TRANSCENDING THE 'GROTESQUE' ILLUMINATION OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

L. MARIE DAMGAARD
Bachelor of Arts, **University of Lethbridge, 2012**

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

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

Faculty of Education
University of Lethbridge
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, CANADA

© L. Marie Damgaard, 2019

TRANSCENDING THE 'GROTESQUE' ILLUMINATION OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

L. MARIE DAMGAARD

Date of Defence: September 20, 2019

Dr. P. Kellett Thesis Supervisor	Assistant Professor	Ph.D.
Dr. H. Rodrigues Thesis Examination Committee Member	Professor	Ph.D.
Dr. T. Luft Thesis Examination Committee Member	Assistant Professor	Ph.D.
Dr. T. Skuce External Examiner Brandon University Brandon, MB	Assistant Professor	Ph.D.
Dr. E. Piji Chair, Thesis Examination Committee	Assistant Professor	Ph.D.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Mikka, who saw

me begin my university education and shepherded

me through the entire process

ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the scholarship of women's sexuality by utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, with feminist, Tantric nondual underpinnings to explore a group of co-researcher women's understanding of their self-defined 'grotesque' sexual experiences. Furthermore, the analysis of their interviews sought to discover the meanings and resulting transformations that these women have undertaken in their experience of sexuality, self, and beyond, which they ascribe to these 'grotesque' sexual experiences. Analysis and interpretation of the transcripts resulted in the emergence of several subthemes. The subthemes fell into three main themes, including, Theme A: *Patriarchy as a Sculptor of the 'Grotesque'*, Theme B: *Denying Authentic Self*, and Theme C: *Becoming Transformed Through Transgression.* Ultimately, the findings of this research study are significant in that they give value to women's experience, while simultaneously exploring the meaning and understanding that these co-researchers acquired from reflecting on these experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

… Life's a bitch, you've got to go out and kick ass…

- Maya Angelou cited by Robert Andrews, The Columbia Dictionary of Quotes (1993)

I want to thank the women who graciously volunteered to be interviewed as co-researchers for honouring me with the opportunity to hear their stories. I am grateful for their continual willingness to be in vulnerability, to share their personal understanding of how 'grotesque' experiences have shaped their *Being* in the world. I also want to thank all the other women who approached me after various presentations or discussions on this topic for sharing with me a spectrum of their own sexual experiences. Thank you for including comments of breaking through the barriers pertaining to the socially constructed world, and the possibilities of transcendent sexual understandings. Your courage and openness to share these deeply personal experiences, and the connection between spirituality, sexuality, and gender, have been some of the most meaningful and rich discussions I have ever had. These exchanges have changed my outlook and have illustrated the power of true healing in Being alongside women, while sharing in the energy of vulnerability, a process which continues to humble me.

I have been supported and encouraged throughout the process of completing this thesis by many individuals, all of whom I deeply appreciate. I must thank my supervisor Peter for taking me on and being incredibly flexible during this process. I am grateful for your ongoing encouragement to examine some of the darker and more 'grotesque' challenges faced by women in their sexual journey. Your guidance enabled me to take advantage of the opportunity to honour my lifelong passion of exploring various aspects

of female sexuality through a hermeneutic phenomenological, with feminist, Tantric nondual research lens. There may never be another opportunity to immerse myself in material with such a relevant application to my interests, or to explore these interests so thoroughly; thank you for letting me grow and learn under your supervision. Thank you for making all the time you did for me during this project. Our connection was immediate, and our frank discussions regarding the intersectoral inquiry of gender and sexuality reminded me regularly why I decided to study this specific topic. Your sincerity in exploring and understanding the Nondual realm of existence and how it relates to gender, sexuality, and feminism facilitated clarity within my own process and in mapping out these complex, yet simple constructs. I am honored by your willingness to teach me; thank you for your openness in hearing me out and discussing these ideas. Through our connection, it became quite clear how problematic language can be in terms of reinforcing structure, hierarchy, and duality. These discussions reunited my initial curiosity about the Nondual realm and the transformational opportunity on a day-to-day basis, in the sense of recognizing that *everything* is impermanent, and that it is the grasping onto what was, which causes suffering.

Hillary: our discussions on Tantra and our exploration of Eastern philosophies within Western contexts has provided me with rich reflections on Tantric philosophy, and the recognition that sex is simply a sliver of what it represents. I often walked away from our conversations with admiration for your elegant and spontaneous approach to interweaving Western and Eastern approaches. Thank you for your time and willingness to discuss how a Tantric Nondual approach could be beneficial and empowering for women exploring their sexuality.

Toupey: thank you for your willingness to be a part of this journey with me, on such short notice. Your knowledge and curiosity have been deeply influential in the final work of this research. Your approachability and versatility, routinely encouraged me to explore the depths and meanings of experience in women's lives, along with the importance and impact of hermeneutic phenomenological research. I believe this reignited an internal flame of passion around exploring the importance of these topics, and my own process of transformation, growth, and awareness.

To CF: who was by my side over the past four years. Through your openness, loving kindness, and care, I have been able to draw awareness to my own attachment and character strategies in this world. You taught me to be curious, to be gentle, and to be vulnerable in ways I have never thought were possible. You showed me that I could work through my 'grotesque' experiences, through love and compassion for those experiences and for me as a Being. I have learned to really lean into discomfort and to put my best effort forth with no preference or attachment to outcome. And, when things fall apart, I have learned to be with the emotions and other levels, with tenderness and care. This reminded me of the continual beauty of the play of existence, no matter how it unfolds, and the love I have for humans. You reminded me that as humans we are bands of energy, and that healing is available to all. Through these experiences with you, I feel reconnected to a playful piece of myself that has been missing until very recently. Thank you.

To Mari Lee: thank you for your unconditional support through this project and many others over the past five years. You have been one of the most influential people in my life and career. I feel privileged to have worked under you in a clinical capacity. Your

tenacity, high energy, and feminist awareness were a breath of fresh air; you are a strong leader and make no apologies for it. I deeply appreciate your capacity to be your embodied and genuine self. You challenged me to keep working on this thesis and to dive into my creative energy with no shame. Thank you for believing in me and activating growth with empowerment.

To LF: your compassionate and inquisitive nature was often the glue holding me together while I was writing, in the last few months of this work. Your support through gentle reminders about basic writing style and organization of ideas often helped me piece together missing links. Your time and feedback were invaluable, and thank you for making yourself as available as often as you did.

To my Mother, Penny, thank you for joining me on this journey to health and exploration. Our relationship continues to blossom into something I never would have imagined was possible. While I know, I was never an easy daughter to raise, I feel we have both come to an understanding and acknowledgment of both what once was and what is now. Your willingness to embrace your own self-growth has been inspiring and motivational. Thank you for always believing in me and pushing me to engage in things that will foster growth for me, my clients, and my relationships. Thank you for showing up and supporting me when I needed it the most. The last couple months of writing this thesis have been the most challenging, and you were available in a loving capacity the whole way. Without this, I'm not sure I would have made it through.

To my father, Niels, thank you for always being available to discuss the medical implications of this work on women's sexuality. Your passion for medicine and health is one that has been passed down to me and is a core piece of this work. Your gentle

guidance and challenges, based on the medical model, were incredibly pertinent for digging deeply into the many layers of this work, and making a cohesive argument for integrating this type of orientation, in hopes of creating a restorative standard to which all physicians ought to be open. I owe my tenacity and passion for creating an inclusive and emboldening model to you. Your willingness to understand women's sexual issues from a phenomenological and experiential perspective ought to be the standard to which physicians aspire. I am also in awe of your determination, in improving your own life, personally and professionally. Thank you for teaching me that all humans are equal and deserve open-minded care.

To my partner: your patience was always available and influential in my capacity to finish this thesis off. You have shown up in ways that I have never experienced relationally; you have taught me how to stay playful during stressful times and to drop into the intuitive space, where this passion was first kindled. I look forward to having more fun, once this is completed.

Finally, to the present women in my life, thank you for the continual invitations to embrace femininity and vulnerability on their many levels. I am also thankful to family and friends who have supported me on this path of creating and exploring; your continual support encouraged me to sit and write and helped me to make it through this process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION iii

ABSTRACT iv

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 1

A Brief Reflection on Women's Sexuality 1

Representations of Women's Sexuality in the Counselling Literature 3

Why Use a Tantric Nondual Lens? 5

The Purpose and Significance of This Study 6

The Value of a Qualitative Approach 7

Research Questions 8

The Implicated Co-Researcher - Statement of Reflexivity 9

The Intertwined Nature of the Academic and Personal Paths 9

Outline of Thesis 16

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW 17

Overview 17

Chapter Layout 18

Part I: Contextualizing Women and Sexuality 20

Sexual Health 20

Sexuality 21

Powerful Institutionalized Social Forces' Impact on Women's Sexual Development 21
Religious Foundations in Western Society and Impact on Women's Sexuality 22
Feminist Theory, Gender Theory 23
Gender and Identity Formation 24
Part II: Social Construction of 'Grotesque' 26
Origin of 'Grotesque' and The Applicability to Women's Sexuality 27
Social Construction of Female Sexuality: Experiencing the Self as Undesirable 29
Body Image Issues 30
Dysfunctional Belief Systems, Shame, and Sexual Satisfaction 31
Glancing at Pornography as Sexual Media 33
Orgasm 36
Part III: Female Centered Sexual Experience 38
Moving from Goal-Oriented Sex to Pleasure Oriented Sex 39
The Casual Sex Dilemma – Hook-Up Culture, Hooking-Up, and The Double Standard 41
BDSM Exploration and Relational Negotiation 44
Feminist Pornography 47
Part IV: The Power of Spirit, Sexuality & Meaning-Making 48
Current Events: The Time is Right to Take a Different Approach to Sexual Therapy 49
Transpersonal Psychology and The Formation of the Ego 50
Women's Contributions to Transpersonal Psychology 55

Spirituality and Sexuality is an Entryway by Creating Meaning 57
Other Reflections on Spirit and Sexuality – Transcendent Transpersonal Sexual Experiences 60
Tantra Nonduality as a Sex Positive Bridge for Women's Sexual Experiences 62
What Is Tantra? 63
Hindu Tantra & Sexuality 64
Left-Handed and Right-Handed Tantra Path 66
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 68
Identification of the Research Problem 68
Purpose of the Study and Significance of Research 70
Research Questions 72
Blended Philosophical Framework for the Methodological Choice 72
Phenomenological Research 73
Hermeneutic Phenomenology 74
Women-Centred Approach via Feminist Research 76
Transpersonal Considerations for this Research 77
The Research Design 81
Research Procedure 82
Selection of Co-Researchers 82
Recruitment of Co-Researchers 82
Sample Population and Sample Size 83
Data 84
Interviews as Data Collection 84

Analysis 86
Ethical Considerations for Research Proposal 88
CHAPTER FOUR: MEETING THE CO-RESEARCHERS AND EXPLORING THEIR VOICES VIA THEMATIC ANALYSIS 92
Meeting the Co-Researchers 92
Jax – Honouring Needs Without Judgement 92
Sarah – Christian and Kinky 93
KT – Kinky and Highly Sexual 94
Barb – Feminist and Exploring Her Sexuality 95
Stef – A Wave of the Ocean 97
TC – Feminist Advocate & Healing 97
Outline of Themes 98
Theme A: Patriarchy as A Sculptor of the 'Grotesque' 100
Classic vs. 'Grotesque' Body 100
Living with the Media 105
Good Girls Don't – Gender Expectations 110
Learning the Rules of Engagement – Sexual Education 115
Carrying the Feminine Burden – Religion 117
Formative Experiences 121
Childhood Experiences 121
Adolescent Experiences 124
Final Reflections on Theme A 127
Theme B: Denying Authentic Self 128

Deny, Deny, Deny…. 129

The Making of a Slut – Changing of Relational Connection. 132

The Dark Pockets of Shame – Scars of the 'Grotesque'. 135

Experiences of Coping. 139

Confronting Contradictions. 142

Cyclical Nature of Learning and Awareness. 147

Theme C: Becoming Transformed Through Transgression. 150

To Hell with Permission. 151

Delightful Discoveries. 154

Sexual Transgressions as the Path to Freedom. 156

Embracing the Erotic Self. 161

Blazing Their Own Trail. 165

Liberating Revelations. 168

Final Reflections on the Themes. 173

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION. 174

Introduction. 174

Discussion of Findings. 175

Revisiting Experiences of Grotesque Sexuality. 175

Revisiting Early Understandings and Experiences. 178

Revisiting How Experiences with the 'Grotesque' Shape Sense of Self. 185

Female Development. 185

Tantric Views of Self with Sexuality. 192

Strengths and Limitations of this Study. 200

Implications for Clinicians Working with Women and Sexuality 203
Moving from a Bio-Psycho-Social Approach to an Integrative Framework 206
Important Elements for an Integrative Framework for Women's Sexuality 210
Contemporary Therapeutic Model for Exploring Women's Sexuality 212
Ogden's Integrative Model for Working with Women's Sexuality 213
Implications for Mental Health & the Addictions Counselling Field 214
Revisiting the Implicated and Reflexive Researcher 218
Suggestions for Future Research 222
Conclusion 223
REFERENCES 225
APPENDICES 236
A: Instituitionalised Social Forces Influencing Femininity And Sexuality 236
B: Figure 2: Hand Drawn Tantric Exploration Of The 'Grotesque' For Learning & Transcendence 237
C: Figure 2: Computer Generated Tantric Exploration Of The 'Grotesque' For Learning & Transcendence 238
D: Recruitment Poster 239
E: Consent Form 240
F: Interview Questions 243
G: Understanding The 'Groteque' [Co-Researchers' Definitions Of The Grotesque] 244
H: Co-Researchers' Reflections On Pornography 249
I: Further Description's Of The Co-Researcher's Sexual Interests And Preferences. 252
J: Co-Researcher's Further Descriptions Of Their Non-Dual Practice & Experience 255

K: Table Of Themes & Sub-Themes 261

L: Further Family Of Origin Discussion And Developent Of The Sexual Self 262

M: More Shared Examples Of ‘Grotesque’ 264

N: Ogden’s 4D Dimensional Wheel Of Sexual Experience 266

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

> *Sexual Energy is connected to the core of all women's energies. Because it has been so regularly used as a tool for social control - proscribed, propagandized, rationalized, institutionalized - sex has political ramifications even at its most intimately personal.*
>
> - Dr. G. Ogden (2007)

I undertook this study to contribute to the scholarship of women's sexuality by utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological lens, with feminist, Tantric nondual underpinnings. I sought to explore women's understanding of their self-defined 'grotesque' sexual experiences. Furthermore, the analysis seeks to discover the common and evocative meanings and resulting transformations that these women have undertaken in their experience of sexuality, self, and beyond, which they ascribe to these 'grotesque' sexual experiences.

A Brief Reflection on Women's Sexuality

> *Part of the problem we face as human beings… [in order to] access our sexual potential, is the way our ideas of sex have been (consciously or unconsciously) distorted or warped by the matrix of our Western culture or religious traditions. To reclaim our sexual integrity, we must be willing to face the layers of our sexual domestication and be dedicated to honestly examining our negative sexual beliefs and baggage.*
>
> - Dr. Tara Long, Integral and Transpersonal Sexology (2013)

Sexuality and an understanding of sexual experiences are both essential to making sense of our world as human beings (Maslow, 2012; G. Ogden, 2007, 2013; Wade, 2004; World Health Organization, 2018). This understanding plays an instrumental role in our sense of identity, worth, and well-being (Byers & Rehman, 2014). It is also well documented that repression of sexual exploration may result in addiction and mental

health issues, especially for women (G. Ogden, 2007, 2013). Despite the central role that sexuality plays in women's lives, the exploration and enactment of this sexuality is akin to walking a tightrope. Women experience many barriers to the pursuit of their own sexual wholeness and sexual satisfaction (Impett, Muise, & Peregrine, 2014) and may position some of their sexual experiences in the realm of the 'grotesque' (Bahtkin, 1984) because they fall outside these socially-prescribed boundaries of what is thought an appropriate performance of female sexuality. This socially-constructed intersection of gender and sexuality has positioned male sexuality and satisfaction as central in the discourse on human sexuality, thereby othering the experience of women as a secondary concern (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2014). Guided by the cultural representations of feminine sexuality (representations which are always situated within socio-historical time and space), women are often left feeling inadequate and abnormal (G. Ogden, 2018; Nagoski, 2015). Part of the feelings of inadequacy and abnormality are informed by socially constructed dualistic gendered expectations placed on women by institutionalized patriarchal structures in society. Ann Wilson Schaef (1992) discusses this view as "*The White Male System*". Schaef (1992) argues that this system permeates through Western culture, and places people into binary categories; each of the categories and ways of understanding the world have been defined, shaped, and constructed by limited understanding of the world and collective patterns of social construction around things such as gender (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2014), and religion (Schaef, 1992). These patterns determine what is normal or abnormal, what is acceptable sexuality, and what is not, especially for women.

