Existential sexualities: The process of sexual becoming

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Abstract

This research project explores the lived experience of sexual becoming from an existential lens. Research linking philosophical conceptions of existential sexualities with lived experience is lacking in existing academic literature, and this research attempts to give voice to lived experience in the process of sexual becoming. A qualitative framework was employed, using a descriptive phenomenological approach to interview participants and identify themes in the existential process of sexual becoming. Key themes of vulnerability, experience, and supports were identified as helping participants in overcoming barriers to the process of sexual becoming, an experience that was engaged in to foster an end goal of enhanced connection. Implications of the existential process of sexual becoming in counselling practice are discussed.

Keywords: sexuality, existentialism, phenomenology, counselling

Existential sexualities: The process of sexual becoming

It is unclear how people come into and make sense of their sexualities. Understanding one's sexualities is integral to the self, with Foucault (1976/1990) noting that it is through "the deployment of sexuality that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility, to the whole of his body, to his identity" (p. 155). This draws attention to the core importance of sexualities in one's existence, further embedding existential consideration in the navigation of sexualities. This study aims to explore existential sexualities through developing a greater understanding of the lived experience of sexual becoming.

As the available number of sex and sexuality identities expands, so too does the potential need and pressure for people to navigate such identities. People are left to explore and choose how, what, and who to identify as. Sex identities (e.g., male, female, intersex, etc.; top, bottom, dominant, submissive, etc.), gender identities (e.g., woman, man, genderqueer, trans, etc.), sexuality identities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, etc.), and relationship identities (e.g., monogamous, polyamorous, etc.) combine to allow people a freedom in expression and self accompanied by an existential weight that may come with such decisions.

Navigating this process of becoming may be difficult and full of contradiction. Terms denoting sexualities may present a sense of reductionist inflexibility and serve to confine one's self-knowledge (Spinelli, 2013). Equally, sexuality identities themselves may not feel like choices, leaving individuals to feel as though core aspects of self are beyond their control (du Plock, 2014a; Whisman, 1996). This territory is made all the more difficult as labels help in sustaining scripted conceptions of available options in terms of sexualities, leading to pressure for the individual to conform or constrain their self (Barker, 2011). This may prevent individuals from moving toward authentic and fluid understandings of self. Such

considerations may be best achieved when it is acknowledged that doubt is endemic when it comes to navigating sexuality (Gamsu, 2014). By understanding sexualities as a continuous process of becoming, a greater comfort and authenticity in sexualities is possible (Pearce, 2014).

Counselling professionals may play a role in supporting clients in coming to know their authentic sexualities. Therapy may represent a valuable space wherein to discuss sexuality, outside of those normalising, judgmental, and shaming voices that may be present in the external world (Richards, 2014). Such therapy acknowledges themes of existential sexuality as ever-present and recognizes that themes of sex and existential sexualities provide valuable information to therapists in their work with their clients (Smith-Pickard, 2014). The voices of individuals negotiating, navigating, and coming to understand their own sexualities are lacking in the academic literature that considers the existential process of sexual becoming. There exists a divide between academic intellectual enquiry and lived experiences in sexuality writing and research that needs to be further linked to allow for more effective counselling practice (Hicks & Martin, 2010). This research project attempts to give voice to individuals' experiences of the phenomenon of sexual becoming so as to develop a better understanding of this process and important factors of influence, allowing therapists to better work with their patients.

This thesis begins with a literature review, explores theoretical foundations and understandings of existential sexualities, and concludes with a discussion about extant research relating to these themes. Methods used in the study are then discussed, detailing how this study was conducted, before results of this investigation are shared, exploring key themes and subthemes identified from this research. A discussion follows, identifying how the process of sexual becoming has been seen to be navigated, and finishes with a conclusion summarizing the current study.

Literature Review

The topic of existential sexualities has been principally relegated to the theoretical discussion of French existentialists such as Sartre (1943/1992), Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002), and de Beauvoir (1949/2010), and, more recently, a resurgence of British existential psychotherapists including Spinelli (2013), Milton (2014), and Richards (2016). Dominant discussions have thus consigned consideration of existential sexualities to the realm of theory and philosophy, with little acting to bridge the divide between academic enquiry and lived experience (Hicks & Martin, 2010). This literature review will begin by conceptualising existential sexualities before considering the lived experiences of existential sexualities and will conclude by considering the relevance of this discussion to the professional practice of counselling.

Conceptualising Existential Sexualities

Sartre (1943/1992) wrangles with the existential reality of sexuality in conceptualizing sex as existing beyond more literal physical manifestations such as the sex organs. Instead, Sartre (1943/1992) understands sexuality to function as part of a subject-object relationship, defining sexual desire as the "attempt to get hold of the Other's free subjectivity through his objectivity-for-me" (Sartre, 1943/1992, p. 382). In this conceptualization, sex is made up of the act of sexualizing the other and in turn being sexualized. In this way, sexuality is not situated in any given individual, but arises from acts, thoughts, and interpersonal relations. Similar in thinking, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002), in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, also considers this intersubjective experiencing. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) prioritizes thinking about the embodiment of sexuality, linking the psychic experience of sexualities with their bodily experience, leading to the understanding that "the body's role is to ensure this metamorphosis. It transforms ideas into things" (p. 190). Particularly building upon those ideas posited by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002), Spinelli

(2013) sees this interrelational aspect of sexuality as allowing for an awakening of the self, giving room for a greater learning of both self and other through sexualities.

In this existential understanding, sexuality, rather than a mere biological drive, is understood to be an intersubjective experience inherently entwined with the way one experiences and exists in the world. This creates a bedrock for understanding sexualities as having access to something greater, hinting that the realm of sexualities moves beyond simple physical experience akin to any other, but rather one that can allow for transformative experiencing of reality. The existential consideration of transcendent meaning in sexuality can be situated in Sartre (1943/1992), who understood that while a greater meaning to sex is available, dominant social discourses as well as personal laziness conspire to constrain the average sexual experience to one of orgasm and ejaculation. From this vantage point, Sartre (1943/1992) sees that there exists a potential for sex to move beyond this script and play a role as an existential, transcendent activity, but believes that the majority of people are not experiencing sex beyond a more carnal conceptuality, a framework that communicates a pomposity in taking a moralistic stance disparaging sex for the sake of orgasm. It seems that there are plentiful ways of experiencing our sexualities, and it is up to individuals to explore, discover, and preference them, as indicated by Richards's (2016) observation that people's lived experiences ought to be privileged when contradicting philosophical theory. Thus, the value of Sartre's (1943/1992) contribution may be seen to lie in his hinting toward those elements of choice within sex – not least who, where, when, and what types of sex people choose to have – but also whatever it is that individuals choose to take from the sex they do have. In this conceptualisation, individuals play a role in deciding what type of sex they will experience and where they choose to take their sexual encounters, whether that is to a place of spiritual experiencing of sex, or simply, for example, an opportunity for ejaculation.

The understanding of sex and sexualities as linked with people's greater existence and meaning results in Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) hypothesising a "principle of indeterminacy" (p. 196) in sexualities. In this, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) understands that any given action may or may not be sexual and that it is impossible to distinguish between sexual and existential significance. While this understanding perhaps has a value in existential and phenomenological theory, it is less clear how people feel their lived experiences relate to such conceptualities. That is, it becomes hard to determine if such understandings are tied to reality or merely representative of the navel gazing exercise of a bourgeois intellectual. Such argument is untenable not least because the sexual significance of, for example, the decision between choosing to eat pineapple or strawberries is extraordinarily unclear (Dillon, 1980). Instead, the value of Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002) contribution may lie in his emphasis on the primacy of sexuality in living and that this pre-eminence cannot be explained simply by the experience of sexual pleasure.

This background understanding of existential sexualities gives rise to several key areas of interest within the investigation and understanding of existential sexualities. The concept of existential choice, the relevance of identity, and the concept of identity politics all follow from this core understanding. These themes will be considered below.

Existential Choice. A key aspect of existentialism relates to the understanding that existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1943/1992). In the realm of sexualities, this gives rise to a free choice in sexualities and the idea that one is not born a certain way but chooses to be so. The implications of this understanding are well appreciated by Medina (2014), who finds the idea of an innate and given sexuality - which inherently hypothesizes that essence precedes existence - most problematic for a Sartrean, existentialist worldview.

This consideration of choice is relevant not simply to sexuality identity, but to any number of aspects of sexualities. Similar questions and considerations may be posed when it

comes to, for example, one's sex identities, gender identities, or relationship identities. This

is equally true of those decisions as to who, when, where, and how one has sex, for example

the decision to be, or identify as, dominant or submissive, or to engage in any given sex act,

for example the choice to engage in intercrural sex with a penis, digital-anal sex, or vagina-

oral sex.

The presence of choice thus plays a large role in understanding existential sexualities,

wherein the way one chooses to engage with and experience sex becomes a part of one's

fundamental project of existence. That is, these choices, like any other, represent the decision

to be the person one wants to be in the world. Such choices may not be pleasurable or desired

and may feel more like a punishment than something to embrace and enjoy (Spinelli, 2013).

In fact, such choices may not feel like choices at all (du Plock, 2014a), not least because of

those strong political aspects that can surround such decision making.

Identity. Of all of the areas of interest in existential sexualities, it is perhaps the

concept of identity that has received most attention. Existential aspects of choice in

sexualities gain relevance because categories of identity exist, confronting individuals with

expanding choice between identifiers. Here, the historical underpinnings of sexuality

identities will be addressed, providing an understanding for the existential implications and

ramifications of these considerations.

The Victorian project led to the naming of sexual acts and practices, in turn creating

categories of identity to which individuals belonged (Spinelli, 2013). While in, for example,

the ancient Greek context, any given sexual action could be deemed to be acceptable and in

line with dominant practice or not, there were no categories of sexual identity to which one

could belong (Foucault, 2014). In more modern times, however, people became defined by

their actions, and whereas, for example, "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the

homosexual was now a species" (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 43). New concepts were able to be

created, aligned with the idea of sexuality as an endemic and inherent part of self, as though this sexual essence preceded its existence.

Furthermore, categories, such as homosexuality, had long been denied, and it was from a place of denial that such an identification was able to gain legitimacy and come into being in a greater and more acknowledged way (Foucault, 1976/1990). That is, in order to be discussed something has to be understood to exist and to be denied there needs to be a recognised entity to deny. Sexuality identities can thus be understood to have found their legitimacy from a place of reactive formation. This aligns with Whisman's (1996) understanding that identifiers do not simply serve individuals by enabling the communication of experience but allow people to advocate for the legitimacy of their selves.

