, but <u>it</u> kind of was like it learnt what it was capable of. But again, it was almost like that permission.</p> <p><b>Demi</b> I think about you know, cervical that deep kind of cervical <u>really deep</u> contractions, clitoral orgasm. When I when I have an orgasm from anal stimulation, again, it's that really kind of deep, very strong orgasm, but then sometimes through the course, I discovered that my anatomy knowledge was not fabulous. <u>So</u> I've discovered that I actually like to stimulate my clitoral legs quite a lot. <u>So</u> what how I stimulate my clitoris has changed dramatically. <u>So</u> I do still love my vibration. But I find I'll <u>actually stimulate</u> my clitoral legs more than my clitoris itself.</p> <p><b>Demi</b> he held me down and <u>actually just</u> blew on my clitoris and I had a full body orgasm, so I wouldn't have that before. So just taking the time to kind of feel into my body. When I do come and play with my breath and play with my movement and slow things down and ... it completely changed my orgasmicity. Completely.</p> <p><b>Demi</b> This is about pleasure. Not orgasm. Which is fascinating. But it's something that I see such value in.</p>
		<p>In becoming more <u>self connected</u> old ways fall away opening to more self-awareness, new possibilities, and sometimes, disappointments (Starfish).</p>	<p><b>Celeste</b> it's been a <u>long term</u> relationship with my masturbatory practice now in a way that it wasn't when I when I'm describing to you my early stages, so I think I, I really do allow myself to engage in ESP in a way that I have come to learn. And it's come to be more pleasurable and insightful.</p> <p><b>Celeste</b> <u>I definitely feel</u> myself being more open and receptive to receiving sensing and creating erotic energy.</p> <p><b>Celeste</b> when I do engage in my own kind of masturbatory practice, <u>I do a lot more self touch</u>. And I also don't go directly to the use of porn or, or toys.</p> <p><b>Celeste</b></p>

## Appendix F – NVivo Screen Shot

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface. On the left is a navigation pane with a tree structure of themes and codes. The main area shows a hierarchical tree of themes and a text view of a transcript with highlighted references.

**Tree Structure:**

- 7 - data set sub and superordinate themes (unli...
  - 01 A journey of self discovery (15 files, 136 references)
    - 01 Discovering the self in pleasure, (9 files, 40 references)
    - 02 Empowered with eros, discoveri (10 files, 27 references)
    - 03 Self discovery hard work but wo (13 files, 69 references)
  - 02 Embodied self pleasure, a joyful pra (15 files, 150 references)
    - 1 Feeling the way to pleasure and j (12 files, 64 references)
      - Noticing the nervous system (3 files, 8 references)
    - 2 Connected with self love and self (8 files, 26 references)
    - 3 Resistance is part of the process, (10 files, 37 references)
      - Rituals help feel safe, to step t (2 files, 5 references)
    - 4 Orgasm is not the goal but it is p (10 files, 22 references)
  - 03 Freedom from society's constraints (0 files, 0 references)
    - 01 Societal judgements constrain t (6 files, 28 references)
      - 1 Judgement (5 files, 8 references)
      - 2 Gender (1 file, 9 references)
      - 3 Children's pleasure is sent to (5 files, 7 references)
      - 4 Porn as sex educator (4 files, 8 references)
      - 5 Body-image beliefs (3 files, 6 references)
      - 6 Economy (2 files, 4 references)
    - 02 Unconditional acceptance, the k (11 files, 26 references)
      - Mental health and wellbeing (6 files, 12 references)
    - 03 Freedom unlocks a new way of (9 files, 42 references)
    - 04 Words matter, shaking off the v (4 files, 18 references)
  - 04 Eros begets eros, doing pleasure me (0 files, 0 references)
    - 01 ESP an intentional embodied m (10 files, 39 references)
    - 02 Erotic joy, feel it, believe it, and (9 files, 19 references)
  - 05 Holding bay (0 files, 0 references)

02 Empowered with eros, discovering new kinds of

<Files\Bejewelled transcript> - § 1 reference coded [1.63% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.63% Coverage

I think one of the, well I know a very powerful experience for my clients is be clothed, you know, it's, it's holding, it's being safe, creating safety with people and safety. They're regulating the nervous system. All those pieces are part in our self pleasure.

<Files\CB transcript> - § 3 references coded [1.68% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.33% Coverage

I can just like sit around and like, hold myself and like comfort myself. And it's really important.

Reference 2 - 0.79% Coverage

doing some embodied movement and just being with like, in my body and to that's the best thing that I could possibly do right now. So I think it's a really everything, you know. But especially for working through stuff or working all

Reference 3 - 0.55% Coverage

because of because it's safe and it's slow and it's no expectation and gentle pleasurable because you're just like holding yourself and breathing and it's just powerful

<Files\Celeste transcript> - § 8 references coded [7.46% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.81% Coverage

I felt really,... I felt very connected with my own ... energy in terms of the power that I felt to dance and to connect with the rhythm. And so it did feel very me, it kind of felt like I took myself by surprise by allowing myself to connect get in that state.

Reference 2 - 0.35% Coverage

I knew that it was possible to be, I guess, really connected to self pleasure as a concept and capacity for self pleasure.

Reference 3 - 0.54% Coverage

But in a breeze or looking at nature or being stimulated by kind of colors and myself a lot more open to that sort of stimulus. And it means that you can do which is lovely.

Reference 4 - 0.77% Coverage

I used to read a lot of erotica and use porn as well probably say, more erotic. But there's definitely times that I didn't like to do, where I would just kind of focusing on my own pleasure without the use of like an aide or a story. And exciting.

Reference 5 - 0.68% Coverage

this idea of getting more open, not just in terms of what's out there, I know very well just thought that I knew what I liked, and that I didn't need to be trying more they didn't appeal to me. And so I've been pleasantly surprised to learn

Reference 6 - 2.24% Coverage

Coming from say, like a feminist lens, but it's very second wave feminist which is you know, degrading or it's violence against women. And then coming