Consideration of these socially constructed limitations sheds light on the experiences that impact women's perceptions of, and consequently their abilities to embrace their natural sexual selves. As a result, women often report feeling disconnected from their sexual needs; many women have reported an internal struggle between what their sexual desires are, as compared with what society deems to be respectable for women to desire (Blumberg, 2003; Diamond, 2008).

Dominant discourses related to female sexuality frequently fail to adequately describe and incorporate women's lived experiences of sexual practices, and the meanings that women ascribe to these practices (Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2013). Many feminists argue that the notion of female sexuality is viewed through a patriarchal lens – often derogatory to women's bodies – which portrays affirmative female sexual desire as submissive and which further views female sexual empowerment as dependent on the other, such as their partner, males, or patriarchal outlooks (Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2013; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). These discourses construct the boundaries of what is considered feminine; therefore, any representation which lies outside of these constructs may be deemed sexually unattractive or unfeminine, or even socially aberrant (Schippers, 2007). All of these could be considered a representation of the 'grotesque'.

Representations of Women's Sexuality in the Counselling Literature

> *Real liberation will make the woman authentically a woman, not an imitation of a man.*
>
> - OSHO, The Book of Women: Celebrating the Female Spirit (2014)

What is disconcerting and highly relevant to the counselling process is that women internalize these shameful and distorted constructs, thereby limiting themselves

from experiencing a fullness through healthy sexuality, which also places them at risk for altered mental health and addictive issues (Brotto, Krychman, & Jacobson, 2008; G. Ogden, 2013). In dealing with the resultant never-ending pit of shame (Brown, 2010), some women engage in addictive behaviors to cope (Kasl, 1990), while others feel anxious and depressed (G. Ogden, 2013). By internalizing these social constructions, women may also feel inadequate because they are unable to maintain the body images that are portrayed as desirable (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Furthermore, by internalizing these judgements, women may be rendered incapable of reaching an ideal orgasm (Gilliard, 2009) and may report that they are self-conscious about their sexual performance (Gilliard, 2009; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Finally, women often report that they feel shame if they do not fit into the rigid social constructions that have reinforced the binaries of respectable female sexuality (Diamond, 2008).

Clearly, the socially-constructed nature of female sexuality is highly applicable to the work of mental health and addictions professionals, as sexual desire is one of the most common problems reported in therapy (G. Ogden, 2008). As this is such an important aspect of women's lives, clinicians need to be well informed on the subject and open to working with women around these sensitive issues to engage in successful therapy. Clinicians also need to be aware of their own internalized perceptions and assumptions surrounding female sexuality, sexual power relations, and how those attitudes differ from the reality of women's lived experiences. Therefore, therapists must be mindful of the importance of completing their own self-inquiry around this sensitive topic of sexuality, and how therapists' own counter-transference issues may harm clients (Katehakis, 2016).

While most classic therapeutic approaches have been biological-psychological-social (bio-psycho-social) in their orientation to working with female sexuality (Rosenbaum, 2013), feminist perspectives have attempted to challenge dominant social constructions of female sexuality by rejecting passivity as a defining characteristic, and have instead emphasized personal freedom, choice, and empowerment (Herlihy & Corey, 2015). This writing focuses on using feminist viewpoints to challenge the social realms of working with women's sexuality and sexual issues. Women's sexual satisfaction and sexual needs are often perceived as inherently body-focused (Weaver & Byers, 2006; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012), and little clinical study has been given to women as a means to satisfy women (Brotto, 2018; G. Ogden, 2018). However, a recent advancement in psychotherapy for issues in female sexuality has been integrating mindfulness into the possibilities of expanding women's sexual satisfaction with themselves and others (Brotto et al., 2008). While this approach is a positive step towards breaking through the older models, the lack of phenomenological orientation to the needs of women (including the spiritual and energetic component of female sexual understanding and treatment) is still limiting these therapeutic models (G. Ogden, 2013; Wade, 2004, 2013).

Why Use a Tantric Nondual Lens?

> *Tantra is about realizing who we are beyond our identifications, and then living that realization in everyday life. While it's fabulous to imagine that this realization is going to happen through a sexual experience so intense that it takes you all the way to God – what is more true is that realization requires moment-to-moment practice.*
>
> - Shakti Malan, Science & NonDuality Blog: Tantric Fantasies and Realities (2017)

This thesis argues that there are significant benefits to exploring female sexuality from a Tantric nondual perspective. A Tantric nondual approach is a non-judgmental

approach to understanding women's sexual experiences, and is open to all interpretation(s), along with the meanings made and stemming transformations, that women create from their experiences (G. Ogden, 2018; Lysebeth, 2001; Long, 2013). This approach recognizes that the transgression of socially constructed ideas of gender, and acceptable versus unacceptable sexual practice, is a necessary project in women's pursuit of wholeness and self-acceptance. Social structures and power-dynamics shape the internalized sense of self. Some understand this to be the "ego", or the struggle between one's internal desires and the conflicting demands of the real world. As this thesis will demonstrate, societal demands that women control their internal desires can be overbearing; therefore the ego can serve as a trap for women's understanding of themselves and their worth (Schaef, 1992). It is essential that women confront these social forces in the process of overcoming the restrictions that the ego places on their experience. By exploring aspects of experience that fall outside the realm of acceptable femininity and sexuality, women can break through the generated egoic shell representations that might be limiting their awareness and engage with their true selves as interconnected *beings* unrestrained by these social constructions (Almaas, 2000)

The Purpose and Significance of This Study

> *Germaine Greer wrote that "women will be free when they have a positive definition of female sexuality."*
>
> - Germaine Greer cited in Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women (1991)

The purpose of this study is to explore women's understanding of their self-defined 'grotesque' sexual experiences by utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological lens

with feminist, Tantric nondual underpinnings. Furthermore, the analysis sought to discover the ultimate meanings and resulting transformations that these women have undertaken in their experience of sexuality and self, which they ascribe to these 'grotesque' sexual experiences. This study contributes to our understanding and discussion of female sexuality, and attempts to understand how women can better integrate their lived experiences and self in the face of social and cultural opposition to them as women in general, and their sexuality in particular.

The Value of a Qualitative Approach

> *The complexities of validating qualitative research need not to be due to a weakness of qualitative methods, but on the contrary, may rest upon their extraordinary power to reflect and conceptualize the nature of the phenomenon investigated, to capture the complexity of the social reality. The validation of qualitative research becomes intrinsically linked to the development of a theory of social reality.*
>
> – Steiner Kvale, To Validate is to Question (1989)

As evidenced in the literature review, until the mid-2000s, much of the research surrounding female sexuality has been completed by men. In addition, much of this scholarship is quantitative and relies on essentially gender-loaded norms, and heterosexist constructs. Furthermore, much of this research focuses on white middle-class people not experiencing disability or marginalization. Finally, the research focuses on the goal-oriented standard of orgasm as a standard of satisfaction (Nagoski, 2015; G. Ogden, 2013). Very few studies have embraced phenomenological inquiry as a methodological approach to write about women's sexual experiences, issues, and questions.

Considering the limited scope of the existing research in this area, this thesis aims to explore women's sexuality by utilizing qualitative research, and adopting a

Hermeneutic Phenomenological approach. Use of a qualitative method allows women to have a voice about their own sexual experiences and encourages them to self-define their experience without the structural hegemony of externally-imposed expectations about the female sexual experience (Hesse-Biber, 2013). As individuals who have been oppressed by patriarchal power, it is important for women to articulate their experience of sexuality in their own words, without censorship and without having to articulate these experiences through positivist frameworks which recreate existing heterosexist and patriarchal situated socially-constructed norms (G. Ogden, 2013; Schaef, 1992).

Daniluk (1993) argues that limiting women to a physiologically-based discussion of their orgasmic experiences marginalizes women in discussions of sexuality, as this limitation intensifies the stress around female sexuality. Expanding on women's lived experiences helps to broaden women's own understanding of female sexuality and pleasure for women, who have been perhaps unable to enjoy their sexual experiences for themselves. Such a focus might also impact other women who have similar experiences. This work hopes to not only broaden understanding of female sexual experiences, and the meanings ascribed to these, but also to disrupt the discourse that seeks to marginalize women's sexuality and subsume it within a discussion of men's experience. This is particularly important as phenomenological and qualitative research of women's exploration of sexuality that includes a spiritual component is very limited (Daniluk, 1993; Long, 2013; G. Ogden, 2007, 2013; Wade, 2004, 2013).

Research Questions

> *Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.*

- William Bruce Cameron, Informal Sociology: A Casual Introduction to Sociological Thinking (1963)

The following research questions will be explored in the current study:

1. How might we understand the experience of sexuality that may be considered 'grotesque' or against conventional expectations, by self or by others?
2. How might we understand how women's experiences with the 'grotesque' shape their sense of self?

The Implicated Co-Researcher - Statement of Reflexivity

Various experiences have led to my exploration of *Transcending the 'Grotesque' Illumination of Female Sexuality*; I include here both academic and personal experiences, which, upon reflection, have been equally significant and essential to deepening my understanding of the impact of 'grotesque' experiences, and how those experiences have affected my ever-evolving transformational path into fullness and acceptance of myself as a female sexual being.

The Intertwined Nature of the Academic and Personal Paths

> *Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.*
>
> – Brene Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection (2010)

Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to participate in many interdisciplinary academic courses, a few of which stand out in my mind when reflecting on my journey. Early on in my undergraduate degree, I delved into Women and Gender Studies courses. These courses encouraged me to look at power dynamics, disenfranchisement of women,

and many of the changing issues that both women and men face as societal demands continue to be fluid, depending on current popular culture fads. These courses also challenged me to reflect on my own gender and cultural conditioning, as well as how I personally see this affecting the world around me, and my existence within that world.

Many of these Feminist-based classes also confronted the realities of my lived experience of gender and proposed that these conditioned states directly impact women's sense of sexuality, sensuality, and their sense of how to navigate the world. This field of scholarship revealed the complexities of living as a woman in a social context dominated by patriarchal perspectives, which position women's experience as secondary to those of men. I came to the realization that women's experience and bodies are frequently allocated to the realm of the '*grotesque,'* negative or unfavourable unless they conform to the goals of patriarchy. This information brought new awareness to my own experiences and understandings as a female sexual being; this not only included how the female body was perceived by others, or by myself, but also intruded into the performance of sexual acts, understanding of sexual experiences, and the meanings ascribed to (my) sexuality by egocentric behaviour and thinking.

The significant learning I took away from these courses was that men and women are both profoundly affected on multiple levels by these patriarchal, goal-oriented understandings of sex and sexuality. However, the focus in the current thesis is on women's experiences, because women often face pressures that surpass those experienced by men. Women occupy an *othered* and marginalized position in any patriarchal society, which shapes the combination of socialization and physical reality to which they are exposed. Consequently, women literally and figuratively internalize and

embody societal norms surrounding gender and sexuality in a way that men do not, since they also face conflicting pressures to both be sexual, while not being be *too* sexual.

One of the main theories I was introduced to was Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity (1990). This theory has strongly informed my understanding and approach to the study of women's sexuality. While Butler's theory is controversial in some spheres (Namaste, 2005), Butler (1990) argues that individuals construct their gender through performance, while also constructing gender in a wider social and cultural context. Butler (1990) acknowledges that these constructs are impermanent and always changing; however, the collective construction is what is deemed to be the standard for either gender (Connell, 1995).

Another theory playing a key role in the conceptualization of this study was Bahtkin (1984) carnivalesque theory of social construction and the body. This theory was the main content of a sociology course I took as part of my undergraduate degree. I became intrigued with this theory whilst completing some undergraduate research work on so-called non-normative sexual arousal patterns, which are defined as sexual arousal patterns that do not fit into the cultural representation of what is deemed to be sexually arousing. I learned how culture dominates our conceptualization of our bodies and constructs the harsh reality of what is understood to be a '*grotesque*', or unacceptable body, versus what is deemed an acceptable body, also known as a *Classical body*. When I considered the sociological presentation of theory through the lenses of Psychology and Feminism, I was intrigued by the paradoxical perspectives on female bodies, since women's bodies are at one moment presented as desirable and the source of life, while at the same time, body processes such as menstruation and engagement in sexual activities

are positioned in the realm of the ‘grotesque’ and sin (Bahtkin, 1984; Schaef, 1992). This deep understanding of what is constructed as ‘grotesque’ has been with me ever since and has strongly informed my conceptualization of sexuality and gender.

As my undergraduate career progressed, I realized, through completing my Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, that my interest in understanding individuals beyond an evolutionary perspective had grown. I felt compelled to deepen my understanding of what happens for individuals, at a basic human level, through the many layers of their experiences. Opportunely, this curiosity led me into a Graduate Counselling Psychology program, which focused on theory and interventions from various psychological understandings and the many levels of development and growth. There I was exposed to Transpersonal Psychology as a foundation for the study of human growth and development. My inner Feminist and my inner academic were intrigued by Transpersonal Psychology, as it encompasses and builds upon an interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies, in pursuit of the transformational possibility of a holistic understanding of human potential (Hatelius, Rothe & Roy, 2013). Transpersonal understandings offer an explorative approach to health, human development, and self-growth that recognizes wholeness. I was inspired by the Transpersonal perspective, which suggests through understanding our own energy and our way of being in the world, transformational opportunities may be presented and revealed; later, I was introduced to a branch of Transpersonal Psychology: Non-Dual Psychology.

During this time, I decided to enter therapy to explore some of my own self-defined ‘grotesque’ experiences, and to evaluate how they impacted my experience in the world. I learned early in the transformational process the importance of doing my own

work, continuing to be curious about my own belief systems and my own privileges, as well as delving into the impact of these beliefs and privileges on my existence. I worked to be curious with my own coping strategies, and to challenge myself by asking, "What is my investment in not receiving what existence is trying to inform me of?" Asking the question was the easy part; however, receiving the answers and staying curious with the receptivity to the answers was not easy at all. What emerged from my own exploration was an awareness that sexuality can be a path for transgressing social constraints, and that it can be transformational in the sense of recognizing that *everything* is impermanent, including identification with defense mechanisms, and living through inauthentic ways of being for self-survival. It is the grasping onto that causes suffering, especially when that grasping functions through the Ego (Almaas, 2000).

As I continued training as a clinician and being mentored through a Non-Dual perspective, I found that much of my clinical training had prescribed only a rigid and dualistic understanding of women's issues and what – for women – comprised a healthy sexuality. Historically, women who were considered to have unhealthy sexualities were essentially labelled as Co-Dependent, Nymphomaniacs, or as having a Sexual Desire Disorder (G. Ogden, 2013). This act of labeling caused me to wonder if vital aspects were being missed by the dominant discourses. This attitude of inflexibility pushed me to attend a variety of sexuality-focused workshops and venues with a greater diversity of women, resulting in deeper considerations of intersectionality, backgrounds, sexual orientations, arousal templates, and women's experiences with intimacy, sex, and the world in general through a phenomenological lens.

It became clear to me, through a Non-Dual paradigm, that there was opportunity to remove the labels being externally prescribed onto women's experiences, and to be in touch with the momentum of energy from women's inner True Nature by moving through these barriers and constraints. From a Non-Dual perspective, pushing, exploring, and transgressing boundaries provides a transformational opportunity to embark on the exploration of what a healthy female sexuality *really* looks and feels like throughout a woman's lifespan. This perspective also enables us to be open to honoring the identification of a healthy female sexuality, though this might look different for different people. Such exploration could perhaps expose the embodied female sexuality without cultural encumbrances or labels; furthermore, we might be able to find multiple sexualities embodied as well. In my current explorations, I find myself engaged by Tantra nonduality, a branch of the Nondual paradigm. Later in the paper, I will explore this in greater depth as sex is simply a sliver of what Tantra represents.

Along with these academic inspirations, this was also a very exciting time for me personally. While I moved through some of my own experiences, it became very clear to me how entwined many women's lived experiences are with being in a relationship. As a result, I became in touch with this deep emerging energetic component of curiosity and familiar playful innocence that had been tucked away for a majority of my adult life, which emerged during this transformational journey. From a Tantric nondual perspective, this is all part of the play of the Divine. The time spent in each of these relationships has reunited me with the very essence of the path, and has fostered resiliency within myself (Tzu & Damgaard, 2015).