Aligned with these understandings and building upon the considerations of Sartre (1943/1992) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002), de Beauvoir (1949/2010) explored how identity is contingent and situated. That is, any given identity only has meaning in a given place, time, and social context. For example, the identifier gay is somewhat meaningless in that one is not somehow simply male and attracted to all men but rather comes to identify as a man who is attracted to some specific people who happen to identify as male, or have penises, or whatever it is that gay is understood to mean. Similarly, "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949/2010, p. 330) as one participates in the process of understanding, accepting, and identifying with this identifier. While Richards (2016) critiques this argument by stating that specific identities are "precisely what many people report" (p. 4), apparently advocating for the view that there are many people who claim to be attracted to all people of a given sex or gender identity, this way of thinking seems rather specious. Richards (2016) also critiques this argument for its tautological nature, failing to consider how people ever come to develop new identities. While circularity may seem at work when, say, a man comes to identify as a man, this does not seem the case when

someone moves beyond preconceived identities. It seems that identities arise from lived experience, and in so doing, people coin new words and identifiers, allowing people to better articulate, or justify and make legitimate, their lived experiences.

Identity politics. While touched upon above, sexual identifiers and choice are directly confronted in the arena of identity politics. Sexuality identity, in particular, has become a political project in the contemporary context, provoking debate and unease in consideration of the existential underpinnings of self. One's fundamental project of existence is not a journey one bears alone or in a vacuum but in a greater social context that serves to influence the decisions one makes.

This political project of justification of self is reflected in both more personal accounts and academic iterations. Regarding these more personal experiences, Whisman (1996) discusses how most lesbians and gay men take a position on the aetiology of their sexualities, a reflection of the stigmatization these individuals experience. People are politically inclined to justify their selves and to take ownership of a position on what brought them into being, as though simply accepting the way that they are may be inadequate. There can be both value and harm in taking on any given identity, with sexism, transphobia, and homophobia acting to impact the identities one experiences. Equally, political requirements can incentivize identity selection, as detailed by Fassin and Salcedo's (2015) account of a man choosing to identify as gay for the purpose of immigration. The need for justification of the self is equally represented in more academic settings by appeals to science in the justification of identities. For example, Richards (2016) turns to neuronal evidence supporting brain differences in trans folks, as reflected by a study by Saraswat, Weinand, and Safer (2015) investigating a biologic basis for gender identity, finding support for a biologic aetiology to transgender identity, and a study conducted by Hoekzema et al. (2015) which found subtle levels of divergence from natal sex in those with gender dysphoria, representing

sex-atypical differentiation. It seems to deeply reflect the contemporary context that such

questions are asked and that a scientism of self is seen as necessary, as though the self

without a biological aetiology might lack validity. People have been left to invoke science

with its stranglehold on legitimacy in their self-understandings and justifications (Whisman,

1996).

Such commentaries align with understanding that the idea of sexuality as choice may

be interpreted as threatening. Discussion of existential underpinnings in sexuality identities

may well be perceived as acts to diminish experience, engage in victim-blaming, use

philosophy against individuals, and deny aspects of oppression and inequality (Richards,

2016; Milton, 2014). This is well aligned with Foucault's (2014) understanding that, while

there can be a strategic benefit to sex and sexuality identifiers, there is need to resist the use

of such identifiers and instead demand a space moving beyond identities, where people are

simply able to do what they want. In an existential understanding, sex and sexuality become

choices about how one exists in the world and the ways in which one would like to relate to

others (du Plock, 2014a). The need for sexuality identities may be understood as the

foregrounding of sex absent a greater consideration of culture and power (Foucault, 2014; du

Plock, 2014a).

Lived Experience of Existential Sexualities

While existential sexualities have a relevance within a philosophical and conceptual

realm, these ways of thinking can be seen to have important and real impacts in the way

people live, understand, and story their lives. While considerable research exists investigating

topics of sexuality, much of what is considered comes from more moralising and agentic

health-centric conceptions, for example with the aim of aiding in the control of transmission

of STIs or HIV through attempts to provide potential interventions (e.g., Crooks, King,

Tluczek, & Sales, 2019; Nield, Magnusson, Brooks, Chapman, & Lapane, 2015), or

discussing politicization of sexualities and how best to predict or influence public opinion with regard to, for example, sexual minorities (e.g., Fahs, 2009; Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2016; Lewis, 2009). Research considered here attempts to aid in understanding how conceptualising sexuality existentially may be seen as relevant to broader conceptions of the lived experience of sexualities, surveying a number of key themes to represent potential areas of existential interest in the process of sexual becoming. The way people experience sexual shame, feel discordance in sexuality identities, experience the obligation to be sexual, are policed in their trans identities, undergo the process of sexual becoming, and story the aetiology of their sexualities all reflect the pervasive nature of existential sexualities in the contemporary context.

Sexual shame. Shame has been seen to frame the experience of sexuality acting as a mechanism of social control that regulates accepted sexual behaviours and ways of being, an association which has been seen to be both long-lived and internalized (Irvine, 2009). Foucault (1976/1990) discusses sexual shame through the lens of a regressive hypothesis wherein western culture is seen as overcoming shame in entering an era of sexual liberation. Irvine (2009), however, points to how shame retains value within such an understanding, noting how a regressive hypothesis necessitates the existence of shame in order for shame to be overcome. In such an understanding, shame is reinstituted and reidentified, not least by therapists in their work with patients to work through such shame (Irvine, 2009). Irvine (2009) also discusses the potential value of sexual shame, such as how shame may help to make sex more meaningful, and that without shame, sex may remain banal.

Contemporary research continues to link the experience of sex with the experience of shame. Ringrose and Harvey (2015) explored the ways in which sexting was used against individuals to contribute to the experience of sexual shame. These authors found shame to be prevalent amongst their participants, serving to discourage girls from sharing images of their

bodies for risk of being deemed slutty, humiliating boys for their penis size, and discouraging boys from admitting to providing girls pleasure, suggesting social policing serving to encourage sexually aggressive hetero-masculinity in boys (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015).

Similarly, in a study exploring slut-shaming on Facebook, Papp et al. (2015) found that, contrary to widespread belief, male sluts were shamed more harshly than female sluts. While men were seen as slutty for more overt sexual behaviours, such as having multiple partners, women were seen as slutty for less overt sexual behaviours, such as wearing sexy clothing (Papp et al., 2015). This points to many potential sources of sexual shame, many of which are identified by Gordon (2018) in his development of a sexual shame scale. Gordon (2018) found evidence that men experience shame in sexualities relating to remorse from masturbating or using pornography, having a high sex drive, experiencing dissatisfaction with their bodies, and from being sexually inexperienced. This suggests that many factors continue to associate sexualities and shame. Sexual policing has been seen to be the result of sexual shame, and where dominant attitudes and discourses exist, there may also exist fewer acceptable ways of being and relating.

Discordance. There is evidence to suggest that people act in ways discordant to those sexuality identities that they adopt, indicating a level of discomfort between the categories of sexual identity and sexual behaviour. In their investigation of 45-year men in Germany, Goethe et al. (2018) found that a significant portion of men that identified as gay led a heterosexual life, with 5.5% of men who identified as gay only ever having had sex with a woman and 45.7% of gay men reporting having had sexual experiences with women. Similar results have been found amongst women, with one study finding that 11.2% of heterosexual women reported having had a same-sex partner (Nield et al., 2015). Importantly, the experience of such sexuality discordance has been demonstrated to be linked with depressive symptomatology (Lourie & Needham, 2017), drawing attention to those real and important

implications in the lived experience of identity. This further reinforces the importance of gaining a more detailed and nuanced understanding of how people navigate and negotiate the process of sexual becoming, making clear the fundamental existential project of sexuality in life.

      Compulsory sexualities. Sexuality may be experienced as an obligation wherein individuals are inclined to take on sexuality identities in response to dominant social messaging. Compulsory sexualities have been demonstrated to operate in a number of contexts, for example as applied to heterosexuality and bisexuality in women and amongst those who identify as asexual. Fahs (2009) explores the concept of compulsory bisexuality in women, finding that younger women were compelled to perform bisexuality in public social settings, whereas older women experienced pressure to demonstrate their bisexuality in private, for example in sex with partners. This need to perform sexuality points to the ways in which people struggle to live genuine and authentic expressions of their sexualities and are instead compelled to explore sexuality in ways that reflect social expectation. This exposes dominant messaging of, for example, patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia, and is well aligned with that understanding of compulsory heterosexuality explored by Rich (1980/2003), who details the way in which lesbian existence has been silenced through hetero-assumption, the male gaze, and any number of other social forces in the policing of sexualities. These understandings can be seen as particularly acute in the experience of asexual identity in a world that privileges sexuality (Emens, 2014). Asexuality makes for an interesting identity of inquiry, not least as aetiology of identity may gain importance in a world where the assumed normalcy of sexuality serves to stigmatize asexual identity. This has been seen to encourage asexual people to disassociate from other dominant social reasonings for not having sex, such as conservatism, prudishness, or religious abstinence (Emens, 2014). This sense of obligation to take on particular identities, and the obligation to

experience sexuality at all, reflects tension in the existential project of the self that one prefers, further complicating the process of coming to know what one truly wants in a world where messages may be received that compel the individual to act in ways that may be contrary to personal desires.

       Policing of trans identities. The policing of trans identities reflects the difficulties individuals may experience in attaining a level of authenticity and certitude in their sexual selves. Trans folks have been seen to experience pressure in justifying their identities, for example in needing to defend their sense of gender-incongruence (Catalano, 2015; Garrison, 2018). This may be especially noticeable in the ways that trans people experience gender policing, for example in the need to pass as a particular gender (Catalano, 2015). Living gender fluidly, or in ways outside of conventional binary presentations, can lead to difficulty in being interpreted and understood as coherent or consistent, further complicating such lived experiences (Garrison, 2018). This understanding is consistent with Doorduin and van Berlo's (2014) finding that incongruence between gender identity and gender perception negatively impacted trans people's feelings during sex, illustrating the implications that gender policing may have on individuals. Furthermore, transphobia itself can be understood to be strengthened by heteronormative gender role pressure (Mizock & Hopwood, 2016). Trans identities, not least for their link with gender role identities, serve as an illustrative example of how dominant discourse and assumption serve to impact the ways in which one may navigate the process of becoming and identifying with that self they feel to be deep, true, and reflective of their authentic nature.

       Sexual becoming. The process of sexual becoming can be understood as the project of existential sexualities, where the individual comes to know and identify as the sexual self they care to be. Many factors have been seen to regulate and impact this process. Crooks et al. (2019) found that sociocultural conditions had prominent impacts on the process of sexual

becoming in black women, while Dillon, Worthington, and Moradi (2011) noted

commonalities in sexual identity development between subgroups in their consideration of

sexual identification as a universally experienced process. Such processes have been

investigated more explicitly, for example by Robertson (2014), who identified four processes

in sexuality construction in gay adolescents, noting the violation of compulsory

heterosexuality, explanation seeking, exploration, and the negotiation of identity as playing a

role in the lived experience of sexual becoming. Such processes can help in accounting for

patriarchal and heteronormative structures as individuals grapple with finding authenticity in

sexuality (Robertson, 2014). Research among heterosexual men has helped in identifying

how hetero-assumption regulates identity until new information about sexuality identities

comes to light, allowing the individual to further query the sexual self they care to be

(Morgan, Steiner, & Thompson, 2010). This helps in further demonstrating how the process

of sexual becoming can be seen as a universal project, where all individuals navigate

complex territory as they come to better understand and identify the sexual self they wish to

identify with.