During this time of personal and academic growth, I had the honour to teach a few courses at Red Crow College (on Blackfoot Territory). I connected with one particular Elder who reminded me to learn to be open to the heart that is ours and embrace what is around, such as the Earth, the animals, and the spirits. These teachings reminded me of the Tantric nondual perspective and the idea that our True Nature is at the heart of what is driving us. It was an impactful reminder of the beauty and interconnectedness of existence—that there really is no separation amongst any of us, or between *anything.* Such a perspective shifted my orientation and curiosity, I was able to generate meaning from these experiences through the continuum states of consciousness.

Further reading on the topic of consciousness led me to Dr. Daniel Siegel's work which, through a neurobiological orientation, focuses on the importance of consciousness in the organization of experience, awareness, and integration; this specific model satisfied my left lobe as Siegel simplifies the complex process of awareness in the "Triangle of Human Experience" (mind, relationship, and environment) (Siegel, 2016; 2019). In a recent speaking engagement, he focused on some of the universal awareness found in the findings of the "Illumination of Nature of Awareness Itself" or the byproduct of integrating this consciousness (2019). The language individuals used to describe the experiences from their practice are similar to what is found in some spiritual, Nondual, and Tantric literature, which included describing a paradox of emptiness while feeling full; expansive, belonging, energy flowing, God, love, and feeling more connected to outside of themselves. While this thesis is not focused on the scientific neurobiological exploration of women's issues, researchers have summarized the importance of neuroscience, somatic psychology, and interpersonal neurobiology, which supports the

potential in this reality when reflecting on issues for spiritualty, sexuality, and awareness (G. Ogden, 2018; P. Ogden, et. al., 2006; Siegel, 2016, 2019)

I have found myself in a place of gratitude for these experiences. This research process has turned out to be part of the pathway of exploration and revelation in the areas of ignorance around my own conditioned rejection of femininity and sexuality. This research has further influenced me to reflect, deconstruct, and re-integrate parts of my experiences, my energy, and myself, which were no longer embodied. It has also kindled my curiosity around how experiences, whether sexual in nature or not, manifest as 'grotesque' for women. Exploring the meanings ascribed to these experiences presents an opportunity for transformation, whether it is undertaken as an intentional choice or not.

Outline of Thesis

Chapter One of this thesis provides a brief overview of the study purpose and an introduction to the implicated researcher. Chapter Two discusses structural barriers placed on women, the impacts on their Being, female sexual experiences, and some issues women navigate in their sexuality and counselling considerations. Chapter Three describes research methodology, philosophical considerations of the research, and the steps taken to conduct interviews and synthesize data. Chapter Four analyzes the lived experience of five co-researchers, their self-defined female sexual 'grotesque' experiences, and how breaking through difficulties can be a transformational and life changing experience. Chapter Five discusses the implications of the research findings, and reflections for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

> *We're raising women to be sexually dysfunctional, with all the 'no' messages we're giving them about diseases and shame and fear. And then as soon as they're eighteen they're supposed to be sexual rock stars, multiorgasmic and totally uninhibited. It doesn't make any sense. None of these things we do in our society prepares women for that.*
>
> - Robin Milhausen cited in Emily Nagoski, Come as You Are (2015)

Overview

Dominant discourses related to female sexuality often fail to adequately describe and incorporate women's lived experience of sexual practice and understanding (Blumberg, 2003; Daniluk, 1993; Nagoski, 2015; G. Ogden, 2008). Many feminists argue that female sexuality is viewed through a patriarchal lens that is often derogatory to women's bodies, portrays affirmative female sexual desire as submissive, and views female sexual empowerment as dependent on the other (Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2013; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Due to the influence on perception created by the patriarchal social construction of the feminine body, many women struggle to develop a healthy sense of sexuality, and to fully embrace their inner female sexual desire (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). They are further constrained by the pressure to reach an ideal orgasm (Gilliard, 2009) and the shame and guilt resulting from identifying with a feminine role (Brown, 2010), leaving them unable to embrace what they are truly experiencing in sexual moments (Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2013).

In Western pop culture, there are contradictory messages about what is classically sexually desirable for women, versus what is 'grotesque' or taboo. Women can feel trapped in the dance of comparing what is socially acceptable/unacceptable to their own sexual needs; these cultural messages may make women feel pressured to perform sexual

acts not in alignment with their own sexuality, or not in accordance with their own sexual needs. There is a predominance of messages informing women that their natural selves and desires are not good enough and are 'grotesque'. While this is not the case for all women, there seems to be an over-riding perception that women *should* feel good about themselves if they are sexually acceptable to their partner or society (Nagoski, 2015).

The aforementioned are but a few common issues discussed in the literature surrounding women's sexuality and explored in psychotherapy. Therefore, as clinicians, it is important to be open to a continuum of lived sexual experience and practices in therapy. This enables women to challenge and overcome the shame they have internalized when their own experiences, arousal patterns (Nagoski, 2015), and sexuality do not fall in line with patriarchal constructions. To have flexibility in the clinical space, clinicians ought to have completed their own personal work and have awareness of their patriarchal conditioning and biases pertaining to women and sexuality.

Chapter Layout

The first part of the literature review discusses some structural considerations that are important for understanding the issues and research surrounding women's sexuality. In Part I: *Contextualizing Women and Sexuality*, definitions of sexual health and sexuality from the World Health Organization (WHO) are provided. Next, I briefly introduce powerful institutionalized social forces, such as religion's impact on female sexuality. A discussion of Feminist Theory (specifically Gender Theory) follows, detailing the multitude of impacts on women's understanding of their sexuality, in order to support women's phenomenological discussion of 'grotesque' experiences and the personal meaning ascribed to these experiences. This leads to a discussion of how gender

intertwines with identity formation, which in some psychological orientations is ultimately understood as the Ego or Egoic Identity (Almaas, 2000; Rowan, 2005).

The second section of the literature review, Part II: *Social Construction of 'Grotesque'*, discusses various areas in which the deeply interwoven conditions of gender and sexuality impact women. While it can be argued that these two specific intersectoral considerations affect all areas of women's lived experience, this thesis focusses on the direct impact on women's sexuality. This section discusses the social construction of the 'grotesque' in women's sexuality and how these very societal biases form an embedded sense of self, or pattern of self, via the Ego (Almaas, 2000). I further discuss how patriarchal conditions construct women's Egoic identity, which engages with the wider world and the dilemma women experience when their preferences and experiences do not match these constructed expectations.

The third section of the literature review, Part III: *Female Centered Sexual Experience*, discusses the progression of goal-oriented sexuality and the impact on girls' and women's healthy sexual development. Moving away from goal oriented sexuality towards pleasure oriented sexuality allows for sexual exploration to occur outside of the patriarchal bounds of heteronormative female sexual expression (G. Ogden, 2018). By exploring diverse sexual contexts (via differing relational dynamics of casual sex, BDSM negotiation, and feminist pornography) women could have a greater chance to draw awareness to their own sexual authenticity (Fous, 2018; G. Ogden, 2018; Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014; Orenstein, 2016; Vrangalova, 2018; Wentland & Reissing, 2014).

Finally, Part IV: *The Power of Spirit, Sexuality, and Meaning-Making*, discusses current socio-political events encouraging women and sex therapists to expand their

perspectives when working and reflecting with women's sexual issues. This section offers a brief description of the psycho-spiritual orientation of Transpersonal Psychology, women's contributions to this orientation by emphasizing the flexibility of meaning-making in spiritual, sexual, and transcendent experiences. This section is particularly relevant to the development of the "ego" that some of the co-researchers discuss, and the negative influence of not living an authentic sexual life as a woman. However, under the umbrella of this psycho-spiritual orientation, through a Tantric nondual perspective, women may find a way to navigate the external pressures and their internal needs.

Part I: Contextualizing Women and Sexuality

This section shares descriptions of the on-going discussion of sexual health and sexuality, from the World Health Organization (WHO). WHO notes the importance of being aware of these definitions from a gendered perspective, as there are many moving parts when it comes to individuals being able to become aware, honour, and embrace their sexuality. The descriptions below are useful when discussing the literature considerations for women and sexuality.

Sexual Health

According to the current working definition, sexual health is:

> …a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected, and fulfilled. *(WHO, 2006a*)

Sexual health cannot be defined or understood without a broad consideration of sexuality, which underlies important sexual health behaviours and outcomes.

Sexuality

The working definition of sexuality is:

> …a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles, and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious, and spiritual factors. *(WHO, 2006a*)

These definitions are used by most sex-positive therapists when exploring different aspects of sexuality with their clients (Kleinplatz, 2010). Both descriptions are imperative to understand, as girls' and women's sexual education, sexual rights, and sexual liberties are often taught in contexts not taking WHO definitions into consideration.

Powerful Institutionalized Social Forces' Impact on Women's Sexual Development

> *Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.*
>
> - Helen Schucman cited in Helen Schucman & William Thetford, A Course in Miracles (1976)

Powerful institutionalized social forces create context for the social construction of normative versus 'grotesque' sexualities among women. The social forces explored below include religious foundations and gender theory considerations, which connect directly with gender and identity formation and influence the social construction of the 'grotesque' for women. Religious foundations and patriarchal systems influence women's sense of self, and therefore are naturally interwoven into their sense of sexuality. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss multiple religions and doctrine towards women; therefore, this section serves as a general discussion of the literature documenting the

impacts of religion on women's sexuality. An analysis of the social construction of the 'grotesque', and how this relates to the Egoic construction of self follows. It is important to note again that each of these topics could warrant a substantial paper alone; however, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to do so.

Religious Foundations in Western Society and Impact on Women's Sexuality

> *For many women, the connection between sexuality and spirituality is frequently experienced in the context of their past or current religious beliefs–beliefs that privilege intercourse and male pleasure while ignoring much of what is rich and important in women's sexual experiencing–resulting in feelings of shame, guilt and disconnection from a vital source of their power and pleasure.*
>
> - Judith Daniluk & Nicole Brown, Traditional Religious Doctrine and Women's Sexuality (2008)

Numerous women's sexuality authors discuss the impact of religion on women's sense of sexual self (Daniluk, 1993, 1998; Daniluk & Browne, 2008; Long, 2013; Nagoski, 2015; G. Ogden, 2008, 2013, 2018; Wade, 2004, 2013). These authors discuss that Western Cosmology is heavily influenced by patriarchal constructs that deem women's sexuality as secondary to men's, dependent on morals, and engaged in only for reproductive function. The impact of religion on women's sexuality has compelled many to live in dualistic social conditioning, causing women to choose a side of the sexual binary trap that Western religion has forced upon them. Daniluk (1998) sums up many of the binary traps that women in her study mentioned they are forced to navigate below:

> Being based upon or interpreted through patriarchal lenses, the common elements related to women's sexuality in the religious teachings mentioned above include: a dualistic separation between mind and body, spirit and sexuality; an emphasis on intercourse and procreation in circumscribing the definition and purpose of sex; valuing and treasuring of virginity; insistence on sexual exclusivity between married partners; sanctions against sex outside of marriage; and admonishment of masturbation, sexual fantasies, and homosexuality. (p. 3)

The accumulation of the totality of these expectations has some devastating consequences through adolescence and into adulthood regarding sexual exploration. Religion creates a structure in society, through appropriation and recreation of patriarchal ideas in practice and teachings (Daniluk & Browne, 2008). These findings are consistent with Ogden's research discussing how all women must work through impacts of religion on their sexuality (2008, 2013, 2018). Daniluk (1998) work also supports the notion that women must consistently grapple with religious pressures on their sexuality, whether they are part of a religious community or not. Therefore, religion's impact on women creates a context which contributes to the Egoic structure in individuals (Almaas, 2000), especially women, as their value is often determined by others and they spend time trying to stay on the 'right' or 'proper' side of the binary trap. It is important to note the emotional toll women experience when attempting to be perfect and maintain all these external standards; the debilitating deep shame felt when they realize the impossibility of perfectionism (Brown, 2010), and personal and/or societal judgement if their preferences do not match religious outlooks. These binaries continue to intertwine with gender expectations and therefore impact women's sense of identity and self.

Feminist Theory, Gender Theory

Feminist Theory brings to light how power relations in society are enacted in the context of gender, and how this in turn intersects with other socially constructed identities like race or social class, in the construction of what is deemed acceptable sexuality for women. These power relations are present in all aspects of women's lives, including their sexual lives, to enforce their subordination to men in society, and within their intimate relationships. Therefore, Feminist Theory presents an important theoretical lens to

explore the sexual experiences of women and the meaning they ascribe to these experiences, since both are highly influenced by their socialization within the context of these social forces. Gender identities are socially constructed and performative in nature (Butler, 1988, 1990) and exist in power relations. Gender is part of the socially constructed realm of what is and is not acceptable. Below is a brief description of gender.

Gender is a term that continues to expand to be more inclusive of an individual's expression of their *Being* in the world. While it is out of the scope of this paper to examine the complexities of individuals who deviate from dualistic gender identity, such as queer, trans(queer), or intersex gender identities, it is important to note the cis-hetero-normative-binary and assumptions encroached on every individual, that are often reinforced in everyday living. While I am unable to delve deeply into the realities of what these individuals experience on a daily basis, I recognize that these individuals suffer additionally, due to not fitting into the societally prescribed binary boxes of gender.

It is often assumed that individuals will accept their gender at birth based on birth sex and external sexual characteristics. The term *assigned gender* is used to describe the dichotomy of observable biological characteristics at birth or pre-birth, such as genitals. Research now identifies that gender is not simply about observable characteristics, but is about the cultural socialization of individuals, especially in Western culture (Richards & Barker, 2013). A relatively new term, *cisgender,* is used to describe individuals who align with the gender they were assigned at birth (Richards & Barker, 2013). There is a strong relationship between gender, identity formation, and sexuality; essentially how sexuality is enacted is linked to socially prescribed gender roles, especially for women.

Gender and Identity Formation

> *Who we take ourselves to be, as determined by the set of ideas and images that define us, is very far from the unconditioned reality that deeply realized human beings have come to recognize as our true nature, who we truly are.*
>
> - A.H. Almaas, The Point of Existence (2001)

In a hetero-normative, patriarchal society, value is assigned to men's sexual pleasure, while women's pleasure is marginalized, except when that pleasure is considered a secondary marker of men's success in the performance of hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Prioritizing female sexual pleasure over male pleasure runs counter to patriarchal power structures because these social performances disrupt patriarchal power relations between men and women (Butler, 1990; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007); therefore, they are assigned to the realm of pariah femininities (Schippers, 2007). The element of what is acceptable femininity and pariah femininity is often linked to sexuality because sexuality is viewed positively in the construction of masculinity and negatively when viewed in terms of femininity (except in terms of the production of children). If women embrace their sexuality, they often face high criticism and shame (Bergner, 2013; Blumberg, 2003; Brown, 2010); alternately, if it is perceived that women are withholding sex and sexual pleasure from men, such a perception also positions their (lack of) performativity as a pariah femininity (Schippers, 2007). These impossible expectations and perceptions contribute to women's identity formation. Please see Appendix A for an illustration of gendered experiences and religious foundations, which leave little room for non-grotesque female sexuality and greatly impact sexuality and femininity.

While these structures are illusionary, the internalization of them enforces an Egoic identity of expectations, belief systems (Almaas, 2000), and feelings of shame and

disempowerment (Brown, 2010; Daniluk & Browne, 2008; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018). The experience of internalization creates an automatic devaluation of women's personal sense of sexuality and identity in comparison to men's (Lerner, 1988; Schippers, 2007). Identity can be defined as the "…social categories in which an individual claims membership as well as the personal meaning associated with those categories… [and in] psychological terms, relates to awareness of self, self-image, self-reflection, and self-esteem" (Shields, 2008, p. 301). These illusionary forces have drastic implications for women individually and collectively, as their natural orientation in the world is based on self and other (Surrey, 1991). Lerner (1988) argues that women have learned to participate in the depreciation of women as a whole, through institutions and by enacting what she labels as the "masochistic attitude" (p. 87). Because this is socially constructed and endorsed, it has implications for women's understanding of themselves and their sexual needs. It can force them into a binary trap: wondering if their preferences are deemed as sexually appropriate versus falling into a 'grotesque' understanding of their preferences and sense of sexuality. The following section expands on the social construction of 'grotesque' and the implications for women.

Part II: Social Construction of 'Grotesque'

> *We all have pain. We all have doubt and sadness and horrible things that have happened that shouldn't have, and when we cover them up and try to pretend that everything is okay, then our stories are forgotten, and our truths become lies. I tell the truth because I'm not afraid to. I tell the ugliness to show you the beauty. But there is so much ugliness still left.*
>
> - Margaret Cho cited in Susan Pelle, The "Grotesque" Pussy (2010)

This section briefly discusses the origin of 'grotesque', and its applicability to women and sexuality. Some of the ways women may find themselves trying to negotiate

and navigate the constraint of dualistic socially constructed restrictions for their sexuality are detailed. Many women describe these restrictions as leaving them feeling unsatisfied and shameful. This demonstrates the dependence of women's sexual development on external pressures, messages, and conditioning, and the importance of remaining aware of these constructs and influences on their sexual being.

Origin of 'Grotesque' and The Applicability to Women's Sexuality

> *[Women's sexuality is a] commercialized, one-dimensional, infinitely replicated, and frankly, unimaginative vision of sexiness, one that, when applied to women, can be reduced to two words: "fuckable and saleable."*
>
> - Dr. Peggy Orenstein, Girls & Sex (2016)

Mikhail Bakhtin's book, *In Rabelais and His World* (1984), utilizes the 'grotesque' versus classic body as a theoretical framework, which is beneficial context when exploring women's sexuality. The notion of the 'grotesque' is an invaluable concept that aids the enigmatic reminder that the human body interacts in the world – especially in terms of how the body performs (Butler, 1988, 1990), that the body is being merged with, and is a part of the world. Many individuals hold world views through the material world, yet there is the paradox that the female 'grotesque' body represents the dichotomy of life and death via the blending of birthing of life to dying (Bahtkin, 1984).

The 'grotesque' body, "… is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself and transgresses its own limits" (Bahtkin, 1984, p. 26). This open system is emphasized through other fundamental attributes of the 'grotesque' body such as exaggeration, excessiveness, and hyperbolism via, "…the parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out and meets the world" (Bahtkin, 1984, p.

26). Examples include fluids expelled from orifices and eating to excess. The body transgresses the hierarchy of social power through the protrusion, while recognizing the cyclical nature of processes, which are never finished, and celebrate the whole body (Bahtkin, 1984).

In contrast, Bakhtin describes the classic body as having a very different aesthetic perspective; the classic body is seen as clean, smooth, and finished in a closed system (Bahtkin, 1984), which matches the bounded Western female body expectation. The classic body is an artificial construction of the body as it does not emit fluids, remains constant, and does not transgress; and yet, the female body is linked with the open or naturalistic, animalistic body that is an unavoidable part of existing as a human being (Bahtkin, 1984). There is also, both in Bakhtin's theory and in cultural conceptions of the female body, an element of the connection between degeneration and regeneration, a blending of life through birth, and aspects of simultaneous physical death and deterioration (Bahtkin, 1984), and the struggling paradox. All of these (classic and grotesque) aspects are dissected, devalued, and fetishized, which pushes women to convert their body, identity, and sexuality, to fit inside what is not deemed 'grotesque'.

Due to the availability and accessibility of pornography on the Internet today, 'grotesque' female sexuality is fetishized by the pornography industry (Dines, 2010), though this aspect of female sexuality is not conventionally valued. An example of fetishized pornography, could be women having pubic hair. These aspects are suppressed in daily living; however, the 'grotesque' is an aspect of self that needs to be integrated as it mediates our experience and our mental and physical being in the world. By avoiding the 'grotesque' inherent in their body or rejecting their own experience of sexuality in

order to strive to be 'grotesque' in accordance with the current pornographic fad, women experience shame (Brown, 2010; Dines, 2010). They also are subject to darker pain, shame, and confliction surrounding their sexuality, especially in terms of their actual experiences (Brown, 2010; Orenstein, 2016). As a result, many women believe that something is wrong with them and how they express, suppress, and enact their sexuality. All these beliefs and emotions contribute to the construction of the "ego" (Almaas, 2000).

It is perplexing that women internalize these shameful and distorted constructions, which increase both mental health and addictive issues (Brotto et al., 2008; G. Ogden, 2013). Consequences of these internalized constructions include: women feeling inadequate because they are unable to maintain body images portrayed as desirable (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012); women rendered incapable of reaching an ideal orgasm (Gilliard, 2009); women feeling self-conscious about sexual performance (Gilliard, 2009; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012); women reporting a main component missing from their sexuality is the connectedness of spirituality (G. Ogden, 2013); and women reporting that social constructions reinforce dualistic realities of their sexuality. These experiences cause women to consistently report feeling dissatisfaction and shame with their sexual experiences, which often lead to mental health and addiction issues as a pursuit to feel whole (Firman & Gila, 1997; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018; Tzu, 2014a; Tzu & Damgaard, 2015).

Social Construction of Female Sexuality: Experiencing the Self as Undesirable

Brotto et al. (2012) cite various studies suggesting between 5.5% to 17.4% of women between 20 and 80 years of age are unsatisfied with their sexual lives. Women often report feeling disconnected from their sexual needs due to the social construction of

women's roles in society (Blumberg, 2003; Daniluk, 1993). Frequently, women who embrace their sexuality report that society "defines them in pejorative ways and that [society] has mores and belief systems that do not correspond to their own behaviors" (Blumberg, 2003, p. 148). Blumberg (2003) conducted semi-structured interviews with 44 women between the ages of 20 and 82, who self-identified as being highly sexual. Highly sexual is defined as the frequency of sexual acts and the importance of sexuality in these women's lives (Blumberg, 2003). Many women reported an internal struggle between what they sexually wanted versus what society deemed to be respectable.

Lisa Diamond (2008) completed a longitudinal study of 100 women and their sexual attitudes and beliefs over a decade. She discovered sexual fluidity, which is defined as: "a situation-dependent flexibility in women's sexual responsiveness" (Diamond, 2008, p. 7). Both studies offer an alternative to the societal norm of female sexuality, but also reiterate that, in Western cultures, women are damned if they do embrace their sexuality, and also damned if they do not (Blumberg, 2003; Diamond, 2008). Other studies focusing on female sexuality have examined the patriarchal views of women's body image issues and self-judgement towards sexuality (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005; Wiederman, 2001; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012).

Body Image Issues

> *The body as product, however, is not the same as the body as subject. Nor is learning to be sexually desirable the same as exploring your own desire: your wants, your needs, your capacity for joy, for passion, for intimacy, for ecstasy.*
>
> - Dr. Peggy Orenstein, Girls & Sex (2016)

Qualitative data shows that women's perception of their body image and their sexuality are connected (Schooler et al., 2005; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012).

Academics and feminists have long argued that the impact on women's sense of sexual worth and sexual appreciation is based on the observer's perspectives (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012), and is often seen through a patriarchal lens (Daniluk, 1993). Woertman and van den Brink (2012) completed a review of 57 studies on the association between female sexual desire and body image; their review showed that researchers have expanded their knowledge base through both quantitative and qualitative measures. From the qualitative studies, two significant and common themes emerged: 1) women are impacted by social constructions of sexuality, often in a detrimental manner, and 2) the way a woman feels toward her body and genitals impacts how often she wants to be sexual, as well as her level of enjoyment of the sexual experience (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). These dysfunctional thoughts appear to be central to the body shaming and guilt about wanting to be sexual, which contribute to women's sexual decision making and subsequent engagement, or lack thereof, in sexual activities (Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013; Nobre, Pinto-Gouveia, & xe, 2006).

Dysfunctional Belief Systems, Shame, and Sexual Satisfaction

> *We think by protecting ourselves from suffering we are being kind to ourselves. The truth is, we only become more fearful, more hardened, and more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. This separateness becomes like a prison for us, a prison that restricts us to our personal hopes and fears and to caring only for the people nearest to us. Curiously enough, if we primarily try to shield ourselves from discomfort, we suffer. Yet when we don't close off and we let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with all beings.*
>
> - Pema Chodren cited by Janina Fisher, Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors: Overcoming Internal Self-Alienation (2017)

A published study of 131 undergraduate students suggests that both young women and men hold the belief that women have a lower sense of sexual function and

satisfaction (Chang, Klein, & Gorzalka, 2013). This study concluded that women who believe women are less likely to be satisfied sexually, experience sexuality in a more negative way (Chang et al., 2013). These kinds of conventional beliefs impact how women are able to enjoy themselves sexually (Nobre et al., 2006; Petzanova, 2010; Snape, 2010) and often result in feeling shame. Shame is a life altering experience, as this intense and painful feeling often ties into individuals believing they failed, or have done something to cause them to be unworthy of connection, belonging, or love (Brown, 2010). Wiederman (2001) reports a similar finding: the more self-conscious a woman feels about her body, the lower her sexual self-esteem, which leads to dysfunctional beliefs about her sexuality and experience. Other studies confirm this phenomenon; Herbenick et al. (2011) conducted a study where 3800 women, their ages ranging from 18 to 60, were invited to rate their beliefs and feelings regarding their genitals. Women who had negative evaluations about their sexual experiences and genitals reported a lower appreciation for their sexuality, and less flexibility in terms of sexual experimentation (Herbenick et al., 2011). This body shame leaves women with less sexual self-esteem (Schooler et al., 2005), higher body dissatisfaction (Wiederman, 2001), and a more negative evaluation of their sexual experience. This clearly relates to not only how the body looks, but also how the body functions.

Nobre et al. (2006) also identified themes about shame and age-related body image issues concerning the female body; 160 females who completed the survey recognized that their dysfunctional beliefs had taken a toll on their sexuality. Further, a take-home survey completed by 199 undergraduate women, between the ages of 19 and 23 (Schooler et al., 2005) demonstrated one of the common themes reported in female

sexuality studies: women's shame associated with their 'grotesque' or undesirable bodily functions, such as menstruation (Daniluk, 1993; Schooler et al., 2005). Gilliard (2009) studied shame and the natural bodily function of female ejaculation and discovered that some women had little compassion for what they considered a 'grotesque' bodily function during sexual intercourse. Women who have negative beliefs about menstruation, menopause, and female ejaculation were shown to be unable to enjoy themselves sexually, and yet they also feared that their sexual life was over (Gilliard, 2009; Nobre et al., 2006).

Several studies have found a positive correlation between how comfortable a woman is with her body and how likely it is that she will engage in sexual activity on a regular basis and have an enjoyable experience (Chang et al., 2013; Nobre et al., 2006; Schooler et al., 2005; Wiederman, 2001). Yet, there are more sources of shame for women than their personal body image; some females reported guilt and shame associated with becoming aroused by pornographic images (Senn, 1993). This connection with female sexuality and shame is interesting in that the pornography industry has capitalized on the fetishizing of the 'grotesque' functions of the female body, which are otherwise derogatory in social construction (Dines, 2010).

Glancing at Pornography as Sexual Media

> *It was time to go beyond the usual conversations about the battle of the sexes, hookup culture, and the effects of Internet pornography to look more deeply at the assumptions we hold about sexuality and why we believe them to be true.*
>
> - Rachel Hills cited in Alex Katehakis and Tom Bliss, Mirror of Intimacy: Daily Reflections on Emotional and Erotic Intelligence (October 27, 2017)

The topic of pornography has roused a tremendous amount of controversy among Feminists. The conflict revolves around a lack of consensus regarding the effects of pornography on how women view their bodies, and pornographic portrayals of sexuality within Western society (McElroy, 1997; Petzanova, 2010; Senn, 1993; Snape, 2010). While it is out of the scope of this paper to delve into all the arguments surrounding pornography between the differing Feminist philosophies, it is necessary to discuss how pornography factors into discussions of social constructs impacting women's sexuality.

Radical Feminists consider pornography and popular culture as conveyors of the underlying ideology, which legitimizes violence against women, and validates their subordination. Supporting the Radical Feminist argument, Gary Brooks (1995) describes symptoms men exhibit towards women, from softcore pornography use, which is linked to what he describes as 'sexual on tap' culture. G. Brooks (1995) describes how men are voyeuristic with women, meaning they obsessively look at women, rather than interacting with them. Objectification of women, where women's bodies are rated by size and shape, is common. Another symptom is trophyism, where women's bodies are trophies, exactly as pornography portrays them. These in turn produce an inability for men to be truly intimate with themselves and women in a meaningful way. In other studies, women reported being bombarded with pornography in their daily lives and detested it; these women identified as Radical Feminists (McElroy, 1997). Dines (2010) argues that individuals need to take a Radical Feminist approach to counter the dominating pornography movement in patriarchal culture. Senn (1993) conducted a survey with 98 women who completed interview packages. The most supported Feminist interpretation

of pornographic materials in this study was in line with that of the Radical Feminist perspective.

Another set of women in Senn's (1993) study were described as being open-minded regarding pornography. These women had opposing views to others in the study as they felt that women were not portrayed as victims of violence or sexual exploitation. This argument supports a pro-sex Radical Feminist, who may argue that pornography benefits women politically and personally, as it allows women to experience safe sexual alternatives, and to satisfy a healthy sense of sexual curiosity (McElroy, 1997; Petzanova, 2010). Petzanova (2010) suggests that pornography can be used to help women embrace their bodies and sexuality. Through qualitative interviews, four women described their positive experiences with pornography and sexually explicit materials (Petzanova, 2010). Women who were more open to pornography use deemed themselves as more sexually liberal, and felt that pornography could be used as an educational tool (Petzanova, 2010).

Snape (2010) completed a narrative inquiry of ten women and found that women enjoyed using porn, but there were minimal spaces for discussion of their pleasurable use, as pornography use is seen as a male dominated activity, or as an uncivilized activity for women. While these women found positivity in the use of pornography, these studies concluded that there was a deep split within themselves, as they felt guilty and ashamed if they used or looked at pornography or sexual materials (Petzanova, 2010; Senn, 1993; Snape, 2010). These women felt the world was full of judgement in terms of them using this material to feel sexually empowered, especially in the eyes of other women (Petzanova, 2010; Snape, 2010). Women find it challenging to express support of pornography and sexual materials as part of their sexual routine (Petzanova, 2010; Snape,

2010). Even though the studies focused on how women's use of pornography enhanced and validated their sexual experiences, another theme that arose from the participants was that the material displayed in pornography often did not depict how sex was experienced in their real lives. Pornography was simply a tool used to help them reach sexual satisfaction and was not a reflection of reality (Petzanova, 2010; Senn, 1993; Snape, 2010).

Overall, women's experiences of sexual shame are not necessarily solely focused on the social construction of a desired body but can be internalized regarding the sexualized materials used to reach sexual satisfaction. Due to this internalization, another area in which women can feel the interjected presence of socially constructed expectations, is orgasm. What seems to be common amongst women is the tension between two oppositional social constructions: the pressure to reach orgasm and the acceptance of the 'grotesqueness' of the (their) female body.

Orgasm

> *Truly, at the peak of orgasm, we pierce through the illusion of fragmentation and separation and glimpse the unity and interconnectedness of all beings. And through the other—our partner—we fall in love with life.*
>
> - Margot Anand cited in Alex Katehakis and Tom Bliss, Mirror of Intimacy: Daily Reflections on Emotional and Erotic Intelligence (October 20, 2017)

A subjective study on the female orgasmic experience found that 93% of 30 women interviewed, ages ranging from 18 to 40, have experienced an orgasm (Sholty et al., 1984). Women reported that they had to make a conscious effort to reach any one or a combination of the six types of orgasms described in the study. A more recent study was completed in order to validate that there are six different types of female orgasms; 503

questionnaires were received back from young, undergraduate, single, heterosexual women (King, Belsky, Mah, & Binik, 2011). Other studies have been used to validate the occurrence of different types of orgasms and the continuum of intensity of female orgasms experienced; these corroborate that women can experience different types of orgasms with or without a partner (King et al., 2011).

Although women reported individual variations among their sexual orgasms, orgasms experienced with a partner were rated as being much more enjoyable versus masturbating alone (King et al., 2011). Herbenick et al. (2011) found that a woman who was more sexual with herself or a partner on a regular basis had a positive correlation with feeling confident about her genitals; as mentioned previously, this greatly impacts the frequency and level of enjoyment of sex for women. Gilliard (2009) completed a study with an open-ended questionnaire pertaining to women's experiences with female ejaculation. Female ejaculation refers to "expulsion of fluid from the urethra" during sexual arousal (Gilliard, 2009, p. 121). This phenomenological study offered an opportunity for these women's experiences to be heard and described from their points of view. Women who reported that they were aware of the ability to ejaculate would often feel sad and consciously resist orgasm due to fear of rejection and humiliation by their partner (Gilliard, 2009). In Daniluk (1993), women also described how their sexual shame was triggered when their partners did not respond positively to their ejaculation. Muise et al. (2013) also discussed that if negative beliefs were present, women would often prefer to get the sexual act over with as quickly as possible, versus enjoying 'getting it on'. If women were unable to physically orgasm, they felt like a burden to their partner, so they would fake an orgasm; this would usually result in a deeper negative

thought pattern, which affected their intimate bond with their partner, and impacted their thinking towards their own sexuality (Muise et al., 2013).