    Aetiology of sexualities. As previously discussed, the concept of sexual aetiologies

has received much research interest. Whisman (1996) discusses the concept of queer by

choice, finding that some individuals understood their sexualities to be intrinsic in nature,

others to have made sense of them as chosen, while others offered mixed accounts in

discussing the aetiology of their identities. Such aetiological understandings hold significant

political and personal ramifications. The belief in sexuality by choice has been seen to be a

predictor of homophobia (Blackwell, 2007). This may help to account for why it is often seen

as important in gaining support for the rights of sexual minorities to promote the

understanding that sexuality is an inborn, immutable, and unchangeable way of being (Joslyn

& Haider-Markel, 2016). Such ways of seeing, however, may neglect to account for the

understanding that the belief in the origin of sexual identity may be shaped more by political

and religious values than by support for sexual minority rights, leading to the alternate

suggestion that convincing people of a biology aetiology of sexuality is a weak tool for

increasing support for sexual minorities (Lewis, 2009). In a world where dominant discourse

sees sexuality as a fixed, innate trait, the conception that one may choose to be queer has

been seen to be under attack (Grzanka, Zeiders, & Miles, 2016), further complicating the

personal navigation of accounting for the sexual self in the contemporary context. This is

further reflected by research which suggests that beliefs about aetiology of sexuality impact

self-concept, such as the finding that essentialist beliefs held by lesbian and bisexual women

led to positive identity outcomes in areas associated with psychological well-being, while

believing in sexuality by choice was associated with more negative outcomes (Morandini,

Blaszynski, Costa, Gowin, & Dar-Nimrod, 2017). Individuals face a harsh political world in

the navigation of considering and justifying the aetiology of their sexualities, with numerous

ramifications, making yet more difficult the accessing of more authentic personal narratives

of the self.

Relevance to Counselling

Thinking and conceptualising sexualities existentially can be seen as relevant to the

counselling context. This is not least because understanding sexual choice can have numerous

implications for individuals and the ways they navigate the world, ways of thinking which

may well be considered and discussed in a counselling context. Equally, understanding of

existential sexualities may have implications for the way practitioners conceptualise their

counselling. It is these considerations which will be considered here, first for their

relationship with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and other sexual identity

(LGBTI+)-affirmative therapies, before considering those arguments that have been

presented for existential sex therapies.

LGBTI+-affirmative therapists can be understood to be those who work from a nonpathological point of view, and who view all sexuality identities as equal (Alderson, 2013). Such approaches have been advocated as necessary for effective and ethical work with LGBTI+ clients (Alderson, 2013). Some authors (Milton, 2014; Langdridge, 2014) see this as consistent with an existential approach, while others (du Plock, 2014a) have argued that such approaches are mutually exclusive. Arguments in favour of affirmative approaches in existential sex therapies have justified the use of the therapist's privilege in the validation of identity (Langdridge, 2014). Others argue that in affirming an identity a practitioner may be seen to hold an agenda, contrary to an existential approach which comes from a place of naivety inconsistent with a more agentive approach (du Plock, 2014a). Equally, this may place a practitioner in a position of power, authority, and expert status, inconsistent with a more existential approach of not knowing (du Plock, 2014a). These ways of thinking result in du Plock (2014a) concluding that the existential-phenomenological approach offers preferable ways of conceptualising sexuality. This demonstrates how existential understandings can therefore be seen to challenge, influence, and engage conversation about the ways in which practitioners work with their clients when it comes to sex and sexualities.

Therapies addressing existential sexualities have been discussed in the practice of individual, group, couples, and family therapy. Individual existential sex therapy has been explored as an approach privileging the lived experiences of the client in the treatment of sexual problems (Barker, 2011). In such an approach, personal realities considered through an existential lens may take precedence as opposed to, say, a dominant discourse of presumed treatment for a sexual problem. In group existential sex therapy people may be invited to explore new ways of being in an environment that offers structure and safety that may not otherwise be present in an individual's lived experience (Richards, 2014). Such therapy may be helpful in expanding understandings of sexuality, not least because sexualities as a topic

are so often silenced in the contemporary sociocultural context (Richards, 2014). Thus, the group environment may allow for a freer exploration of sexuality, supporting individuals to break with their assumed sexual identities and move toward the establishment of more authentic identities (Richards, 2014). Du Plock (2014b) applies an existential approach to couple therapy, illustrating how such themes served to help a couple in the navigation of their open relationship. Existential approaches may also be used in family therapy infusing themes of sexuality, for instance in working with families with transgender or gender nonconforming youth (Iantaffi, 2014). An existential approach in such a context may help in privileging personal dialogues while giving room for new and different interpretations to be created (Iantaffi, 2014). Such therapy may help in displacing belief in biological aetiologies of sexuality, helping to make available discourse of choice in gender and sexualities (Iantaffi, 2014).

Therapy acknowledging existential sexualities recognizes the unique space counselling professionals occupy in creating room for alternate discourse and increased self-understanding when it comes to one's sexualities. Therapists working from such a lens may be better able to interpret and make sense of ways to approach and work with their patients (Smith-Pickard, 2014). This acknowledges the positionality such professionals may exist within, bridging a space between scientific knowledge and approaches and lived, lay belief systems, giving rise to the ability to complicate discourse, and offer support, in the arena of sexualities (Grzanka, Zeiders, & Miles, 2016).

Method

This section outlines the research design and methodology used in this research project. I make clear the choice of methodology and how this reflects concordance with the subject of inquiry. This section addresses design and procedure, participants and sampling

methods, personal perceptions of the topic of inquiry, as well as the process of data analysis used in the study.

Design and Procedure

This study used a Husserlian framework to transcendental phenomenological analysis (Husserl, 1913/1983, 1929/2003), often referred to as a descriptive phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2012). Husserl (1929/2003) discussed how phenomenology lays "bare the universal structure of the transcendental life of consciousness in its enwrapment in and formation of meaning" (Husserl, 1929/2003, p. 17), giving rise to an approach inherently concerned with discovering ways of seeing and knowing and what these mean. Thus, this approach allows for a descriptive analysis of a phenomenon, aiming to explain both what a given experience is and how that phenomenon is experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This allows the researcher to describe those essential aspects of the lived experience of a phenomenon through the study of essences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and can therefore be understood as "a philosophy which puts essences back into existence" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. vii).

A phenomenological method was selected because it allowed for the explication and honouring of the lived, experiential process of existential sexualities. For one, a phenomenological approach is inherently aligned with existentialism, not least due to these philosophies shared histories and ways of seeing (Correia, 2017; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). The use of a transcendental phenomenological approach also meant that I was able to respect "*the way matters themselves stand in original* [= *first-hand*] *experience and insight*" (Husserl, 1929/2003, p. 4), in line with the core aspirations of this research. This gave room for an understanding of existential sexualities to develop organically outside of previously held assumptions and understandings. This is in line with an approach to descriptive phenomenology that requires the researcher to bracket themselves from previous theory and

ways of seeing, instead allowing understanding to arise from that experience and knowledge encountered in the research process (Giorgi, 2012; Husserl, 1913/1983).

The use of a phenomenological approach offered a number of strengths in investigating existential sexualities. This approach helped in giving voice to individuals in identifying their process of sexual becoming and allowed for the identification of themes and meanings in this process, allowing for greater understanding of existential sexualities. Equally, this enabled the identification of key themes for counselling professionals to consider in their work with patients as well as for the identification of potential areas for further research.

Interviews were key in gaining knowledge to learn about the experience of sexual becoming. Interviews involved a semi-structured interview process around seven interview questions (see Appendix A) and ranged in length from 39 to 82 minutes (*M*= 60 minutes). All participants were asked all questions, though the direction of interviews and time spent on individual questions varied substantially.

Participants and Sampling

In moving forward with a phenomenological psychological method, I recognized the key importance of participants as the foundation of this research. Upon ethics approval, posters (see Appendix B) were shared online through the author's personal social media pages and posted in various publicly accessible venues (e.g., local coffee shops, a local sex show) in Calgary, and participants were invited to pass information about the study on to others in a process known as snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A total of 15 responses were received resulting in 10 interviews. Participants represented a large variety of life experiences and backgrounds and met purposefully broad inclusion criteria of: (a) willing interest in participating in this research project; and (b) being 18 years of age or older.

Participants were invited to share key demographic information relating to sex and sexualities. Some participants indicated multiple identifiers within singular categories; information shared here attempts to represent the diversity of the sample. Of the 10 participants, eight disclosed their age and were between 23 and 62 years of age (M= 38 years). Regarding gender identity, six participants identified as women, two identified as nonbinary, and two identified as men. In terms of sexuality identity, seven participants described themselves as heterosexual, one as bisexual, two as pansexual, and one as grey-asexual. Further, six participants identified as monogamous, three as polyamorous, and one did not disclose relationship identity. In addition, nine participants used the descriptor White or Caucasian, one used the descriptor Middle Eastern, and one identified as East Indian. Individual demographic information about participants has not been shared to reduce potential for identification of participants. Participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms which have been retained throughout this research.

Author's Perceptions and Experiences of Sexual Becoming

I have long been confused by the process of sexual becoming. As long as I can remember, I have wondered about the nuance between what we are born as and what we become. To what degree can I control who I am? Am I choosing to be gay? I have felt pressured to believe that I was born this way, as though one is unable to choose their sexuality. It was as though choosing to identify as a sexual minority was conflated with choosing to be the undesirable or the pathological other. I have never felt as though I was born gay, or that this was in any way an unchangeable or inherent part of myself, and my engaging in gay sex and homoeroticism did not feel problematic for me. This said, I have long been aware of discourses of shame that serve to condemn such behaviour – not least my own experiences of bullying and homophobia – and I see such social pressure as having the power to inhibit authenticity in self.

I recognize a convenience to identity, understanding that the world around us often expects, or at least works more smoothly with, simplicity and concreteness. This has left me identifying as a gay man, an identity that is true but does not tell the full story of myself. The singularity conveyed by this identity does not communicate the self that is open to other possibilities. Equally, if I were to attend to this by choosing some other identity, I fear losing that sense of self, social acceptance, and understanding that can be received in identifying as a gay male. Even within gay identity, this struggle has played out for me in navigating those expected socio-political sex identities of top, bottom, and versatile. From this place, I have always felt a level of sexual fluidity, embracing a rather continuous understanding of self and identity. I do not know how I identify, especially when it comes to sex and sexualities, and have felt comfortable inhabiting a space of paradox, contradiction, and change in my process of sexual becoming. This has left me curious to explore and advocate for flexibilities and fluidities – sexual and otherwise – from a place of knowing that it really does not matter what we are or how we come to know who we are, but understanding that we live in highly politicized spaces where we may be expected to justify our experiences and identities.