Daniluk (1993) argues that limiting women to a physiologically based discussion of their orgasmic experiences marginalizes women, as this intensifies the stress around female sexuality, and often forces women's symptoms to be tailored under a DSM label (2013). Daniluk (1993) completed a phenomenological study that provided women an opportunity to articulate their personal sexual experiences. She found that "performance-focused definitions of sexuality related specifically to sexual functioning and orgasm, seemed inadequate and limiting" (p. 55). This statement allows flexibility in understanding how women feel sexually and is supported by Diamond's (2008) work, as women's sexuality is fluid and changes throughout the lifespan. Quantitative studies can be limiting as they only measure female satisfaction through methods involving empirical measurement, which only account for physical orgasm (Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). Yet, some quantitative studies have shown that integrating mindfulness increases the likelihood of reaching orgasm for women who have been diagnosed with dysfunctional sexual disorders (Brotto et al., 2008; Rosenbaum, 2013).

Part III: Female Centered Sexual Experience

Every experience is a paradox in that it means to be absolute, and yet is relative; in that it somehow always goes beyond itself and yet never escapes itself.

- T. S. Eliot, Ph. D Dissertation: Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley (1916)

Some Feminist researchers argue that the diagnosing and labelling of women's sexual disorders are based on guidelines of measurement, of what is considered normal versus dysfunctional, and rarely take into account the complexity of women's sexual and

pleasurable experiences (Daniluk, 1993; Daniluk & Browne, 2008; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018; Wade, 2004, 2013). This is not intended to discount the value of some of these symptom labels and the relief that some women have experienced via bio-psycho-social models of treatment; however, some scholars argue these very methods limit their scope of healing, as they often do not include a spiritual domain. This section discusses areas of women's sexuality that have, until recently, been stigmatized based on patriarchal expectations. Moving away from goal oriented sex and towards pleasure oriented sex allows women to explore alternative meanings in spheres that need not align with the labelling and pathologizing sexual behaviour of women (Vrangalova, 2018). Some areas to be explored include: the possible benefits of casual sex, BDSM exploration and relational negotiation, and feminist pornography. Following this section is a brief discussion of meaning making through sexuality and spirituality

Moving from Goal-Oriented Sex to Pleasure Oriented Sex

> *If the script handed down by our hypersexualized culture expanded the vision of "sexy" to include a broad range of physical size and ability, skin shade, gender identity, sexual preference, age; if it taught girls that how their bodies feel to them is more important than how they look to others; if it reminded them that neither value nor "empowerment" are contingent on the size of their boobs, belly, or ass; if it emphasized that they are entitled to ethical, reciprocal, mutually pleasurable sexual encounters, then maybe, maybe I'd embrace it.*
>
> - Dr. Peggy Orenstein, Girls and Sex (2016)

Dr. Peggy Orenstein (2016) discusses in her recent book, *Girls and Sex*, that girls and young women are not receiving *any* support regarding positive messages about sexual discourse, female sexual pleasure, and the direct impact this has on their sexual development. Orenstein (2016) further discusses that Western culture is hyper-sexualized through music, media, and pornography, is reinforced through poor sexual education, and

through the lack of authentic conversations with girls and women about their sense of sexuality, especially during adolescence, which is an impressionable period for sexual development (Daniluk, 1998).

Typically, feminine sexuality as portrayed in the media (and thus culturally constructed and reinforced) indicates women are sexually submissive. Even much of the sexual education curriculum in Canada reinforces this stereotype (Young, 2015). This is highly problematic, considering many areas of the country have advocates continuing to argue for an abstinence-based approach to teaching children, adolescents, and adults about sexuality. Abstinence education reinforces some of the institutionalized power structure pressures on young girls and women (Orenstein, 2016), and perpetuates the pressure of performance based sexuality (G. Ogden, 2018). This also seems to force young individuals to explore and gain their sexual education via pornography (Dines, 2010), which reinforces the multiple messages of heteronormative presumptions. These presumptions can further shame women into believing that embracing their sexuality will only result in negative consequences, such as medical dilemmas including disease and unwanted pregnancies (Daniluk, 1993; Dines, 2010; Nagoski, 2015). Thus, some sex researchers and therapists are attempting to add research to expand possible understandings which women derive from certain sexual experiences or opportunities. Due to the ever-changing landscape of relationships, women's roles in the world, and sexual exploration, continuing research is necessary when exploring these topics: casual sex and BDSM exploration are common, and for some, the attempt to reclaim the pornography landscape is a way in which women can reclaim their power.

The Casual Sex Dilemma – Hook-Up Culture, Hooking-Up, and The Double Standard

> *I'm 160 pounds right now and can catch a dick whenever I want, like that's the truth, it's not a problem…*
>
> - Amy Schumer, Acceptance Speech Glamour UK (2015)

Hook-Up Culture has been a hot research topic for the past decade as the impact of the Internet and technology has greatly changed how humans connect with one another for sexual purposes. It is important to give a brief description of what is deemed as Hook-Up culture, to aid in understanding what hooking-up is, how it relates to women's sexual needs, and the impact of social structures on the identities of women engaging in these experiences. While this paper is trying to detach from labels and pathologizing behavior, it is important to recognize that descriptions of sexual encounters are often part of the social climate. Women are often labelled a "slut" when they engage in these acts (Farvid, Braun, & Rowney, 2017), which is a double standard compared to men (Conley, Ziegler, & Moors, 2012). The definition of Hook-Up Culture, definitions of varying hooking up relationships, and the double standard women are subjected to if they engage in these experiences are detailed below. Hook-Up Culture is the context in which hook-ups are experienced and can often be experienced under the influence of substances (Vrangalova, 2018). Hooking Up is often a sexual encounter where there is no long-term relationship, and anything can happen. Wentland and Reissing (2014) have defined differing relationships and meanings through which individuals can experience relational

circumstance including: Friends-With-Benefits (FWB), Fuck Buddy, or Booty Calls (Wentland & Reissing, 2014).

In Wentland and Reissing's (2014) study, 544 university-attending women responded to an online survey suggesting heterosexual women chose Booty Call, Fuck Buddy, and FWB definitions over One Night Stand. These definitions run contrary to the monogamy women are expected to be engaged in. A revolutionary sex researcher, Dr. Zhana Vrangalova, has also been researching how different aspects of sexuality, especially casual sex or promiscuity, are linked to health and well-being. Dr. Vrangalova (2018) started the *Casual Sex Project* platform online where individuals can share stories of their casual sex encounters, from rape to the best sexual encounter they have experienced thus far. This groundbreaking project offers an alternative to the sex-negative perspective of casual sex, especially for women.

Often research exploring hooking up and casual sex has a negative connotation (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012) when referring to women and their

One Night Stand: Sex between strangers or people who do not know each other that well, these two usually meet while out in a social setting (e.g., bar, party), sexual activity is not planned ahead of time, one or both are usually under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, there are no expectations that the two will see each other again (even if they exchange contact information).

Booty Call: Sex between two people who know each other, one person calls or texts the other person with the intention of having sex with that person within the next few hours, often late at night, one person is usually under the influence of alcohol/and or drugs, these two engage in sex with each other occasionally.

Fuck Buddy: Sex between people who know each other, they engage in sexual activity when they hang out with each other, they are usually not under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, these two engage in sex with each other regularly.

Friend with Benefits: Sex between two people who have an existing friendship, these two may or may not engage in sexual activity when they hang out with each other, they are usually not under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, these two engage in sex with each other regularly.

Quoted from Wentland and Reissing (2014), p. 171

sexual behavior in these encounters. The negative connotation is known as the sexual double standard; this again refers to the dualistic nature that social, cultural, and moral discourses have implications women have to work through that men do not necessarily face, such as being called a slut for engaging in the same sexual behaviour (Conley et al., 2012; Farvid et al., 2017). Farvid et al. (2017) borrowed a Dictionary.com definition of slut: "an immoral or dissolute woman; prostitute; a slovenly woman; a woman of loose morals" (p. 544). Even this definition has a 'grotesque' feel to what it describes and what it implies of women who are 'sluts'. Furthermore, Farvid et al. (2017) discuss several dichotomies including the traditional focus on heterosexuality, Madonna/whore complex, virtuous versus promiscuous, and provide an alternative discourse to the expectation of monogamy. In summary, this language is pathologizing, shaming, and often deeply intertwined with the Egoic structure of their existence and helps explain women's hesitancy to explore these experiences or why they are highly secretive about disclosure, for fear of backlash (Conley et al., 2012).

However, Dr. Vrangalova (2018) is changing the discussion around the understanding and exploration of casual sex, as she argues that individuals, especially women, have such negative experiences with casual sex because they need a less pathological way of working with these experiences. Dr. Vrangalova argues that her *Casual Sex Project* demonstrates the diversity in sexual experiences and the necessity of not judging individual's experiences, but simply understanding what sexually satisfies them. There is no metric to use when researching this as everyone is unique in their casual sexual experience, and often do not match the heteronormative expectations of women's sexuality. Other researchers also argue that the landscape of casual sex is

changing for women; Hannah Rosin (2012) argues women's sexual behavior has changed as a response to fourth wave Feminism and women's work in the public centre is more respected and seriously considered. No longer are women willing to sacrifice careers for families; some women become more focused on their career, are enjoying casual sex (like men have for decades) and are delaying or choosing not to have a family (Rosin, 2012). Rosin (2012) argues that women who are attending school and putting off family considerations until they are developed in their career or attempting to have it all, have different dating habits than previous generations. While these encounters are not new, Peggy Orenstein (2016) discusses that a casual sexual encounter is no longer an indicator of a dating relationship or a step towards a monogamous relationship. Yet, other research discusses that transcendent sex can be experienced out of committed relationships, and even with strangers (Wade, 2004, 2013). Another area women seem to be exploring more is BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Dominance & Submission, and Sadomasochism).

BDSM Exploration and Relational Negotiation

> *It's important to have realistic ideas about what a healthy sex life is. If you accept there's no right or wrong way to be sexual, and you and your partner are open with each other about when you're feeling it and when you aren't, then you will have a healthy sex life.*
>
> - Kristin Zeising Cited in Alex Katehakis and Tom Bliss, Mirror of Intimacy: Daily Reflections on Emotional and Erotic Intelligence (December 26, 2018)

BDSM has become a hot topic since the *50 Shades of Grey* phenomena (Barker, 2013); this section defines BDSM, the interest *50 Shades of Grey* created, and some critiques of *50 Shades of Grey*'s impact on the BDSM community. This will be followed with an alternative understanding of BDSM and what individuals in the community argue

is paramount in BDSM relationships: Safe, Sane, and Consensual (SSC), and what is now understood as RACK - Risk Aware Consensual Kink (Barker, 2013).

The *50 Shades of Grey* phenomena brought BDSM to the forefront and impacted sexual culture first as a book craze, and then through the movies. Some areas of the *50 Shades of Grey* films and books draw on common understandings of BDSM, such as safe words and common practices in BDSM communities; however, they fail to accurately portray consent and negotiation of activities in healthy BDSM relationships (Barker, 2013). "*Fifty Shades* reflects broader heteronormative understandings of consent whereby men initiate, and women comply or resist, having the agency and self-understanding to easily do so" (Barker, 2013, p. 908). Instead, the books and films perpetuate the heteronormative assumptions that women are passive in sexual relationships and should go along with initial sexual contracts, without negotiation or consenting along the way (Barker, 2013). The film portrayed a very simplistic narrative and demonstration of these considerations, which often is not enacted in real life. Hence, *50 Shades of Grey* ought not be the type of BDSM women strive for as it fails to take into account the multi-faceted complexity of these experiences and expectations (Barker, 2013).

Galon Fous (2018), a Transpersonal Psychologist, Kink Sex Educator, and Sex Researcher provides an in-depth relational framework discussing the many flavours of Kink and BDSM, as there is no clinical definition; they are often individually defined, based on the individual's experiences. Fous argues that exploring authentically what is sexually appealing, especially understanding context, creates a deep sense of excitement and connection for individuals.

Kink is an umbrella term which refers to the broad spectrum of oriented sexualities, activities of kink, and the community through which these occur (Fous, 2018). Often, Kink behavior is contrasted with what is termed 'vanilla sex'; however, Dr. Fous takes this discussion further and argues that Kink is actually an expression of myth, through fake personas, props, dialogue, and mythic story line, etc., paired in a power-exchange relationship. Fous (2018) argues that relationship examples of daddy/daughter; bitch/cuckhold; master-slave/dominance, are very different from a session of vanilla sex (which is an activity), versus Kink sex (which is experienced as an epic story).

BDSM is outlined as Bondage, Discipline, Dominance & Submission, Sadomasochism. Jay Wiseman (1996) definition of BDSM is "the knowing use of psychological dominance and submission, and/or physical bondage, and/or pain, and/or related practices in a safe, legal, and consensual manner in order for the participants to experience erotic arousal and/or personal growth" (p. 10). The activities of BDSM can be intertwined with each other and are often acted out in combination with each other and to varying extent, for leisure and pleasure (Fous, 2018; Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Christensen, 2014). Fous (2018) makes a distinction between BDSM versus dominance and submission; in the power exchange, it is important to recognize the sacred and profane sides. Dominance and submission create the relational container through day-to-day negotiations, authenticity, deep communications, and intimacy, which allow for the profane to be enacted, expressed, and honoured safely (Fous, 2018). While complex and requiring maturity for adults to participate, it allows the possibility to bridge the paradox and makes room for the power of context in women's arousal (Diamond, 2008; Nagoski, 2015); for example, being a caring partner and a dominating partner (Fous, 2018).

Perhaps the negotiating and sharing of power that occurs within the context of a mature BDSM relationship bridges the complexity of a feminist engaging in BDSM behaviours. Therefore, this recognition may help clinicians support clients relationally negotiate and embrace their sexual authenticity via BDSM. Certainly, the complex intersection of power dynamics and sexuality is not limited to BDSM, as Feminist critiques of traditional pornography have led to the emergence of Feminist pornography, which seeks to assign importance to women's sexual desires and needs, while equalizing the power and influence of women in the creation of pornography.

Feminist Pornography

> *Feminist porn takes a cultural form that has historically been seen as a purview of men. It reworks sexual images and conventions to explore new and more diverse kinds of desires.*
>
> - Madison Young: porn actress, director, bondage model, sex educator, and founder of Femina Potens Art Gallery (August 11, 2018)

Pornography is a billion-dollar industry, which continues to re-invent itself to meet demands and create a sense of novelty among its consumers. Thus, pornography is not going anywhere, anytime soon (CovenantEyes, 2018). Women's use of pornography has been reportedly increasing due to the *50 Shades* phenomenon. Third-wave feminists have started to reclaim sex positivity in the pornography space through Feminist Pornography (Liberman, 2015). Feminist Pornography differs from mainstream porn as it is often produced by women, with women's sexual needs as the focus, where the actresses are paid equal to their male counter-parts (Liberman, 2015). In much the same way that Feminist Pornography seeks to prioritize women's sexual needs, feminist approaches to sex therapy encourage women to pursue a pleasure-oriented experience

versus goal-oriented experience. In addition, exploring the spiritual domain and continuing to make meanings from their sexual experiences may help women expand their sexual awareness and feel more whole or less divided internally.

Part IV: The Power of Spirit, Sexuality & Meaning-Making

If you go to war with your sexuality, you will lose.

- Jack Morin, The Erotic Mind (1995)

This part of the literature review explores the impact of the current socio-political context on women's sexuality, and calls for sex therapy practice to include a spiritual domain. Previous sections discussed the patriarchal influences on women's sexuality and how these structural forces exert a negative influence on almost all domains of women's experience. Utilizing the psycho-spiritual orientation of Transpersonal Psychology, I explore how these negative influences can create a hardened shell of an "Egoic false self-representation", which essentially argues that individuals are not living their life from an authentic way of being (Almaas, 2000). Living from false self-representation often results in mental health issues, addictive pathways, and feeling negatively about oneself or the world (Almaas, 2000; Brown, 2010; Tzu, 2014a; 2014b). A simpler definition of this lived experience that most can relate to, is living through a "divided sense of self refers to a disconnect between outer self-presentation and the inner self" (Syzmanski, Ikizler & Dunn, 2016, p. 2), and splits them away from themselves and their needs (Fisher, 2017). This takes women further from their Essence, True Nature, Total Being, or Soul (Almaas, 2000, 2014; G. Ogden, 2008, 2013, 2018), their resiliency in Being (Tzu & Damgaard, 2015), and their Sexual Authenticity (Fous, 2018). Thus, it is necessary to include ways in which women can make meaning from their experiences

(Daniluk, 1993, 1998), and integrate a spiritual component for clinicians when working with women's sexual issues (Long, 2013; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018; Wade, 2004, 2013).

Current Events: The Time is Right to Take a Different Approach to Sexual Therapy

> *When we come into contact with this kind of beauty, it serves as a medicine for the brokenness in ourselves, which then gives us the courage to live in greater intimacy with the world's wounds.*
>
> - Toko-pa Turner, Belonging: Remembering Ourselves Home (2017)

Women's sexual rights have taken the forefront in recent years. One of the most politically charged eras in recent history has reignited a familiar fight for Feminists against patriarchy and individuals who enact this invisible force. This underlines for therapists that current events and political climate continue to force women's sexual issues to the forefront of politics and cultural issues. Dr. Terry Real (2018), an expert in men, expressions of masculinity, and counselling, discusses in his training model how in the past year, women have demonstrated they are becoming empowered and are unwilling to lose the momentum this has brought forth. Notable events include the Women's March against the 45th president of the United States, the #MeToo movement, and the discourse shared about women's genitals and entitlement to women's bodies. During this time, other forms of sexual harassment were brought to the forefront, such as Cat Calling, which Urban Dictionary defines as rude, sexual comments made by men towards women, usually pertaining to a certain body part or the body as a whole. The United Kingdom recently has begun to fine men who Cat Call women. This denotes an important change in dynamics and a willingness to address the patriarchal imbalance in society, which women are no longer willing to tolerate or accommodate.

In the context of such a movement and societal shift, clinicians may benefit from re-evaluating their own sexual experiences, how they position themselves in power relations with clients, how they feel about their own sexuality and women's sexuality, how to work with counter-transference, and knowing when to refer out, if necessary.

Fous (2018) argues that clinicians need to explore their own sexuality, sexual authenticity, and flavour of Kink, because the repercussions of not doing so are catastrophic and will emerge unconsciously. Clinicians may deny their sexual needs due to fear that people who are relationally important to them will judge their preferences and fantasies, and not accept them fully. Fous believes fear of rejection is also why individuals do not share their pornography use and preferences (Fous, 2018). This is not just a calling for male therapists to explore the impact of the current women's movement (Real, 2018), but also for women to do the same. It's no secret that effective therapists are often the ones who have completed their own work, have awareness of their own biases, and are reflexive in their way of working with individuals in therapy. In order to be open to the many ways through which sexuality and meaning are made from lived experiences, Transpersonal considerations may be helpful in understanding how powerful nondual experiences can be useful for transformation of self, beneficial in healing, and able to draw on deeper meaning from trauma, along with sexuality experiences.

Transpersonal Psychology and The Formation of the Ego

> *Something is afoot which is bound to touch all of our lives. There is a growing collective realization that much of the suffering found in life is not a necessary aspect of the human condition, but that it derives from a primal wounding to the core of our deepest humanity*
>
> - John Firman & Ann Gila, The Primal Wound (1997)

The branding and definition of Transpersonal has been under scrutiny, since it emerged as a psycho-spiritual approach in the 1960s; Transpersonal Psychology is still considered an emerging field that continues to find ways to be inclusive, represented, and discover what this means to individuals on their path of healing (Hartelius, Rothe, & Roy, 2013). In simpler terms, "Transpersonal Psychology [is]: An approach to psychology that 1) studies phenomena beyond the ego as context for 2) an integrative/holistic psychology; this provides a framework for 3) understanding and cultivating human transformation" (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007, p. 145). Unlike other previous waves in Psychology, Transpersonal Psychology aims to expand on previous models, while including components such as spirituality, which have been excluded or understood as regressive (Cortwright, 1991). Transpersonal Psychology does not make distinctions as to how growth and expanded consciousness happen; rather, there are multiple pathways in which this can emerge and be experienced.

Modern Transpersonal Psychology originates with William James, who was the first to use the English word trans-personal in a Harvard course outline in 1905 (Daniels, 2013). James' research focused in differing areas, which explored possibilities of differing states of consciousness through experiments. Through substance induced experiences he concluded, "Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different" (Daniels, 2013, p. 25). Consciousness is not a new phenomenon in Psychology, and it continues to be studied today through contemporary treatments such as Interpersonal Neurobiology (Siegel, 2014, 2016), Trauma Treatment (Minton, Ogden, & Pain, 2006; P.

Ogden & Fisher, 2015), and Transpersonal/Nondual Research with Addictions (Tzu, 2014; Tzu & Damgaard, 2015).

This literature review illuminates the consistent demands through which women's egoic self and identity form on a day-to-day basis. As beings living in a socially constructed and manifested version of existence, humans are assigned, or self-select, into these dualistic categories, and intersectional identities shape their realities and lived experiences. This shapes women's sense of self, identity, and their place in the world, or in other words, their Ego. Almaas (2000) describes this identifying process and experience as the way in which humans lose touch with their True Nature, Essence, or Soul and become focused on living through this identity, which carries a personal history, where self-recognition and sense of self is lived. According to Almaas (2000), this is living life through false self-representation, as it is not from their core; living this way leaves most individuals feeling empty, worthless, and like a part of them is missing. Almaas refers to lost connections as holes: "A hole refers to any part of you that has been lost, meaning any part of you that you have lost consciousness of" (Almaas, 1987, p. 15). This is similar to Firman and Gila's primal wounding, and how there is a loss of basic trust in traumatic experiences, where the environment did not value the Essence and True Nature of individuals (Firman & Gila, 1997). Almaas (2000) argues that humans do not feel whole when this is experienced, so will use Egoic gains as a way to temporarily feel whole, and ultimately most are left feeling unsatisfied, or may live in a divided way of being which forces women to maintain relationships by disowning their own needs (Lerner, 1988; Syzmanski, et. al, 2016).

Orenstein (2016) discusses how young people's growth of self, especially their sexual self, no longer develops from within, but instead is almost like a brand that is created for others to like. This often has devastating consequences for individuals as they begin functioning from a false self-representation, in hopes of having their needs acknowledged and met. Simultaneously, they often create a dependent relationship with the material world to meet these needs through false self-representation. In the end this does not feel authentic and creates an automatic reminder that there is still a void inside (Almaas, 2000), which can result in an addictive process to quiet this painful reminder.

Dr. Gary Tzu (2014a), a Transpersonal and Nondual Psychologist, describes addiction as,

> A method which we use to try and climb out of the realm of negative experiences into a realm of positive experience. We use the whole process of addiction to escape unresolved painful feelings such as abandonment, worthlessness and emptiness, but at the same time as we try to escape them; these negative feelings fuel our attempts at addictive self-repair. It's paradoxical and it's a vicious circle, but that's what we do. (p. 14)

Through the addictive process, the mind and unconscious attempt to fill a hole through all sorts of distractions, and continue to pull away from the core. Along this path, many lose 'who they are' at their core and become driven to fight the void on the inside. There is not only the struggle to connect from within, but also a pull to dissociate from our authenticity via culture. Others discuss the addictive process as naturally initiated from "a dissociative culture - a culture that separates body from mind, body from spirit, feeling from thinking" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 21). This can be especially true with a culture that does not honour what may be deemed as dark emotions, such as shame, and which only values the very strategies used to not feel, such as what humans can do to be valued

through the Ego. Identity is the very foundation that most find themselves chasing, building, deconstructing, and striving for, which is often enacted out of full consciousness, especially for women around sexuality and in Western culture (Almaas, 2000). These concepts further support G. Ogden's description of disconnection from any and/or all aspects of self, including mind, body, heart, and spirit, as a "psychospiritual autoimmune disease" (p. 118).

> Transpersonal Psychology believes individuals come to therapy
>
> ... because they are stuck, not developing as fully as they sense they could. The reason they are stuck, not developing fully is because they are not operating with full consciousness. There are blind spots or phobic avoidances ("defenses"), which prevent the awareness of essential feelings or aspects of themselves. (Cortright, 1997, p. 54)

Working alongside individuals to expand their understanding of this work is part of the path to achieve Awakening from binary existence into the possibility of learning and transforming from the wisdom of this non-dual consciousness. Dr. Daniel Siegel (2016), pioneer in Interpersonal Neurobiology, has found that, "…with consciousness comes the possibility of choice and change" (p. 266), and through this consciousness it can "… invite us to realize that wisdom is not owned by a single individual…, [but that] ... wisdom is something that can arise within each of us and be shared by us all" (p. 209). During these experiences, there is no sense of space or time. Along with the loss of these dimensions, an awareness that "every story of suffering contains a world of pain. No matter how apparently individual, this story is played out in a larger social, cultural, global, and cosmic context - an ecology of emotion" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 25), which allows individuals to feel less alone with their process and emotions. This is especially important regarding women and sexuality.

Some branches of Transpersonal Psychology, including some authors in Non-Dual Psychology, argue the importance of not being in the physical world, but rather, transcending the flesh of being human and occupying a non-dual consciousness as much as possible; there is consistent striving to ascend from the Ego into higher states of consciousness (Daniels, 2005). From this lens, Transpersonal studies often frame personal identity as a problem to transcend. The focus remains on the spiritual, while denying the physical or emphasizing the importance of spirit; Michael Daniels (2005) labels this as ascendant focused models of psycho-spiritual development, which value masculine qualities. However, some of these experiences dismiss personal identity, the embeddedness of relationships, and the importance of context-based authenticity; hence the necessity for an expanded definition, with a Feminist contribution.

Women's Contributions to Transpersonal Psychology

> *Transcendence is nothing without immanence. Enlightenment is nothing if it is not warm and wild and sticky and gooey and human too. Awareness is nothing if it is not radically intimate with this gorgeous physical form. Nonduality is nothing if it is not a tantric love affair with the mess of duality.*
>
> - Jeff Foster, Life Without a Centre Facebook (2018)

Many Feminist Transpersonal therapists and researchers critique Transpersonal Psychology and models within this wave, because of the persistent androcentric views, and the lack of reflection on intersectional considerations and cultural inclusion (C. Brooks, Ford, & Huffman, 2013; Wright 1995). The Transpersonal seeks to dissolve the West's duality of experience and thinking in the pursuit of feeling whole; however, many Transpersonal models focus on the process of 'letting go' of the Egoic Identity in an individual sense, failing to take into account context and relationships (C. Brooks et al.,

2013; Wright 1995). This is problematic as other Feminist theorists and clinicians recognize the importance of intersectional viewpoints for understanding identity and women (Shields, 2008). The intersectionality perspective reveals that social identities profoundly influence beliefs and experiences of gender, which inform the reality of living; therefore, there is no single identity that can describe us being in the world and how the world interacts with us (Shields, 2008). C. Brooks et al. (2013) suggest that rather than trying to move beyond the ego, a definition of Transpersonal Psychology that is more inclusive for women's orientation in the world would be helpful.

An Integrative and Holistic exploration of Transpersonal Psychology could be defined as examining, "…the phenomena of psyche as elements that belong not merely to the Ego, but to larger contexts as well: the living body in its entirety, the therapeutic relationship, the social and ecological situation, or the greater-than-human matrix of existence" (Hartelius et al., 2007, p. 5). This considers the reality of women's experiences, allowing for unique and universal expression of intersectional identities. The intersectionality perspective reveals that social identities profoundly influence beliefs and experiences of gender, which inform the reality of living; there is no single identity that can describe us being in the world and how the world interacts with us (Shields, 2008).

Women's Psychology argues that women need these opportunities to make meaning from their experiences, which allows them to add their voice to their experience and understanding (Daniluk, 1998; Nagoski, 2015). Wright (1995) agrees that meaning making in spiritual exploration is a necessary component when working with women in a spiritual space, as some models focus on goal-orientations and compartmentalize, rather

than experiencing within relationships. Abraham Maslow (1971), co-founder of Transpersonal and Humanistic psychology, summarized transcendence beyond the ego:

> Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or Holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than as means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos. (p. 279)

This applies to women and sexuality since the ability to make meaning allows women to acknowledge that the continuum of female sexuality is flexible, fluid, and can be experienced beyond the physical realm of the body; in and out of relationships, with a multitude of pleasure-oriented experiences. These elements are needed for women to feel safe and curious enough to explore, process, and transcend their experience in the world.

Much of sex therapy addresses the biological, cognitive, and behavioural components; however, when working with women's sexual issues interventions such as meditation and mindfulness are becoming mainstream (Brotto et al., 2008). Others have expanded on the bio-psycho-social model and include transcendent sexual experiences (Wade, 2004, 2013), and spiritual possibilities (G. Ogden, 2013, 2018), which could offer a path to integration from this false self-representation or divided self (Almaas, 2000; Siegel, 2019).

Spirituality and Sexuality is an Entryway by Creating Meaning

> *Sexuality based spiritual experiences are irrepressible human dynamics that continue to crop up in the face of ignorance, denial and religious oppression. Because it is not talked about today, when people have transpersonal sexual experiences…[they] have the potential for immense healing, life enhancement, [and] personal transformation…*
>
> - Dr. Jenny Wade, Transcendent Sex (2013)

For women, spirituality is often tied to dualistic beliefs and practices, especially concerning gender expectations and sexuality (Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018;

Wade, 2013). Along with these expectations comes the impossibility of meeting them, or 'doing it right', all of the time, creating a deep sense of shame (Brown, 2010), thereby making it difficult for women to acknowledge their own needs, that do not align with societal conditioning. Dr. Gina G. Ogden (2008) argued that many women resist the connection between sexuality and spirituality due to religious belief systems, selective education, norms about pleasure, and the mind-body separation.

G. Ogden's (2008) quantitative survey about integrating sexuality and spirituality garnered responses from 3810 females aging from 18 to 86, from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, and with a diverse faith base. An interesting finding of the study was the resistance within women to integrate both sexuality and spirituality because it did not fit the 'norms' of what sexual experience was supposed to be for women, and they often felt guilt afterwards or judgement from partners (G. Ogden, 2008). McCarthy and Wald (2013) similarly reported that women have a tough time "finding [their] own erotic voice" (p. 45) without focusing on the eroticism of the other. (G. Ogden, 2008) borrowed the term "pleasure anxiety" from William Reich to describe some other reasons women question the importance of this connection. Pleasure anxiety can be understood as women feeling anxiety pertaining to their inability to move beyond the body and mind, into the acceptance of the present moment through spiritual connection, to feel pleasure (G. Ogden, 2008). Other research indicates that women feel bored and unemotional, encouraging women to reach out for a "non-goal oriented spiritual element to sexuality" (Brotto et al., 2008, p. 2742; Nagoski, 2015). This demonstrates the difficulty of understanding what spirituality could uniquely offer them, climbing out of the Ego and into their core essence. Dr. Brene Brown (2010) defined spirituality as:

> Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives. (p. 73)

This definition of spirituality offers individuals a non-threatening way of exploring what spirituality means to them and is especially applicable for women and sexual exploration.

In G. Ogden (2007), *Women Who Love Sex*, one of the main proponents of enjoyment for women was a spiritual connection, or making meaning from their experiences. Wright (1995) discusses that many Transpersonal models have not made room for meaning making, and that this was problematic for women as their spiritual practice was about becoming whole, rather than focusing on enlightenment. Daniluk (1993) discusses in her phenomenological study that women felt it was essential to experience the integration and wholeness of their sexuality and to create meaning from it, in order to feel and identify that they were functioning in a healthy way, sexually. In regards to female ejaculation, Gilliard (2009) demonstrated that once women were able to create meaning from their sexual experiences, they increased their autonomy in sexual decision-making and had less resistance to the physical expulsion of fluid. Many women reported being grateful they could experience sexual orgasm in such a way. Blumberg (2003) also discussed the importance of women finding their own voice and creating meaning from sexual experiences, allowing them to go with what was happening in the moment, truly letting go of any judgements and social constructions.

Qualitative studies suggest that once women were able to create meaning around their sexuality, they became grateful for their feminine body, which reduced their experience of body shame (Schooler et al., 2005; Wiederman, 2001). Gilliard (2009)

reported that by creating meaning, women felt more comfortable with their female ejaculation and felt as though they would be able to expand and accept their true sexual nature. From these experiences, women worked through the fear and conditioning that had held them back from truly expressing sexual self-acceptance, self-love, and self-efficacy. Below is a brief exploration of sexuality as a transcendent pathway, which may not be fully experienced without spiritual awareness (Wade, 2004, 2013). Following is a discussion of how a Tantric, nondual perspective encompasses all domains while considering relationship and context, which naturally aligns with Feminist perspectives and could be a bridge for a sex positive approach to women's sexuality.

Other Reflections on Spirit and Sexuality – Transcendent Transpersonal Sexual Experiences

> *The relationship between sex and spirituality is one of the most controversial and least understood in contemporary society as well as in Transpersonal studies.*
>
> - Jenny Wade, Transcendent Sex: When Lovemaking Opens the Veil (2013)

Dr. Jenny Wade is a Transpersonal therapist who has researched a transformative process and expansion of growth through sexual experiences. Wade (2004, 2013) argues that individuals are not educated on transcendent sexual experiences, and so, when people have these, often do not process the experience. Some of Wade's (2013) general findings surrounding Transpersonal sexual experiences include:

1. Transpersonal sexual experiences have no obvious connection to sexual mechanics or technique; they can happen individually or with a partner, in all identified orientations and through different sexual experiences and expressions.