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a hired transcriber. Transcripts were reviewed by the author for accuracy before being returned to participants to invite any changes they felt fit, allowing participants to ensure their perspectives were accurately captured in their interviews. Transcripts were then reread by the author to identify important statements which provided units of meaning (Giorgi, 2012; Wertz, 2005). These statements were sorted into themes in a process of producing clusters of meaning, reducing repetition between participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further interviews continued concurrent with such analysis until additional interviews did not identify new themes, that is, when saturation was reached (Wertz, 2005).

These statements and themes were used to identify the ways in which participants experienced the phenomenon of sexual becoming. This informed a composite description accounting for the experience of all participants, identifying the essence of the experience of sexual becoming. Identified themes formed subthemes, which were grouped into key themes of best fit. Key themes and subthemes will be discussed in the results section.

Results

Barriers, vulnerability, experience, support, and connection were identified as key themes impacting the process of sexual becoming. Various subthemes were identified giving rise to these requisite key theme categories. Identified key themes and subthemes derived from interviews are detailed in Table 1 and are discussed sequentially below.

Table 1

Key Themes and Subthemes Derived from Interviews on Sexual Becoming

Key Theme	Subthemes				
Barriers	Media	Parents	Religion	Social Pressures	Perception of Sexual Risk
Vulnerability	Comfort	Safety	Trust		
Experience	Curiosity	Experimentation	Exploration	Direct Experiencing	
Supports	Internet	Friends	Partners	Therapy	Education	Media
Connection	Connection with Self	Connection with Others	Spiritual Connection		

Barriers

Participants identified plentiful barriers to accessing their authentic sexual selves. These barriers acted to form narrow sexual scripts which constrained participants' experiences, forming expectations which participants felt obliged to follow. For example, Starbucka shared how her sexual becoming was shaped by "expectations - cultural expectations, society expectations, family norms, religious expectations - Adam and Eve, it wasn't Adam and Adam,", alluding to those barriers that shaped participants' experiences of

sexual becoming. Here, media, parents, religion, social pressures, and the perception of sexual risk are discussed in how they acted to prevent individuals from accessing their authentic sexual selves, instead bringing about shame, guilt, judgment, and an increased awareness of risk in navigating the process of sexual becoming.

Media. Participants recognized a vast variety of media as barriers to sexual becoming. From this vantage point, the media was seen to offer limited conceptions of what sex could be, constraining sexual understandings to be in line with dominant cultural messaging and expectations. Participants discussed how the media encouraged understandings of monogamy as the standard and expected form of relationship, the concept that men are hypersexual and should have a lot of sex, acted to objectify people, and reinforced certain body types as being sexual. This resulted in an understanding of the media as a source of harm, with Anna discussing how "I think one of the most hurtful ways, that, have impeded sexual development in a lot of people, including myself, is um, the culture and the media,", while Forest discussed living in a "hypersexualized society, lots of porn, lots of, um, loud, obvious sex in my face telling me I should do it a lot." Media messaging was understood to reinforce cultural norms. Lavender discussed how she fell into enacting a female role reinforced through movies:

> I would say I fell really into a very, like, traditional female role and he was in a very
> traditional man role and I think that was what I wanted at the time. It's what I had
> seen in movies and what I thought was what you were supposed to do.

Thus, the media were seen to act as a barrier to sexual becoming, acting to reinforce dominant sociocultural expectations, with the potential to confine and constrain sexualities.

Parents. One of the most dominant barriers in sexual becoming identified by participants was their parents. In this conception, parents were seen not only as unreliable and uncomfortable around topics of sexuality but also as a source or reinforcer of cultural

messaging associating sexuality with shame and guilt. For example, Anna shared her parents'
response to her masturbating:

> When my parents found out what I was doing at home… my mom held up my legs as
> my dad hit me. Hard. So, there is shame around it. A lot. Around the idea of sexuality
> and expressing sexuality in general.

Parents were seen by participants to help in teaching that sexuality is something to be
ashamed of. Participants did not recognize parents as sources of helpful support or advice.
For example, Babs shared how her "parents certainly weren't very supportive. I couldn't
count on them for anything." Instead, parents were seen as directly discouraging of sexual
development. Overt discomfort and avoidance of sexual topics by parents was seen to be
interpreted by participants as indicating that sex is bad, as revealed by Lavender's experience
of sex in movies:

> Anytime there was a sex scene of any kind it was bad, and it was fast forwarded.
> Everybody had to close their eyes during the fast forward. As a child I interpreted that
> as sex is bad and wrong. And sex was wrong no matter what.

Rather than being seen as a supportive source of information, care, love, or respect when it
comes to sexuality, parents were instead seen by participants with, at best, ambivalence, and,
at worst, a source of stigma and shame. Parents thus acted as a substantial barrier to accessing
the sexual self.

Religion. A number of participants noted how religion promoted narrow
understandings of what sex can be and further contributed to feelings of guilt and shame
when they participated in sex. Religious messaging directly discouraged sexuality and sexual
exploration. Forest discussed how religious influence led to his experience of sex being:

> ... very hidden. Um, because my family is very Catholic, and there was, there was a
> context of you shouldn't have sex till you're married. Um, it was, so, I always felt a

lot of shame around it, but like all my teenage years was a lot of masturbation. Um,

also sex with my girlfriend. But always super hidden…. It was like that was super

ingrained, that as soon as parents are around – hiding.

Such religious pressures meant that sex was not something to be celebrated and certainly not

something which could be public. This experience of Catholic guilt was shared by Lavender,

who found that:

There was something really shameful in having sex just for pleasure because in the

Catholic religion sex wasn't for pleasure. I felt shame for having anal sex, like there

was something wrong with anal sex. That it was not feminine or something. Like the

proper way to have sex is penis in a vagina for procreation.

For Lavender, Catholicism established a narrow sexual script that left her feeling ashamed

and defeminated, and as though sex should not provide a source of pleasure. From a similar

vantage point, Tom shared how his time in the Church left him feeling ashamed to touch his

penis:

I think a lot of the shame is tied to religion. Um, like I, (laughs) I remember being

really ashamed of touching my penis. I wasn't even playing with my penis, just

touching it. From like, whatever my first memories were till I… I can't even say when

I first left - it was more like, 5, 10 years later.

This illustrates how the shame established by religion may take years of unlearning, offering

substantial barriers in the process of sexual becoming. These stories found parallels in

Sarah's experience of Hinduism:

I had pretty strict like, not strict, but in my head, it was strict, like, religious, um, ideas

of, of what was right and what was not. But for the longest time, so with my first long

term boyfriend in high school I was convinced I was going to be celibate until

marriage. Um, so I had gone most of my high school and into my university career,

ah, not having had any sex, but like, really experimenting with almost everything

around it. But also having a pretty negative view around sex because of how I was

brought up in my household. And then I decided to leave my religion and kind of

open things up, for, um, making decisions for what's right and wrong on my own

terms. And that was, that was nice, cause then I got to experiment things, experiment

with basically all parts of who I am and my identity.

The barrier of religion was not always present for participants, with Parker, for example,

sharing how a secular environment lacked this negative messaging around sexual

potentialities in saying, "yeah, I never had like, religion that told me not to sexual or not to be

queer or anything like that - I was very, very secularly. So, it never really interacted."

Thus, religion can be seen to be a substantial source of shame and guilt, and, in the absence

of this barrier, individuals may find themselves less burdened and more open to sexual

potentialities.

Social Pressures. A number of participants discussed the ways in which the social

pressure of normalizing judgment reinforced a greater culture of shame, silence, and

discomfort around sexuality. Lavender discussed how a friend:

… shamed me after I told them I had anal sex, making me feel like there was

something wrong with me or disgusting about me. It made me realize how much

external opinion plays a role in the types of sex I have and the feeling around the

types of sex I have.

Social pressure can play a role in policing sex that lies outside of an accepted or expected

sexual script, bringing about guilt and subsequent reluctance to more fully explore the sexual

self. A similar experience was shared by Starbucka, who discussed the impacts of name

calling on learning to engage in monogamy in saying that "you didn't want to be a cheater,

you didn't want to be called a, you know, any other bad name, so then you continued with a

relationship one at a time." Like Lavender, the social influence of those around her acted to

hold Starbucka's behaviour in line with what was seen as acceptable and appropriate. These

experiences illustrate how, if one does not want to be shamed and called names, they need to

act in accordance with socially accepted and expected standards. Forest described how such

standards may be learned:

> I just felt because of like languaging at school, like being called a fag, just being bad,
>
> um, congruent with bad, that I just had a lot of, like, emotional fear around, like, what
>
> is gay and attraction to men.

Social pressure can thus be seen to play a key role in policing behaviour through raising self-

consciousness and shaming behaviours outside of the norm. These examples show how

certain behaviours - such as anal sex, nonmonogamy, and homoerotic attraction - are seen as

less desirable and are socially discouraged. Normalising judgment, actualised through social

pressure, can be seen to hold people back from open and frank discussion and free

exploration of their sexual potentialities.

Perception of sexual risk. Many participants identified a level of risk in sexuality.

This was generally identified through awareness of physical and emotional risk through

sexual bonding. Such awareness of risk heightened the stakes in sexual exploration, creating

more firmer sexual scripts and reinforcing understandings of accepted sexual behaviours.

Awareness of risk acted as a barrier to more open sexual exploration and experiencing. Anna

discussed:

> The risks that you're willing to take with somebody, when they are inside of your
>
> body I mean, we're not talking just about like, the infectious diseases kind of risk. But
>
> we're talking about um, we're talking about like, if, if, if you think about it from,
>
> from, from a, um, like a neuroscience or neuropsychological kind of space when you
>
> have that kind of experience with somebody, um, it releases kind of like a different

level of endorphins in your body and bonding hormones and you're subject to, then, um, and you're then subjecting yourself to bonding yourself with somebody that may not actually want to bond with you that way. And then so you walk away from that afterwards subjecting yourself to the risk of being completely emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to the place of like, uh, you know, self, it's self-detrimental.

This conception was shared by Yellow, who also saw sex as a form of bonding with attendant risk in her experience of talking in casual sex encounters:

Because there's a relationship attached then. So, um, like you know like if I'm going to have a physical like relationship with someone that's going to be non-attached then I don't want to have the attachments – so no talking. Or I mean like less. Like I want to minimize that risk or something.

This illustrates how sexual relationships were understood to act as a form of bonding, and such attachment was understood to require caution. Having recognized risk as a potential part of the sexual experience, participants wanted to act in ways to alleviate and minimize risk, thus minimizing sexual exploration and constraining their sexual selves to accepted, dominant, and more conservative sexual scripts.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability also arose as a key theme in the process of sexual becoming. Participants respected that, not least in the face of barriers to sexuality, sexual exploration required a level of openness. In fostering such an openness, comfort, safety, and trust were identified as fundamental themes which are explored here.