2. Transpersonal sexual experiences seem unrelated to physiological differences associated with male and female arousal as they have the same type of experiences.
3. Orgasm, which is considered an alternate state of consciousness, is not the same as Transpersonal sexual experiences. Wade discussed how orgasm was deemed irrelevant, and even a distraction to a Transpersonal sexual experience.
4. Individuals with a history of sexual abuse described differing states of dissociation and Transpersonal sexual experiences; trauma did not cause the Transpersonal experience.
5. Transpersonal sexual experiences can occur in all types of relationships and circumstances. (p. 389-391)

Sexual Transpersonal states have no discernable relationship to the participants' spiritual beliefs, length, or type of practice, or levels attained during spiritual practices. The range of Transpersonal experiences produced spontaneously during sex include ones very like, if not phenomenologically indistinguishable from, those associated with altered states of consciousness; some examples include out-of-body experience, the void, visions, past lives, shamanism, Transpersonal, connections in nature, etc. (Wade, 2013).

Wade (2004, 2013) and Rowan (2005) discuss reasons why many individuals may not share these experiences with others, including not being educated about the healing and transformational power of them, being devalued or made fun of, and feeling these transcendent experiences were too personal to share. Some argue that when educated in transcendent sexual experiences, individuals experience a sense of empowerment and wholeness, in all domains and relationships (Rowan, 2005; Wade, 2004, 2013; Wright

1995). The following section discusses a Tantric Non-Dual framework for considering women's sexual experiences, which presents one possible way for women to explore the transformational power of sexual experiences.

Tantra Nonduality as a Sex Positive Bridge for Women's Sexual Experiences

> *Tantra says: First you change your being and then your action changes automatically, of its own accord. First attain to a different kind of consciousness, and that will be followed by a different kind of action, character and behavior.*
>
> - OSHO, The Tantra Experience: Evolution Through Love (2012)

Tantra is a relatively new perspective in the West; however, it is frequently presented in a watered-down manner and often is focused on performance-based or goal-oriented ways of being sexual. A quick Google search of "Tantra and Women's Sexuality", resulted in the following top titles:

- *Enlightened Sex – A Woman's Way to Breathe to Orgasm*
- *6 Different Orgasms Through Tantra*
- *Tantric Sex: The Key to Mind-Blowing Sex with the One You Love*
- *Women's 7 Step Guide to Nailing Tantric Sex*
- *Tantric Masturbation: What It Is, How to Do It and the Benefits*
- *Tantric Techniques 101 – The Best Tantric Love Techniques*

While each of these resources may be applicable to what women are searching for, in order to feel some normalcy and reach a performance-based outcome, these titles are clear examples of how the West has capitalized on the foundation of Tantra and sexuality. Below is a brief description of the background and power of Tantra when working with women's Ego/divided self and Sexuality. There is also a brief exploration

of Left and Right Tantra, and how this relates to transgressing the 'grotesque' in women's sexuality.

What Is Tantra?

Tantra does not deny anything, but transforms everything.

- OSHO, Tantra The Supreme Understanding (2012)

Tantra is a complex philosophy to explore, especially in terms of sexuality; Eastern Tantra provides a way to transgress Western dualistic understanding of the ego, through the mind/body connection, which is just a slice of what Tantra has to offer humanity. Tantra, according to Andre van Lyebeth (2001):

> … is both indispensable and arduous given its myriad possible meanings, each with its own particular nuance. Depending on the context, Tantra means a shuttle (in weaving), the warp (of a fabric), continuity, succession, decadence, a continuous process, the carrying out of a ceremony, a system, a theory, doctrine, a scientific opus, or a section in a book… Tantra perceives the universe as a fabric where everything is interrelated, interconnected, where everything impacts on everything else. If you add the instrumentality suffix *tra* to the radical *tan* (to stretch, to spread, to expand), you get *tan-tra*, literally, *the instrument to expand* the field of ordinary consciousness in order to reach super consciousness, the root of one's being and the wellspring of unknown powers that Tantra seeks to awaken and harness. (p. xiiii)

Tantra's holistic system values everything and believes in the sacredness of interplay between the duality and non-duality of existence. In Tantric traditions, the feminine or woman is revered and far exceeds any liberation movement in the West; this is not to dismiss the necessity of women's movements rising against patriarchy. Instead, Tantra supports woman's desire to gain awareness to emerge into who she really is and integrate that awareness in how she experiences and views the world (Lysebeth, 2001).

Western understandings of 'femininity' have identified passivity and weakness, leaving 'masculinity' as having the power, which is played out via patriarchy (Daniluk,

1993, 2008; G. Ogden, 2018; Wilberg, 2009); the very nature of categories is putting structure on something and creates a positivist approach. However, a Hindu Tantric perspective dissolves the focus on polarities and Western detachments are transcended by understanding the experience of existence as a play of the divine and simply an expression of awareness through embodiment and consciousness (Wilberg, 2009). It becomes less about trying to define expressions of sexuality, sexual identity, or even sexual acts, and more about how this is comprehended, embodied, and lived (Wilberg, 2009). Tantra is open to any exploration, viewing all of this as empowerment. Appendix B and C provide diagrams of my hypothesis to demonstrate the continual interweaving of a Tantric process, which takes into consideration institutionalized, gendered social forces, and the impact of the ego on women's sexuality. These diagrams demonstrate the weaving of institutional forces that create the ego, and the pathway of dipping in and out of learnings through a Tantric non-dual orientation. This model's power is in embracing everything as sacred; all aspects of duality and non-duality are the play of the divine (Feurstein, 1998; Urban, 2003; Wilberg, 2009; Lysebeth, 2001). Below is a brief description of Hindu Tantra and the implications of this understanding through sexuality.

Hindu Tantra & Sexuality

> *That which is not understood and completed will continue to repeat itself again and again until it is; there is no escape from this, do what you will.*
>
> - Jiddu Krishnamurti, The World Within: You Are the Story of Humanity (2014)

Acharaya Peter Wilberg (2009) wrote about Hindu Tantra and reflections of sexuality. He describes bodies of awareness as interplays of the Divine not easily polarized (as Western understanding frames it) but simply understood and symbolized as

merging elements and relations of flesh, along with the universal performance of existence, and awareness of consciousness. According to Hindu Tantra, "this relation is the intercourse of pure awareness (Shiva) with *all* its expressions and embodiments (Shaktis)" (Wilberg, 2009, p. 2). The manifestation of existence plays out through the dual and non-dual world, via masculine and feminine principles; in all realms and levels.

The divine feminine principle, 'Shakti' is the transcending energy which is the potential for action, vitality, and power (Wilberg, 2009). The feminine principle is the sacred, dynamic principle through which manifestation in this world occurs (Lysebeth, 2001). The divine masculine principle is passive, and plays a very different role than in Western cosmology. In Tantra, Lysebeth (2001) discusses how human beings can dissolve the power of patriarchy on all people, where the power and value of the female are recognized, but do not cause the masculine to lose virility.

Tantra contends there is always a mixture of the feminine (dynamic) and masculine (static) principles in all aspects and manifestations of reality. While many Nondual philosophies emphasize the path from the separate self (individuation) to Nondual unity, Tantric philosophy does not privilege the state of Nonduality. The Absolute, or the Divine does not care to abide in Non-Duality, it manifests as separate selves, and loses itself purposely and playfully in separation, only to absorb back into Non-Duality from manifestation (Lysebeth, 2001). So, in Tantric Nonduality, there is no dualism created between the state of Absolute realization or the process of manifesting diversity; each is relevant as Tantra embraces exploration of the continuum from individuated manifestation and the all-encompassing Absolute. In Hindu Tantra, one is never ultimately 'lost' as everything is divine; everything is the Absolute (often

understood as Pure Consciousness). This is the nature of the process – Absolute Consciousness loses itself, in itself, through manifestation as an individual self in order to experience itself as other, and ultimately to find itself as not-other. All aspects of life are embraced in their creative expressions. Thus, in Tantra, there is paradox in every stage, namely paradox of inseparability (Lysebeth, 2001). There is a constant and simultaneous playing out of dual and non-dual expressions of existence, which are accepted and explored through Left and Right Tantra (Lysebeth, 2001).

Left-Handed and Right-Handed Tantra Path

> *If you expect any material, mental or spiritual benefits from your search, you have missed the point. Truth gives you no advantage, no higher status, no power over others; all you get is truth and the freedom from the false.*
>
> - B. Realist, What Am I (2006)

Tantra honours paradoxes – dual and non-dual forms, feminine and masculine principles, along with left Tantra and right Tantra. There is no favoured consciousness or way of Being; as long as it is in awareness (and if it is out of awareness, Tantra is accepting) and is open to how all of existence manifests in the process. Tantra is clear that suppression of sexuality, expression, and yearnings is not healthy and causes issues. Through a Tantric lens, it becomes clear that Western and patriarchal societies have made some huge mistakes in how sexual education is delivered, particularly with the dominance of men's sexual needs and the power of commercialization of sexuality and sexual rituals (Feurstein, 1998; Lysebeth, 2001). The key element to remember in Tantra, is that anything goes – 'grotesque' and all, there is no limit on freedom to explore. The following is a brief description of Left and Right Tantra.

The Left and Right-Handed paths of Tantra describe two different interpretations of Tantric practice (Urban, 2003). The Left-Handed Tantra path involves engaging in rituals and experiences that embrace tradition and often use substances, food, and all sorts of variety in embodying the sexual practices which could be seen as forbidden (Urban, 2003). The Right-Handed Tantra path is accepting of the Left-Handed Path, but does not physically engage in the same rituals, practices, and experiences, but "…interprets these forbidden substances symbolically or metaphorically, using them to refer to internal spiritual states rather than literal transgressive acts" (Urban, 2003, p. 102). This relates to sexuality in the ways of allowing others to explore their needs and likes, and for others who do not want to explore, but are open to others honouring their own sexuality, which is a healthy sexual model to strive towards. Tantra ties into the methodology chosen for this research project as it offers complete acceptance of diverse experiences; this was one factor considered when choosing a methodology to empower women's reflections on sexuality. The following chapter discusses the methodology chosen for this project.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

> *Phenomenological methodology and its conceptual resources facilitated these pursuits for two important ends: it was able both to question the established notions of embodiment, spirituality, and essence/existence and to open up new perspectives on woman's (and man's) first person experience and to understand this experience in terms of embodied spirituality.*
>
> - Virpi Lehtinen, Luce Irigaray's Phenomenology of Feminine Being (2014)

Identification of the Research Problem

Individuals develop and mature in a specific context of social and cultural norms, the meanings of which are influenced both socially and historically. Meanings are many and varied since each individual experiences the world differently (Hesse-Biber, 2013), especially when it comes to inquiring into the complexity of human sexuality (Frost, McClelland, Clark & Boylam, 2014) through women's perspectives (Daniluk, 1993, 1998; Ogden, 2018). G. Ogden (2018) argues that women's sexual experience encompasses much more than coitus, which is a male-centered concept of sexuality that has dominated women's sexuality for years, despite the fact that female sexuality is more fluid and diverse than that of males (Diamond, 2008). Women are more complex and subtle in their sexuality, and research has found that they have sexual organs all over their bodies as they experience pleasure from more varied acts than those considered to be sexual acts by predominantly male estimation (Ogden, 2013, 2018).

The dominant discourses related to female sexuality are deeply rooted in institutional forces and can be enacted through "… policies directed at sexual behaviors, relationships, education, and health [which] have enormous ramifications on people's lives" (Frost et. al., 2014, p. 122). These discourses and policies construct the boundaries of what is considered 'proper' and feminine for women, and any representation lying

outside of these constructs may be deemed sexually unattractive, unfeminine, or 'grotesque'. Gender expectations are one of the structural social forces that reinforce patriarchal perspectives. These expectations subordinate women's perspectives and women's lives by enforcing the egoic shell around women's sexuality. One of the many ways in which these socially constructed discourses and policies impact women is through their sense of identity and sexuality (Shields, 2008); this development in turn creates a rigid egoic shell through which they navigate the world (Almaas, 2000) and their sexual needs. Drawing on Feminist and Tantric theoretical perspectives, I seek to explore the meaning that transgressing artificial boundaries between what society has constructed as acceptable (non-grotesque) versus unacceptable (grotesque) feminine sexuality has on women's sense of self, their sexuality, and their lives at large.

While most classic therapeutic approaches have been bio-psycho-social in their orientation to working with female sexuality (Rosenbaum, 2013), Feminist perspectives have attempted to add to the literature by transgressing dominant social constructions and power dynamics of female sexuality. These perspectives reject passivity as a defining characteristic of female sexuality, and instead emphasize personal freedom, control, and empowerment (Daniluk, 1993, 2008). Other authors and sex therapy modalities focus on women's experience of sexuality beyond the body, and the added intricacy of the spiritual component to a woman feeling sexually whole and transcending beyond a western understanding of women's sexuality (Long, 2013; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018; Wade, 2004, 2013). However, there is a gap in the literature as there is a need for Hermeneutic Phenomenological approaches to explore the meaning of sexual experience for women, and how these meanings affect how they feel about themselves and engage in the world

on a day-to-day basis, along with how they feel sexually. This study offers the opportunity to explore ordinary women's 'grotesque' sexual experiences through a Tantric nondual perspective which can serve to depathologize elements of sexuality and acknowledge that sex can be a transformational opportunity (G. Ogden, 2018; Wade, 2004, 2013), by discovering their true nature as human beings (Almaas, 2000).

Purpose of the Study and Significance of Research

The purpose of this study is to explore women's understanding of their self-defined 'grotesque' sexual experiences by utilizing a Hermeneutic Phenomenological lens with Feminist, Tantric nondual underpinnings. Furthermore, the analysis sought to discover the ultimate meanings and resulting transformations that these women have undertaken in their experience of sexuality and self, and which they ascribe to these 'grotesque' sexual experiences. This study seeks to contribute an important piece to the discussion of female sexuality and attempts to understand how women integrate their lived experiences and self in the face of social and cultural opposition to women in general, and women's sexuality in particular. Cultural opposition occurs in multiple domains, and is not limited to socially-constructed Western ideals. These constructions contribute to women's sense of identity (Shield, 2008); expanding on women's lived experience helps broaden the understanding of female sexuality, and the meanings attached to their experiences. The findings might also awaken pleasure for women who have been unable to enjoy themselves through all of the sexual domains due to the 'grotesqueness' of their sexual experience, and provide them with an opportunity to move beyond social constructions/limitations imposed on them. I want to understand more clearly how women make sense of transgressing cultural expectations, and move through

these constrictions, into their personal capacity that honours their own interpretation and understanding. This can empower them to embrace the inner transformational potential that lies inside all humans (Maslow, 1967; Almaas, 1987, 2001, 2014; Tzu, 2014a, 2014b; Tzu & Damgaard, 2015; Wade, 2004, 2013).

I want to subvert the concepts surrounding female sexuality that have been generated and understood through, and dominated by, western patriarchal constructions; "… researchers and clinicians need to engage with methodological approaches that are specifically designed to investigate individuals' experiences and interpretations of their sexuality" (Frost, McClelland, Clark, & Boylam, 2014, p. 122). This qualitative approach fills a research gap by giving women the opportunity to articulate the experiences that have impacted their ability to be sexually whole, and the hope is it will allow women to impact the paradigms that are applied to female sexuality (Daniluk, 1993). "In the domain of sexuality, it is increasingly important to consider the clinical applications of psychological research, given that findings from studies are often applied to questions of diagnosis and treatment" (Frost, et al., 2014, p. 122). This offers women opportunities to work through and embrace any experiences that have impacted them sexually by creating meaning (Daniluk, 1993; Gilliard, 2009; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018), which may allow women to feel empowered and autonomous in a sexual sphere that has been subjugated by the patriarchal lens and often consciousness-restricting frameworks. This study may also be beneficial for clinicians to review as engaging women in therapy that encourages confrontation of power relations that reinforce gender expectations is an empowering approach to counselling women. Transgressing the artificial boundaries between what society has constructed as acceptable versus unacceptable feminine sexuality creates

opportunities for breaking free of the internalized negative emotions of shame and fear that maintain women's subordination within patriarchal society and within their lives at large, which may pave the way for others to transgress boundaries.

Research Questions

The following research questions are explored in the current study:

1. How might we understand the experience of sexuality that may be considered 'grotesque' or against conventional expectations, by self or by others?
2. How might we understand how women's experiences with the 'grotesque' shape their sense of self?