Comfort. Participants noted how being comfortable in sexual spaces allowed for a greater and more authentic accessing of self. Comfort acted as a means of accessing vulnerability, and participants sought comfortable situations to give them the desired space

from which to access sexual processing. Participants identified how monogamous or committed relationships could act as means of establishing greater comfort in such spaces, helping to foster desired emotional connectedness. This gave rise to the ability to feel more confident in the sexual self. For example, Babs discussed a vulnerable experience in which she felt comfortable and at one with her body, allowing her to be in greater touch with her sexual self:

> He was the first man that I showered with. Because I was comfortable. And they say "oh, you look sexy" and you know? So that made me more comfortable with my body. I think I have issues with that. Being overweight. Yeah, yeah, that's, you know? Until, it was like lights out until I met this guy. It's almost like you feel a little more comfortable, you could be who you are.

> Knowing what one is or is not comfortable with may also allow for the productive

experience of vulnerability. Parker recognized how comfort may manifest in recognizing limits and knowing what they do, or do not, consent to:

> I feel like I'm such an introspective person, that like I sit with it for a long time before I'm willing to do anything, and then by the time that I do it, I'm like, I know like these are the boundaries I want, and these are, like, what I am for sure comfortable with, like I'm already very entrenched in that, like that understanding.

Being aware of and working to establish safe boundaries can help in creating a more comfortable space for sexual experiencing. Increased comfort was linked to a greater propensity for expanding sexual scripts. For example, several participants discussed how increased comfort would increase their interest in engaging in anal sex:

> I think if I was with somebody over a period of time and I was comfortable and trusted them I think I would probably experiment with that, I would be open to that. As long as you make sure you use a condom and all that stuff. (Babs)

I have not dated anyone else that instigated or was into anal. It is not something that I would instigate in another relationship. If I was dating someone that was really into anal, I would have to be very comfortable with them before I would participate. (Lavender)

Safety. Several participants saw sexuality as requiring safety in order to be experienced in a vulnerable way, allowing for further access to the sexual self. Participants identified safety as involving both physical and emotional aspects. Lavender, for instance, recognized the need for safety to move forward with sex in ways she found desirable:

Safety is something that I need to have an enjoyable time sexually, I worry about my safety, I worry about being raped or that my boundaries won't be respected. Demeaning or aggressive behaviour makes me keep my distance. Large groups of men make don't make me feel safe. There's no guarantee that someone won't be violent or unsafe.

Creating parameters that allow for this experience of safety and allowing for the vulnerable experiencing of authentic sexuality was also shared by Parker:

Well and like, I'm a very like, verbal person and so, like, I would so rather sit down and like, have a conversation and be like, here's some clear boundaries and like, whatever versus trying to read that in a situation. Like, I feel like, I'm not as good at that. So even just for my own sake of like, peace of mind it's nice, um, and like vice versa I can't always promise that someone else can read me, in like the middle of the moment, um, and so it's just like, a nice way to do those things, and like, establish that you feel safe before you're doing anything. Um, and I feel like that applies to so many things, whether that's like, just consenting, like participating in an activity or, consent around like, more intense kink related stuff. Or, um, things like, sexual health protection stuff, like that's all part of that consent conversation in my mind. Um, so, even yeah, like physical safety things are involved in that as well as like,

the mental health kind of thing of am I comfortable safety kind of thing. (Parker)Safety

helped participants in fostering healthy vulnerability. This was well explicated by Yellow,

who discussed how:

> The opportunity to be vulnerable only comes when you feel safe, right? I mean, so…
>
> You know, like I might be vulnerable, or really do my best to overcome that, like a
>
> perceived risk and be vulnerable and it might not be safe but then I have to do that all
>
> on my own. Like I have to be like "Okay, I did that. I put it out there and done," you
>
> know? But I think someone, when it's a shared experience and you can be vulnerable
>
> and it's held, or met, or matched or whatever. Then that's I think a nicer experience.

Trust. Trust was described by participants as a prerequisite to accessing the sex that

they desired and preferred. Participants discussed looking for partners that could hold space

for them in ways that felt safer, allowing space for vulnerability and exploration. Part of this

theme was seen to be reinforced by dominant cultural messaging that suggests that sex is

relegated for trusting relationships. Trust of the sexual partner was seen to be an important

element of accessing vulnerability. For example, Anna discussed how sex:

> … becomes incredibly risky for both people. And um, and if you don't know that
>
> person, you don't trust that person, you don't um, yeah. Like, yeah, so if there are too
>
> many unknowns, I mean cause there's always going to be a level of uncertainty, for
>
> sure. Nothing means a guarantee, but, um but I think, if there's this um, if there's so
>
> many unknowns that you, you can't feel secure within yourself and that and the level
>
> of, of security within a relationship also extends to the level of security for you within
>
> yourself first. That's kind of a basis of it. If you, if you have a very good sense of self
>
> and self-security then you will, will, then I think, we, I think, we tend to search for it
>
> and seek it in other relationships to make up for that and then that's where we can put
>
> ourselves at higher risk.

This standard holds sex in high esteem, perhaps setting a narrow script for the experience of sexuality, but may also be seen to provide room and allow the vulnerability participants felt around sex to be experienced safely. Seraphina shared how trust contributed to their experience of attraction to men:

> Yeah, so, so, um, yeah, people who have been culturally raised masculine, male. I can read them much more easily and I trust them more, well, no, not all of them, but because I know, I guess I do trust them more easily, because I feel that I can more easily read and tell whether or not they are worthy of trust. And if they are worthy of trust, then, I find I have a much easier time doing that, whereas I find I second guess myself when it comes, or more often when it comes to woman.

This helps in showing how trust was held in high esteem by participants as a fundamental prerequisite to the accessing of vulnerability necessary for them to engage in the process of sexual becoming.

Experience

Experience played a key role in participants process of sexual becoming, supporting participants in overcoming shame learned from barriers to sexual becoming. Curiosity, experimentation, and exploration paved the way for sexual experiences, allowing participants to better understand their sexual selves, while direct experiencing allowed for further nuancing of the developing sexual self.

Curiosity. Curiosity was recognized by participants as allowing for an openness to new experiences. Curiosity provided an inquisitive interest in sexuality which resulted in participants engaging the subject further in spite of dominant learned themes of shame, guilt, judgment, and risk. This curious openness formed a core component of participants navigating sexual spaces, often developing in direct reaction to those narrow sexual scripts

and shaming voices participants experienced as barriers to their process of sexual becoming. Anna shared how:

> I think that's kinda how, how I, think about my own, coming into my own sexuality, as openness, curiosity, and experimentation but not at the mercy of like my own dignity, for the most part. But um, but I think coming from an early experience of shame around it ironically developed this need to, um, explore and be curious around it and I'm still curious around it.

Thus, shame can give rise to curiosity, fostering an environment of exploration and desire for experience. Curiosity also acts as a mediating factor for seeking new experiences. Forest's curiosity allowed him to seek out new experiences to see if they resonated with him, for example in connecting sexually with men:

> How did I know? I guess it was, maybe it wasn't in knowing – I said knowing, but it was more like a curiosity. It's like a... Like, maybe there's this thing I, maybe if I don't interact in the world in this way, how will I know if this is a thing or not a thing. … And see what happens. And like I've been pretty adventurous in the past and it makes sense, here's a thing like, connecting with the dudes sexually, what's that feel like?

Yellow also found herself curious about same-sex experiences but discussed how her level of curiosity never reached a level high enough for her to be inspired to act upon it. In discussing her heterosexual identity, Yellow explored how:

> I guess I have questioned it because it's been in my face so often and it just hasn't, it's just never been, umm, like curious enough or, umm, I guess – I don't know if it's curious enough but because there was a time when I thought that was like the way to be really empowered, you know?

Similarly, Yellow discussed how she "never explored the physical relationship with another woman, it just hasn't been like physically interesting." Curiosity can be seen to motivate new behaviour, encouraging individuals to try what is otherwise unfamiliar to them. New experiences can be seen as positive and desirable, or may be experienced negatively, impacting the future experiences people choose to engage with.

Experimentation. Experimentation was respected by participants as a way of discovering what may or may not be enjoyable when it comes to sex. Through experimenting with sex, participants understood that they would be better able to directly understand what it was that they wanted or did not want. Babs discussed how one may discover what they enjoy:

> By experimenting and maybe doing both sexes, I suppose. I mean who am I to say if I was approached by a woman, considering I haven't done anything, who's to say I might not take her advances? I don't know.

An open-minded attitude toward sexual experimentation was therefore retained by participants, who saw that change was possible and that direct experience can help in constructing informed opinions of what one wants. This concept was well explicated by Parker:

> Um, I'm also just like, I've always been pretty casual about sex as a concept in general. Um, so I've definitely had sex because I was bored and things like that, um, because, why not? It's an activity. Um, yeah, I feel like, uh, once in a while I've had sex like largely for experimental purposes, when I'm like trying to figure out the thing I think I like, I actually like.

Parker elucidates this process of experimental discovery and confirmation. Engaging in sex with an ethos of experimental discovery helped participants come to understand what it is that they did or did not like.

Exploration. Participants recognized the value of an exploratory attitude toward sex. Through exploration, they were better able to discover the self. Participants explored ideas of sex and gender identities, homoerotic experiencing, or polyamory. Exploratory attitudes allowed participants to discover and access things they did not even know existed. It was through this exploratory process that participants were able to find a greater degree of certainty in self. Lavender saw how exploration played a role in her discovering ideas of masculinity and femininity with a transitioning partner:

> I think being in a relationship with a transgender woman also opened up my ideas of feminine and masculine. When I met her, she identified as a man and then into our relationship she started identifying as a woman and started taking hormones, so her physical body had not changed much at the time. Still, we explored different ways of treating her penis and testes like a vagina and what that meant. Actually, focusing less on her penis and more on the place right behind her testes. Kissing and caressing her nipples and chest like breasts. That sort of thing. Exploring the difference between masculine and feminine touch - or perceived difference. Experimented with submissive and dominant roles pertaining to gender.

Exploration allowed for a deeper discovery of self. Equally, this helped to reaffirm sexual choices, as discussed by Starbucka:

> I think, just as you do in your teenage years, that anytime that you go through a change like that you may want to explore. You know, make sure that you're on - not that I had any doubts - but make sure that you're on the right path and, and um, that you're still content with your choices that you made when you were younger and you stuck with.

Participants also revealed how exploratory interest may be limited, narrowing the scope of their sexual experience. Exploration allowed participants to further access and discover their sexual selves.

       Direct Experience. Actual experiencing of sex helped participants in better understanding who they were and the sex that they preferred. This concept was well elucidated by Babs, who noted that "if you don't experience what's missing, you don't realize it's missing." This aligns with Tom's understanding that his decision to engage in sexual behaviour was often motivated because "I had this experience in the past and I enjoyed I, so I would like to do it again." With the direct experience of something, one is better able to understand whether they do or do not enjoy that thing. This process of learning through experience can function to support individuals in surpassing those barriers to becoming that they have experienced, as discussed by Forest:

> The experience informs like, oh I had that shame and ideas around the shame and the stories and it's like that experience negates those, so it's like that. And then relationship changes. I feel like all the domains in my existence are, like, corresponding. And, I mean, especially the experiences, so I think it's the most valuable. Um, because, the like, practical, grounded, actual physical experience seems to inform the other domains with some concrete examples.

Experience provides a tangible reference point for individuals to know what they do or do not like. This process can help in affirming preferences:

> Um, so by the time I had like the language around that queer identity, I kind of already knew it was like a real thing I was experiencing. Um, so I feel like the experiences were not so much what helped me figure it out, as they just like affirmed it, what I actually figured out from the education. (Parker)

Support

Participants identified numerous supports as important in helping them engage in the process of sexual becoming. These sources served to help provide further knowledge and information, for example sharing their own experiences to help participants in understanding alternative ways of seeing and being, broadening understandings of sex and sexualities and offering previously unseen sexual scripts. This helped in normalising aspects of sexuality that may otherwise have remained hidden in response to shame, fear, and judgment. These supports were seen to include the internet, friends, partners, therapy, education, and the media.

Internet. Online communities were identified as a source of support by participants. Participants discussed online dating, chat rooms, Facebook, Tumblr, Reddit, group chats, exposure to porn through the internet, and using the internet to find events related to sex as ways in which they have developed a greater level of sexual awareness. The internet can be seen to, in many ways, offer an extension of other identified supports – for example, a way of meeting and communicating with friends, a means of learning about sex and sexualities, or a way of finding and corresponding with partners. Parker identified how:

> I've always been the kind of person that has lots of online friends. Um, I think part of having like, grown up and discovered a lot of the stuff on the internet, like, lent itself to me building my life that way. Um, and actually in a really weird online community of like 200 people… So, I have spaces, like that, that are very, very like, tight knit communities where we can talk about things. And then there's almost fewer barriers in a lot of ways because you don't have to sit across from someone and talk about things that might feel weird to talk about… It's like safe to do that, and everyone's really positive. And like that's such a nice space to be in.

The internet not only provided a means of connecting with potential supports but was seen to offer a safer space to do so. This lowered risk allowed participants to access greater vulnerability. For example, Babs discussed how:

> It just depends. And I think sometimes, there is nothing wrong with chat rooms and what not, because you have that safety because once you do meet, you almost feel like you know them.

Online communities were well accepted by participants as valid and important sources of support:

> It's an incredibly, you know, supportive community that I built. It is - and, and the thing actually with that is it doesn't have to be in the flesh - my community is hugely digital. (Seraphina)

> **Friends.** Participants identified friends as a key source of support in the process of

sexual becoming. Friends were recognized for validating and supporting participants while simultaneously encouraging risk-taking and exploratory behaviours while providing safer confrontation. Friends were respected for sharing their own experiences regarding sexualities, providing alternative ways of seeing and conceptualising. For example, Parker shared how:

> with friends I find, like, just social discussions of sex stuff is really healthy and positive for me. Um, and hearing, um, I feel like from that I get a lot of, like more realistic discussions and information about sex. Um, especially talking about like kink stuff. Um, and I feel like it also opens less traditional narratives.

Closer friends were respected as more supportive while extended friends were seen as more strongly associated with aspects of judgment. Friends were respected for offering a supportive framework that allowed for safer, gentle confrontation, but also understood to have the potential to reinforce dominant messages of shame, guilt, fear, and judgment. Tom shared how:

The initial support structure was absolutely my peers and friends. And then the

extended one would be them. But the first level of, - we call it support, but I still...

judgement, cause to me they were all kind of the same thing, right? - the first level of

judgement was your immediate friends and then extended friends.

Friends were respected for helping participants better understand how sexualities operate and

what steps they could take to actualise their preferred realities. For example, Sarah identified

that:

I didn't really want to try anything. And also like, any problems I had I would

actually talk to my best friend about and she's like "why are you so afraid of

communication?" And I'm like "it just feels unnatural" and she's like "make it

natural, like you need to talk about what you like." And I'm like – "oh yeah, I guess

you're right."

Friends thus helped in confronting participants, helping to provide a healthy, questioning

voice as they navigated the process of sexual becoming.

Partners. Participants recognized partners as a potential source of learning and

support. Partners were respected for bringing their own experiences and preferences to the

table, broadening the potential landscape in sexual encounters. Partners also offered

participants the opportunity for sexual experimentation, a process that allowed people to learn

about themselves through teaching and exploring with others. This process of experiencing

with partners allowed participants to overcome shame that was associated with sex. For

example, Forest shared:

I was living in Australia, and had a partner who was 10 years older and just had really

great chemistry and she was super relaxed around sex, and somehow the like,

connection with her, just like, removed, like the vast majority of the shame I was

feeling in the way of really questionable sex.

Partners were seen to provide a space that was seen as somewhat more high-stakes and judgmental than with other supports. In this lens, partners can be seen as the source of sexual expectation rather than simply sexual support. For example, Tom discussed how "I have always kind of felt like it's, like, it's my job to perform and then I'll get criticized or praised. That's kind of how I look at it." Similarly, Lavender recognized the support of:

> Partners in a way, in a different way. I feel like with friends you can kind of talk about anything - like, oh this was weird or, well just social processing, I guess. Yes, I think partners bring experience and experimentation and their own sexual preferences to the table. I think they supported me in sexual growth. However, I would say it was not always supportive of me becoming my authentic self, sometimes it was more selfish on their end. With friends I found I could talk about anything and everything. With partners there is a level of sexualizing that feels like not everything could always be discussed in fear of not being sexualized in the same way.

Therapy. Participants shared an openness to counselling as a source of positive support. Counsellors were readily seen as a source of support for sexual trauma and were more tenuously respected as having the potential to support individuals in developing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the sexual self, providing an environment for safer exploration and discovery. The idea of counsellors introducing sexuality as a topic was encouraged by participants, serving to break the ice of a potentially awkward subject and acting to make such discussion more comfortable. Therapists were respected as providing a safer place for sharing and exploration, outside of the judgment often experienced in the greater world. Tom shared:

> I would think a counsellor would be much easier to share this stuff with than a teacher or a parent or anyone else. Um, because it's always baked into the relationship that there is no judgement and there's just complete support in everything… I think a

counsellor would be an amazing, um, resource. Just inherently because there is that

um, that separation, you have a really close relationship with someone but there is

also a separation. So, I feel like a counsellor can share things that maybe would be

harder for a parent or a friend to share.

Participants agreed that this objective stance could serve to create a space where individuals

have the ability to experiment with identity, exploring themselves outside of the context of

usual sociocultural pressures and judgment. Counsellors were respected for providing an

element of accountability. Forest noted how:

I think the process of therapy would be like, under, helping to really understand what

my clear authentic desires are and being supported and held accountable to like get

them to happen, to find some way to express them. To find some way to express

them.

A number of suggestions were offered in terms of things counsellors may do to better

foster comfortable relationships that allow for a deeper accessing of sexuality in the

therapeutic context. For example, it was noted that therapists may better serve clients by

"becoming accessible" (Seraphina) and being an encouraging source of support through

fostering "strong relationship and good empathy" (Yellow). Several participants noted the

usefulness of therapists' introducing the topic of sexuality in session, with Tom noting, for

example, that when counsellors introduce sexuality as a topic of discussion, "it breaks the

glass; now it can be brought up if it needs to be brought up." Further, Tom, Parker, and Sarah

noted the importance for therapists to self-disclose to foster closer therapeutic relationships,

with Parker stating that "I feel like therapists should share more."

Education. Participants identified numerous sources of education that acted as

supports in helping them to better understand their sexual selves. Sex education in school,

mentors, groups and workshops open to sexual topics, and somatic sex educators were all

identified by participants as potential sources of learning. This vast variety of potential resources were seen as able to inform in a more objective way, for example in Yellow's discussion of school teachers as a source of learning and support:

> So, I think those lived experiences of teachers is really important. Parents too but parents have motives and teachers don't. So, I think that's a key difference umm because, well, I don't know – yea parents have to have input of course, but as soon as you say like, but parents they have – I think that parents trust less that their interests are going to be supported because they look out for themselves. But teachers are looking out for the group. So, there's less bias, I think. Less personal interest.

Participants identified the value of intensive workshops on topics of sexuality. In such contexts, people were able to create and experience new and different community, experiment with new aspects of self, and move beyond prescriptive scripts. This allowed for a greater exploration of self through experiencing and seeing modelled alternative ways of being. Sarah discussed her experience with a sex workshop while on vacation:

> To help with this is that, I've taken like odd workshops here and there and like, when I was in Costa Rica I took a workshop at a festival and people there are quite like, they're the types of people who I vibe with, that are like marrying this whole like spirituality and sex. And when I find communities that do that, I'm like, that's where I belong… And when I do find those workshops and I'm sitting and listening to this woman speak about all these ways that women can have orgasms and how like, how healthy it is for them, and it's coming from like a less, political, less like biological, less like honestly psychological but more like whole being, whole holistic, experience.

These experiences were seen to be of great value by participants. Similarly, Seraphina discussed how she:

… attended one of Midori's, um, Forte Femme, intensive weekends. And it was

wonderful in many, many ways…. And she accepts anyone into it, into the forte

femme, that identifies as femme in some way. Um, so whether that's, you know,

anyone who feels like they'd be good in that space. Um, so she's certainly not

prescriptive.

Contexts such as workshops help individuals in pushing beyond their current

conceptualisations of sexuality, providing a safer container for learning alternative sexual

scripts and ways of seeing and understanding sexuality. This broadening provided individuals

with new ways of imagining, allowing for an expansion of self in new and different

iterations.

Media. A wide variety of media sources were identified by participants as supporting

their developing sexual selves, providing a means of learning about new and different ways

of being. Books, movies, television, radio, and magazines were all identified by participants

as sources of information in a cultural context that may otherwise shy away from direct

discussion and teaching about sex. Several participants discussed how their introductions to

and learning about masturbation came from depictions and discussion of masturbation in

such sources:

I was watching *There's Something About Mary*, and I understood there was

masturbating before the, before the prom night. That was the first time I realized what

that actually was. I thought, "Oh I should try that, that's an interesting thought."

(Tom)

I read *The Happy Hooker* I want to say grade 7 or so, and that's how I learned the

word clitoris. I'm like, "what is that?" And it was actually then that I read it and she

was talking about masturbating and it's like, "Oh my God!" So, I actually read that

and then said, "well, I'm going to try that." And that's how I kind of discovered that, I

didn't know any of this stuff. You know, and this goes back, again, I'm reading Ann

Landers in the comics or in the paper and I came across a thing about masturbating.

And my mom was at the sink and I said, "mom, what's masturbating?" and my

brothers were in the house and she's all "stop", she's all, "I'll tell you later". So, I

knew I hit a gold mine here, cause I thought "ok, well this is something bad," right?

(Babs)

These media sources were respected as offering a separate dialogue capable of introducing

new vocabulary and ideas that did not exist in the normal lived context participants

experienced. This allowed for new learning that participants were able to enact in their own

lives. These sources of support provided a sense of resonance to participants, further

validating the self and giving rise to a more congruent sense of self. For example, Sarah

shared how:

There was this quote from a TV show from this mom, saying like, uh, "I can do

everything your father can do, and I can do it in high heels". And I'm like, "oh, yeah!

(laughs) That's exactly how I feel." (Sarah)

This validated Sarah's conception of her own feminist values, helping her better understand

that her own femininity could complement other aspects of her being. This helps in

understanding the media as a source of learning and support, helping individuals to find

models of alternative ways of being and understanding. The media can be seen to provide a

way of learning, exposing individuals to new and different ideas they do not otherwise come

across.

Connection

Connection was a clear theme present within interviews. Participants identified how

connection with the self was an integral and inherent way of making sexual decisions and

coming to know the sexual self. This introspective self involved elements of physiology and

visceral feeling, as well as more cerebral aspects of self-understanding. Sex also gave rise to a sense of connection beyond the self. Participants identified how sex brought them closer to partners in a process of interconnection, as well as to friends in being supported in sexual becoming. Participants also identified how spiritual aspects in sex played a role in their experience of sexual becoming in a process of transcendence. Learning about sex and sexuality, as well as having sex, helped participants develop a deeper sense of connection with themselves, others, and spirituality. Themes of connection with self, connection with others, and spiritual connection will be explored as they were discussed by participants.

       Connection with self. Coming into sexuality was respected by participants as a process of connecting with the self. Participants identified how this process began with their birth and the bodies they were born into. Participants identified other biological factors that could play a role in their sexuality, for example, participants referred to endorphins, sex as something within ones' DNA, and sex as a biologically felt need. Sexual decisions, such as when, how, or who to be sexual with, were often made by feeling what was right in a body-aware, visceral way. By remaining viscerally aware and listening to their bodies, participants could help alleviate anxiety and risk, creating safer spaces for sexual exploration and experiencing. Forest discussed how this sense of self knowledge can operate:

      … within an experience. So, there's on some level, a like settling in my nervous

      system, like I think it's my belly sometime of, like, getting really aligned. There's just

      like this knowing. It's like it's emotional, it's physical, it's like body chemical, which

      is like, yeah, I feel like I'm really connected to my, authentic nature.

Anna explored how this process changes over time, with biological underpinnings in birth with more cerebral layers as one develops greater self-awareness:

      My first initial thought of is like I was born into it. Born with a female parts in body.

      Um, and then the rest of it, is just um, I think it all becomes like a process of, you

know, processes of, you know, differentiation or individuation however, whichever
word or theory you want to come from…. Yeah, I think you come into it, in layers,
right? Yeah, biological base, you know component and level of it and then I think
afterwards it becomes, you know, as your awareness and your, and your sense of self
develops I think your sexuality develops from there.

Physically informed ways of knowing were generally preferred to more cerebral processes, as
explored by Sarah, who found that she enjoyed sex more if "it's really natural, like whatever
feels right…. So, if I'm in my head and I'm thinking about what I have to do, then it's not
right." This way of seeing was shared by Seraphina, who discussed how:

Yeah, I, I connect with um, a lot of things, uh, sometimes I look through, work
through things first, um, in a cognitive way, and sometimes first viscerally. Uh, it
depends. But um, I do usually, my tightest connection to a thing is often visceral.

Connection with others. Participants discussed how sexuality brought them closer to
others, helping to foster a sense of connection and intimacy. This sense of connection was
accepted as valuable in and of itself, as a potential endpoint to and reason to engage in sexual
encounters. This idea was respected by Parker, who explored how

Um, I don't know, I've never had to articulate this. Um, I feel like it, like there's
various different reasons that I want to. Um, I definitely experience sex as like a way
to increase intimacy in some situations. Or to express intimacy.

The power of intimate connection was respected for how it could help participants in
overcoming their own personal struggles. For example, Seraphina shared how in seeking sex:

… part of me was actually seeking, um, real emotional connection because I had
some, um, abandonment issues and attachment issues. So, at the same time as all of
the rest and trying to be a free spirit, there was also that seeking.

Tom took this further in talking about how through connecting with others through sex, he was better able to connect with himself, stating:

> I needed someone to care about me to care about myself. So yes. Very much so, sex can be very, very good at that. It can also go the opposite way very, very easily… if you get a negative experience.

In connecting with others, the individual remains vulnerable to that element of risk endemic in sexual space, accepting the potential for the experience of judgment, shame, rejection, and guilt. While sex can foster and allow for connection, it opens the individual to a level of a vulnerability and risk that can result in real harm.

Spiritual connection. Many participants identified ways in which sex operates to allow for connection with something greater, beyond both themselves and their partners. This allowed for greater levels of accessing self, the development of greater self-knowledge, and the experience of something transcendental. Spirituality was seen both as a means and an end in sexuality, with sex allowing participants a way to better access their sexual selves and providing a means by which to become more spiritually aware. Spiritual connection was seen to allow for cathartic processing and for increased safety and vulnerability, allowing for the development of safer containers for sexual experiencing. Forest revealed how meditation, masturbation, and spirituality have impacted his experience of his sexual self:

> So, I was like, oh if I have sex without ejaculating then my meditation is way better. The more I, the more sexual engagement I have without orgasming, it like changes my experience in meditation and like how I experience myself. To a level where I felt like more energy and more vitality like more mental acuteness and I found it really attractive. So that's one aspect of the type of sex I have. Um, yeah, it is different and has been different and really informed a lot of my spiritual connection.

Sarah explored how these spiritual components can allow for the creation of greater intimacy:

Um, it's kind of like when you know that you're kind of on the same vibration. Like

you can feel each other and that like feeling of electricity in yourself is the same in the

other person. And, and, you listen for the cues and the feelings and you just, it's just

like a delicate dance and you don't have to think about it. It's, honestly, it's like, good

sex is one of the most spiritual experiences of my life. So, I really, yeah, I really

respect that - that intimacy that you can share with someone.

Anna discussed how spiritual connection could allow for a different experiencing of sex,

beyond the confines of a procreative script:

through understanding yourself and then that all kind of show up in who you have sex

with and how you have sex with and where your boundaries are and how healthy that

is and what the purpose of that is, whether it's just procreation, whether it's for an

emotional connection, whether it's for an intellectual connection, whether it's for

spiritual connection. And I think people who are more self-developed or have done

more of that process of individuation um, can have a, it can have a more spiritual and

transcendental um, experience of sex, and I think that can be, comes in the

Kamasutra, and like all those Indian kind of traditions that have a, like a spiritual

component to them.

Discussion

The way in which one comes to know their sexual self seems to be mitigated through

five key factors: barriers, vulnerability, experience, supports, and connection. Here, I will

explore how these key factors relate to one another in the process of sexual becoming,

building connections to the greater social framework in which we exist while noting

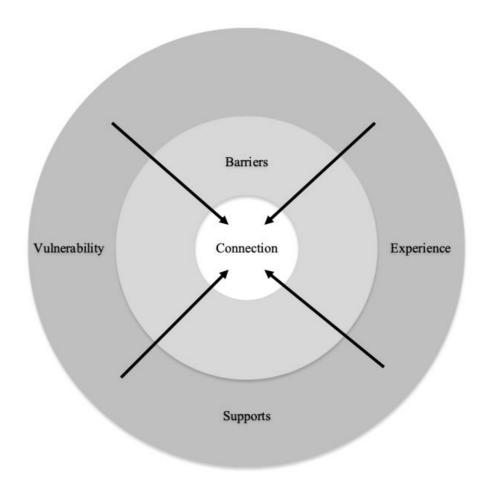limitations endemic to and implications of this project.

This process aligns with Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002) observation that "sexuality

conceals itself from itself beneath a mask of generality, and continually tries to escape from

the tension and drama which it sets up" (p. 194). Thus, while I attempt to elucidate this

process, it may be understood to be the very nature of sexuality itself to be obfuscated,

concealed, and obscured. The process of interviewing and discussing sexuality with

participants was fraught with a sense of cerebral alienation as represented by a lack of

confidence in and resistance to fixed identities present throughout interviews. Participants

instead appealed to visceral and spiritual knowledges, helping to relegate sexuality to a

category of its own beyond cogent comprehension. It thus seems that sexualities operate

through ways of knowing that resist verbalising, as though sexuality itself does not want to be

pinned down or fixed.

Interrelationships Between Key Themes: The Process of Sexual Becoming

Vulnerability, experience, and supports play a key role in enabling the individual to

access connection, allowing the individual to overcome those barriers of fear, shame,

judgment, and guilt that collude to manufacture disconnection, dislocation, and confusion in

the process of sexual becoming. This process is not one of completion, meaning that these

core aspects remain relevant throughout life as one continues to grow, change, and develop in

their sexual interests and inclinations. This aligns with and affirms Foucault's (1976/1990)

understanding of sexuality as integral to one's development of interpretive coherence, and

that in developing a sense of sexual self, one is able to access lucidity in a process of

individuation and differentiation. These interrelationships are depicted in Figure 1, after

which they are individually explored and explicated for their role in this interrelationship.

Figure 1. The Process of Sexual Becoming

In the contemporary western social context, individuals are born into a world wherein

barriers to sexuality are endemic, giving rise to sexual shame, guilt, fear, and judgment. Any

number of forces – such as parents, the media, religion, social pressures, and the perception

of sexual risk – help to ensure the learning and reinforcement of sexual negativity. This social

context provides a panopticon bringing about self-policing of the sexual self, in line with a

Foucauldian understanding that "we live in a society where evaluation or normalizing

judgment has replaced the judiciary or torture as the primary mechanism of social control"

(Epston & White, 1990, p. 24). People are left scared to embark on a journey of open

discovery when it comes to their sexuality, knowing that the potential social costs of such

exploration could be life-altering. In discouraging a process of such discovery, individuals

are held back from moving beyond, surpassing, and transcending what already exists. Instead, individuals limit behaviour to established norms, keeping sexual options confined and constrained within narrow, socially accepted sexual scripts (Barker, 2011). Social opprobrium triumphs in the battle for one's sexual authenticity, fluency, and fluidity.

Before one can confront barriers to sexuality, the individual needs to experience a sense of vulnerable openness to change. Vulnerability - arrived at through comfort, safety, and trust - acts as a necessary precondition to experience. It is from a place of vulnerability that one is able to begin questioning sexuality's association with shame, guilt, fear, and judgment. Thus, vulnerability may be seen to foster the shift from sex negative to sex positive ways of seeing and being. Vulnerability allows the individual to feel safe in exploring the self and experiencing risk, taking steps to confront and overcome those established barriers to sex. Vulnerability allows for the acceptance of sexuality while providing a safer container for sexual experiencing.

From a place of vulnerability, individuals are able to venture into sexual experiencing. Vulnerability provides strength, courage, and an open acceptance from which the individual can engage their interest in sexuality. This allows individuals to entertain the experience of sex – through curiosity, experimentation, exploration, and direct experiencing of sexualities. Experience can thus be seen as that place in which individuals directly confront and overcome barriers to sexuality, having completed the prerequisite work in accepting their sexualities as part of becoming vulnerable. Experience acts as an experiential mechanism that allows individuals to directly confront aspects of sexual negativity.

Supports are integral in helping individuals access vulnerability and experience. Thus, supports may be understood to help mediate the harms brought on by barriers to sexuality. Support may come from a number of sources, such as the internet, friends, partners, therapists, education, and the media. These sources offer an external and more objective

resource in navigating the process of sexual becoming. Supports can provide advice, knowledge, information, and their own experience, helping individuals feel better about and become more confident in their own development. Thus, supports may act as an encouraging influence, helping to create a safer space for sexual becoming. This can help not only directly inform the individual about sex and sexuality but also to broaden conceptions about what is possible, expanding any narrow scripts individuals have been exposed to. Equally, supports act as an insulating factor contributing to a sense of resiliency in the face of barriers to sexuality. Through informing and sharing experiences, supports help to validate the individual and further expose them to new and expanded sexual scripts.

Connection may be seen as the endpoint of this experience, acting as the result of and motivation to discover the sexual self. This process is one of learning and engagement, leading to a deepening in connection. This occurs despite barriers to sexuality but also because of such barriers, as these pique a curiosity in sexualities prompting a process of further exploration. Individuals respect the joy of sex while retaining awareness of attendant risk, accepting the power sexual connectedness can provide in the personal, social, and spiritual realms. The process of sexual becoming may thus be understood to be one of connection – with the self, with others, and with the spiritual realm.

In coming to better know the self the individual is better able to find a sense of meaning in a more existential sense. One is able to map out, explore, discover, and land upon who they see themselves to be, giving rise to a sense of grounded connection from a more developed space of self-awareness. In particular, vulnerability represents individuals finding a safer place of self-connection, with sexual experience helping individuals to better comprehend who they are in a more tangible and concrete way. For example, such experiencing allows individuals to develop an increased knowledge of what they enjoy or don't enjoy in sex and self-pleasure, what they identify as attractive or sexual, or how they

care to identify or present. Equally, individuals connect with themselves as they come to respect and listen to their bodies, with sexuality enjoying access to visceral knowledges. Such self-knowledge gives rise to further agency, ability, and confidence to engage in this process, prompting the individual to further participate in a process of discovery, challenging those underlying assumptions so often finding their roots in dominant discourses of shame, guilt, judgement, and a heightened perception of risk associated with sex. This can be seen to be a process of finding ways to navigate dislocation and disconnection as one locates and connects with their sexualities.

Equally, in engaging the process of sexual becoming, the individual is better able to bond and differently access and connect with others in their life. Part of this connection occurs through sex itself, between partners, as they develop bonds of attachment and intimacy. Such connection surpasses such sex reductionism, however, extending to a greater social framework of supports in sexuality, from friends to therapists as well as greater society through the internet and media, in line with Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002) observation of the inherent and endless "interfusion between sexuality and existence" (p. 196). Sexuality is thus infused in our ways of being and interacting, while gaining greater knowledge and understanding of one's own sexuality involves interacting with and relating to others.

Such engagement provides individuals with a sense of transcendent connection, providing a spiritual element to this process. In coming to know the self in such a profound way, in overcoming barriers, and allowing for a position of vulnerability, individuals may well perceive and experience transcendent connectedness. These elements of self and these ways of experiencing represent the depths of the annals of life, putting people in touch with that which is profound, important, and all-encompassing. This contrasts with Sartre's (1943/1992) suggestion that "the average man, through mental sluggishness and desire to conform, can conceive of no other goal for his desire than ejaculation" (p. 385). Instead,

people recognize volition in purposive engagement with sex, acknowledging the option to choose sex that allows for levels of higher experiencing and connection – whether they happen to engage with sex in this way or not. This association of sex with spirituality speaks to the ironically elevated status of sex in our sociocultural context, something that has potential to be deep, enlightening, and life altering, while simultaneously being associated with shame, risk, guilt, and judgment.

Beyond these themes

These findings speak to the never-ending nature of the process of sexual becoming. People recognize that they may well never know their sexual selves as they continuously engage in the process of becoming. In this view, individuals are not somehow constrained to a singular way of being but rather respect that they can continue to question, alter, change, and grow in those directions that they care to and in those ways that fit them. This is in line with Pearce's (2014) observation that by understanding sexualities as a continuous process of becoming, a greater comfort and authenticity in sex is possible, a way of seeing that perhaps finds root in those existential ideas well explicated by de Beauvoir's (1949/2010) observation that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 330).

While Lady Gaga (2011) suggests that people are *Born This Way*, this study's findings suggest that many individuals may find equal resonance with the voice of Rae Spoon (2018), who proposes that people *Do Whatever The Heck You Want* (track 3), recognising choice, rather than deterministic reality, in navigating questions such as "should I be a man or a woman?" (track 3) or "should I date non-binary?" (track 3), or with The Spook School (2016), who observe that "you are not a computer, you are complex and undefined, so why let yourself be limited to binary desires?" (Side A) and call on us to "let it be complicated and hard to understand" (Side A). It seems that individuals have less attachment to a scientifically based, biological aetiology of identity, rather creating room for a post-modern social

construction of self, where identifiers, far from acting as simple descriptors of experience which might serve to limit, confine, or constrain the self, are skillfully deployed by individuals in their navigation of a politically inimical world (Whisman, 1996). Participants recognized sexuality to be the current pull of proclivities and curiosities in an ever-changing landscape of an ever-evolving sexual self.

These findings are in line with du Plock's (2014a) understanding that sexuality identities themselves may not feel like choices, and Whisman's (1996) observation that individuals may feel as though core aspects of self are beyond their control. Individuals are content living in an area of greyness, where sexuality may feel as though it operates in and of itself, seemingly located outside of personal agency and cognitive awareness. People are satisfied to live with desires and drives outside of their perceived control and are happy to discover and explore their sexual selves as their life context allows, where sexuality may conceal "itself from itself beneath a mask of generality" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 194), known more through visceral and spiritual experiencing than deliberate, existential, cognitive processing.

Recommendations for Counselling Practice

These findings imply a number of suggestions for counselling practice, not least in the infused and open discussion of existential sexualities in the therapeutic context. This illustrates how therapists may do well to introduce discussion of sexualities with their patients, not least because of those dominant discourses of shame that may otherwise prevent such discussion from taking place. Participants also identified how self-disclosure may be helpful in fostering therapeutic relationships in this area, perhaps pointing to the need for cautious and deliberate use of personal sharing by therapists as they support their patients in the process of sexual becoming. By remaining open, safe, willing, and knowledgeable about sexualities and their discussion, counselling professionals may find themselves yet better

positioned to offer support to those they work with as they journey and take steps in becoming the selves that they care to. By understanding that discussion of existential sexualities endemically lies within purview of the counselling professional, therapists may be better able to become educated and informed in those ways that may best meet their patients' needs – that is, by listening and honouring the lived experiences of clients outside of dominant discourses and understandings of sexualities and their development.

Limitations

This study used a small sample size of ten participants, most of whom identified as heterosexual and women, limiting the applicability of findings. This is equally true of the lack of ethnic diversity amongst participants, who largely identified as white, while the use of a descriptive phenomenological approach means that these results are not generalizable. Participants were not directly questioned about negative experiences of sex and sexualities, an area likely to impact an individual's process of sexual becoming. Equally, questions required a level of retrospection, indicating that a level of recall bias may have been involved. This results in the identified process of sexual becoming offering a useful heuristic in helping to better comprehend sexualities, rather than providing a universally experienced, normative process.

Delimitations

A number of delimitations helped in narrowing the scope of this research. This study considered participants in Calgary, Alberta, Canada for pragmatic reasons. Existential and phenomenological philosophies were chosen to inform and frame this research process. Only participants 18 years or older were considered, relegating this study to the arena of research on adults.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research helps in identifying a number of areas that may benefit from further consideration and research. Importantly, findings draw attention to the key importance of shame, guilt, and judgment in the process of sexual becoming, and further research may well consider ways in which these influences may otherwise contribute to lived experience. Such research may draw on understanding the potential value of, for example, sexual shame and possible positive impacts such lived experience may give rise to (Irvine, 2009). Greater understanding of the social functions of such factors thus seems warranted to help in expanding such conceptions and offering alternative ways of understanding these mechanisms and their varied functions. Further research may also focus on the connection gained through sexualities, especially transcendent connection. More research looking into spirituality in sex may help in providing understanding into how such experiences are learned and achieved. Finally, broader research on the lived experience of attraction follows from this project, exploring and drawing attention to aspects of the lived experiences of sexual sexism, racism, classism, ableism, ageism, lookism, elitism, etc., not least to help in gaining a better sense of how such factors contribute to the existential process of sexual becoming.

Closing

This research has explored the ways in which the discovery of the sexual self is infused with the individual's project of being, giving rise to greater voice and understanding of the project of existential sexualities. Individuals have been seen to access vulnerability, experience, and supports as they overcome barriers of fear, shame, judgment, and guilt in order to access a sense of deeper connection with self, others, and the transcendent. These findings speak to an endless process of sexual becoming where individuals, contrary to dominant social messaging, recognize that they are not confined to a singular way of being as they engage in a continuous process of deepening connection. Individuals feel free to explore their selves and those curiosities that fascinate them as they participate in a process of growth

and change, with sexuality often experienced more through visceral and spiritual mechanisms than cognitive processes. Such considerations retain relevance for the ways counselling professionals conduct their work, drawing attention to the importance of being informed about and ready to engage topics of existential sexualities with their clients.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Interviews followed an unstructured interview process, which involved asking participants

the following 7 research questions:

How did you come to know who you are sexually?

What informs your sexual self and the type(s) of sex you have?

How do you decide when, how, and who to be sexual with?
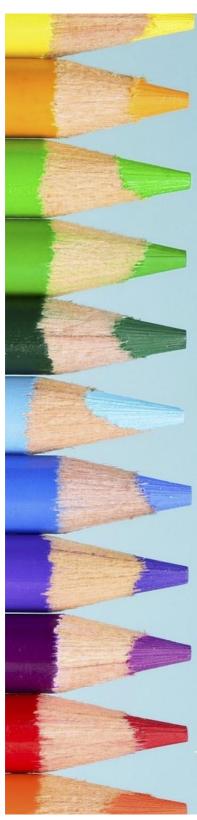
How did you come into sexual being?

How do you know your real, authentic sex/ualities?

How were you supported by others in your process of sexual becoming?

How might you be best supported in coming to understand your authentic sexual self?

Appendix B

Recruitment Notice