Blended Philosophical Framework for the Methodological Choice

Accept no one's definition of your life, define yourself

- Harvey Fierstein cited in Thurston Johnson, Zoggle: Your Mind (2005)

The methodology adopted for this research project is a blended framework of Hermeneutic Phenomenology, which is informed through a women-centered approach, that is inclusive of Transpersonal considerations. As Frost et. al. (2014) discuss, the phenomenological research method is an important lens to use when being curious with sexuality, and exploring the phenomenon in question, as this research "… emerged because of dissatisfaction with research conducted within other paradigms that was perceived to be irrelevant to, or misrepresentation of, the lives of people" (Mertens, 2009, p. 29). This method is especially significant to the current landscape of women's bodies, as the dominant paradigm in women's sexuality research centers around a measurable or reductionist approach. It is important that emerging research respects the lived experience of women and does not limit the knowledge shared, while being open to exploring

transcendent experiences. The following discussion provides a brief background and description of each approach and the relation to each other, and the support for exploring this thesis, through this blended method.

Phenomenological Research

Phenomenology was developed by Edward Husserl, in response to the Cartesian philosophy informed tangible, empirical positivistic paradigm that dominated science and philosophy (Laverty, 2003). Philosophically, Husserl felt like there could be a greater reality explored by deepening our understanding through the world of consciousness, through the relation of consciousness to objects, and by arguing that mind and objects occur in the same experience (Laverty, 2003). Therefore, for humans to understand the world, they had to understand consciousness. This movement was opposing the Cartesian paradigm as it posited a reality, separate from the individual (Laverty, 2003).

His exploration led to the idea of intentionality; consciousness is never without an object, humans are always conscious, even if they are only conscious of not being conscious (Osborne, 1990). Laverty (2003) summed up Husserl's view on intentionality:

> Husserl viewed intentionality and essences as key to our understanding of this phenomenology. Husserl saw intentionality as a process where the mind is directed toward objects of study. Conscious awareness was the starting point in building one's knowledge of reality. By intentionally directing one's focus, Husserl proposed one could develop a description of particular realities. This process is one of coming face to face with the ultimate structures of consciousness. These structures were described as essences that made the object identifiable as a particular type of object or experience, unique from others (p. 22).

His theory was an attempt to dissolve the mind/body paradigm and expand the possibility of what consciousness could focus on. He argued that this very experience created the particular reality one was living in.

Initially, some phenomenological researchers argued that they would be able to suspend or put aside their biases and personal interpretations, a practice known as "bracketing" (Kafle, 2011). Husserl believed this needed to occur in order to be successful with the essence of the research (Laverty, 2003). Husserl believed that individuals could remove themselves and halt their belief systems and judgements to the outer world, to see the phenomena clearly and fully.

Some Feminists and Hermeneutic Phenomenological researchers argue that it is impossible to 'bracket' out our assumptions and that "…preconceptions are an integral part of the process of understanding…" (Wilke, 2002, p. 4). This approach recognizes that the researcher and the co-researchers all have biases which are inevitably part of the research process (Osborne, 1990). "Hermeneutic phenomenology asserts that all research is value-laden, since researchers bring their biases, prejudices and assumptions to the research and these color the findings" (Wilke, 2002, p. 5). Heidegger, who did not believe in bracketing, expanded on phenomenology with a context-focused lens, and created the other branch of phenomenology: Hermeneutics phenomenology. I agree with the notion that a researcher cannot bracket out their own biases; thus, I chose to use Hermeneutic Phenomenology for this study.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of lived experience and the key themes that illuminate that experience (Osborne, 1990). The phenomenological approach moved towards hermeneutics when Heidegger "introduced the concept of *dasein* [the human way of being in the world] (Kumar, 2012, p. 794); 'Being-in-the-world' is how knowledge is derived from our experience in the world (Kafle, 2011). However,

Hermeneutics recognizes that transparent reflection of an experience does not exist, as it is always an interpretation (Kafle, 2011). Hermeneutics is also "concerned with the understanding and interpretation of our being in the world and how our different ways of being in the world are connected to our understanding of things" (Kafle, 2011, p. 186). Further, hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with "the life world or human experience as it is lived…with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). I chose this approach as I believe it allows for the research conducted within this framework to be substantial in depth, connected, and holistic for the co-researchers who have the courage to be involved. This is "... not just to another awareness of another perspective with previously unrecognized body of knowledge, but to a radically different way of being-in-the-world" (Valle, 1998, p. 273).

Heidegger assumed that all human knowledge is interpretation because it is based on a historical-cultural context; our experiences are based on previous understandings and as such our meanings associated with these experiences are continually a reflection of our contexts (Moules, McCaffrey, Field & Laing, 2015). Language is a means through which culture is inherited, made sense of, shared, and discussed. I agree it is difficult to separate ourselves from the experience, we are not able to "turn around fast enough" to remain objective since interpretation is the cornerstone of the process of meaning (Gadamer, 1989).

Gadamer (1989) expanded on Hermeneutics by focusing on the language used and spoken, as simply a description of *being*. The only way *being* can be expressed is through language since this is how meaning in research is shared (Van Manen, 1990). Gadamer focuses on language and writing as the ways in which humans make sense of

the world; interpretation occurs through the use of language, which is a shared aspect of understanding through conversation (Moules et. al., 2015).

Hermeneutic phenomenology continues to be built on today by scholars and researchers who have added to the literature and are able to apply the knowledge to professionals in the field (Findlay, 2011).

Hermeneutics aligns with Feminist methodology since, as researchers, it is important to understand humans from a holistic perspective as they are "complex, multifaceted beings embedded in a multi-layered network of relations" (Wilke, 2002, p. 6). Feminist researchers agree that there is an inseparable connection between mind and body, lived experience, and historical and social context (Finlay, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2013; Luft, 2002). Therefore, the "…efforts toward understanding the unique experiences of each individual involve not so much a mental or intellectual process, but rather a way of being, a way of behaving in our existence" (McManus-Holroyd, 2007, p. 3). This concept of a complex individual living in a complex socio-historical moment would make a quantitative approach to this topic less effective than that of the Feminist Hermeneutic Phenomenological model.

Women-Centered Approach via Feminist Research

> *Research is considered grounded in a set of theoretical traditions that privilege women's issues, voices and lived experiences.*
>
> - Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, Feminist Research Practice: A Primer (2013)

The focus of this project is to draw consideration to women's self-defined female 'grotesque' sexual experiences by using their voice to share their process of moving through barriers, and transcending these into life-long learnings and intentions. The

importance of gender was discussed in Chapter Two and it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore all Feminist analysis regarding female sexuality. However, major ideas of relevance will be explored. Feminist approaches to research are vast and complex, as is any intersection of identity; however, it is important to remain conscious of women's stories, and who may or may not be included in sharing these stories (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Women's needs, voices, and meanings have not been a core part of the paradigm applied to understanding their sexuality (Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2018); this study is dependent on women sharing their experiences, in a way that is safe and significant to them. A philosophical assumption of this paradigm is that feminist research aims to "achieve understanding through interpretation and adopts a process that clarifies the phenomenon of interest in its context" (Dowling & Cooney, 2012, p. 25) and will honour women's voice through the opportunity to share their narrative (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Mertens, 2009). Feminist researchers are interested in "…getting at the subjective understanding an individual brings to a given situation or set of circumstances" (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 189) and giving them a voice. It is also important to note that transcendent, pleasure-oriented experiences in women's sexuality research have often been overlooked, undermined, and dismissed as not valuable in quantitative studies and methods.

Transpersonal Considerations for this Research

> *The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained to liberation from the self.*
>
> - Albert Einstein, The World as I See It (1949)

There are experiences that are captured through conventional or even measurable means; there are also experiences that may not be fully encapsulated by these

assessments, even with a phenomenological and Feminist lens. Transpersonal considerations offer the opportunity to study human development and its relationship with the Transpersonal (Anderson & Braud, 2013). According to Anderson and Braud (2013), the two questions posed for qualitative research exploration are:

1. The *nature* of transpersonal experiences – can be explored by means of various descriptive qualitative approaches like phenomenological, life stories, case studies, feminist approaches.
2. How the experiences are *conceptualized, interpreted and understood*, especially by those who experience them – can be addressed by various theoretical and interpretive approaches [such as hermeneutics]. (p. 243-244)

Transpersonal exploration thus invites awareness and allows for the honouring of pleasurable expressions through the variety of opportunities and pathways, and allows for different states of consciousness of these experiences. These expressions and descriptions are often missed in sexual research, as sexuality is an area where Transpersonal inquiry is needed more (Wade, 2013).

Overall, the chosen approach allows for an honouring and interpretation of the data through a holistic and encompassing Tantric nondual perspective. It accepts meaning and expression through the dual world and the non-dual realm, which is especially important for sexuality research with women (Long, 2013; G. Ogden, 2018; Wade, 2013). Therefore, the "…efforts toward understanding the unique experiences of each individual involve not so much a mental or intellectual process, but rather a way of being, a way of behaving in our existence" (McManus-Holroyd, 2007, p. 3). This concept of a complex individual living in a complex socio-historical moment would make a

quantitative approach to this topic less effective than that of the Feminist-Hermeneutic Phenomenological model. Finlay (2011) suggests that "both therapy and phenomenological research involve a journey of evolving self-other understanding and growth" (p. 67); therefore, the value of this work aligns with offering clinicians the opportunity to grow themselves and learn.

A Feminist Hermeneutic Phenomenological model is a non-empirical approach, which supports the idea that there is no objective truth (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Osborne, 1990; Van Manen, 1990). The philosophical assumptions underlying the foundational concepts of a Feminist and Hermeneutic Phenomenological methodology are complementary (Luft, 2002). Writing phenomenologically within this paradigm is an endeavor on its own, and is highly challenging due to the reflective nature of the process, which also nicely aligns with feminist philosophy. "The personal is professional" is a common Feminist phrase used in dissolving the invisible barrier suggesting that what we do as humans can be compartmentalized. Similarities in Feminist and phenomenological centered writing include that the writer cannot predict how the writing and the process will change their being-in-the-world. Van Manen (2007) quotes Michel Foucault:

> I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end. (p. 20)

It is through the writing process that the internal becomes external; change is cultivated through the actions and choices of writer, and the reader's being in the world can be transformed. Inclusion of Transpersonal considerations also aligns nicely with the

Feminist Hermeneutic Phenomenological research practices. In the Transpersonal approach, the researcher is "the most important tool" in the investigation of the topic (Anderson & Braun, 2013, p. 252). Some other transpersonal skills required for research, which align effectively in this blended framework chosen include:

Working with intention: awareness of, and deliberate framing of, intentions (attention directed toward a specific goal) for all phases of a research project; facilitates the realization of study aims.

Quieting and slowing: sets the stage for use of other skills, relaxes and quiets, reduces distractions and "noise" at many levels, reduces structures and constraints, allows change, allows fuller observations and appreciation of more subtle aspects of what is studied.

Working with attention: practice in deploying, focusing, and shifting attention; deautomatizing attention; attending to different forms and channels of information; changing focal plane or magnification of attention; developing witnessing consciousness; *meditation* [and mindfulness practice] is really a special way of deploying attention.

Direct knowing, intuition, empathic identification: identifying with the object of knowing; knowing through presence, empathy, sympathy, compassion, love, being, becoming, participation, parapsychological processes.

Accessing unconscious process and materials: Reducing egoic control; tacit knowing; liminal and transitional conditions; incubation; attention to vehicles that carry previously unconscious information; identifying unconscious tendencies.

Play and the creative arts: fostering curiosity, creativity, and insight; encouraging beginner's mind; provides novelty, new combinations, encourages excitement, enthusiasm and exploration (Anderson & Braun, 2013, p. 254).

These skills further guide the philosophical assumptions and research design of this blended framework. The next section discusses the research design and procedure.

The Research Design

Hermeneutic Phenomenology is more of an orientation than a method per se; the research is guided more by philosophical assumptions than the procedure of the research (Laverty, 2003; Kafle, 2011; Kumar, 2012). "A methodology is not a correct method to follow, but a creative approach to understanding, using whatever approaches are responsive to particular… subject matter" (Laverty, 2003, p. 28). By using a blended framework, qualitative methods allow women a voice about their own sexual experiences, as they can speak for themselves (Daniluk, 1993), and share their perspectives, learnings, and trials. Both Feminist and Hermeneutic Phenomenological researchers place awareness on the power dynamics within the research relationship, context, and interpretation of meaning (Luft, 2002).

A strength of this approach is how interviews are focused on a marginalized group of individuals (women in a patriarchal culture) "…and [are] concentrated on historical meanings of experience and their developmental and cumulative effects on individual and societal levels" (Laverty, 2003, p. 27) in terms of breaking through patriarchal structures and discovering what sexuality means to them. Daniluk (1993) argues that limiting women to a physiologically based discussion of their orgasmic experiences marginalizes women, by intensifying the stress around female sexuality.

Other quantitative study designs also seem limiting as they only measure female satisfaction through methods involving empirical measurements accounting only for physical orgasm (G. Ogden, 2018; Woeterman & van den Brink, 2012).

A Feminist Hermeneutic Phenomenological method seems more apt for this area of research, because these "data" are based on women's experiences. This approach seeks to expand the understanding of female sexuality and the pleasure for women who have been unable to enjoy their experiences for themselves. "Phenomenology brings us back to our experience – something we take for granted and 'pass over in silence'… grabs our attention and reminds us what it means to be human" (Finlay, 2011, p. 25). By being reflective and insightful about experiences, there can be a recognition that even the silences between the dialogue are significant (Van Manen, 1990). Through paying attention to not only what is said, but also to what is not spoken, a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences with their own sexuality will be produced.

Research Procedure

Selection of Co-Researchers

The women interviewed are referred to as co-researchers, as an attempt to dissolve power imbalances in the study; as a feminist, transpersonal researcher, equality and appreciation for the mutual and cooperative engagement in this project is important to me (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Osborne, 1990). These women were courageous to share their story through the interviews, which took place in the beginning of 2015; there were about 25 inquiries about participating in this project; however, many women declined due to being recorded, but continued to share their experience privately.

Recruitment of Co-Researchers

After obtaining ethical approval for the study through the University of Lethbridge's Human Subject Research Committee, co-researchers were recruited via a letter describing the researcher, the purpose of the study, and information inviting them to assist in snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Appendix D contains the scripts and posters utilized for recruitment. Snowball sampling was used for this research project; as co-researchers were recruited "through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest" (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). In this case, women comfortable discussing their awareness of self-defined female sexual 'grotesque' lived experiences, exploring how they worked through the 'grotesque' sexual experiences, and integrating the learnings into wholeness, were sought as co-researchers.

Sample Population and Sample Size

Snowball sampling is ideal for this research project in that the population studied is of low communal reflectiveness, which refers to participants being 'hidden' or 'hard-to-reach', in contrast to populations with relatively high social visibility. While researchers studying populations with low communal reflectiveness "might have some difficulty obtaining access to these types of populations, the knowledge of where to locate them is not a problem" (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 146). Snowball sampling is advocated as a successful way to locate hard-to-reach populations. These hidden groups can be accessed by referrals from personal acquaintances and colleagues of the researcher, who will be informed about the study and invited to participate if they are interested in doing so (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In addition, letters of invitation to participate were distributed through my supervisor's network; these recruitment strategies

ultimately resulted in obtaining six voluntary co-researchers.

Data

The purpose of this study was to acquire the essential features of participants' experience and the meaning they have acquired from these experiences. Data collection and analysis for the current research was composed of the steps borrowed from Hesse-Biber, (2013), Laverty (2003), Mertens (2009) and Osborne (1990), as outlined below:

Interviews as Data Collection

The researcher conducted qualitative interviews in person; an "… interview is the most common procedure for data gathering" (Osborne, 1990, p. 84). Feminist and Hermeneutics Phenomenological methods access an individual's subjective experiences of the world and the diversity of realities spoken, as well as the reality that is often hidden and unarticulated (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Kafle, 2011; Laverty, 2003; Osborne, 1990). The researcher became involved with the co-researchers through "… sharing identities and stories with one another [which] is thought to increase reciprocity and rapport in the interview process, thus breaking down the notions of power and authority invested in the role of the researcher" (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 199). Each co-researcher shared how impactful it was for them to have an opportunity to share their experience with vulnerability, without feeling judgement.

Not only did this challenge the power dynamics between researcher and co-researchers but their openness to new horizons allowed for reflective dialogue. This enabled new learning and created greater safety, and therefore facilitated a more trusting relationship with the co-researcher(s). Osborne (1990) describes establishing rapport as the most important element for data collection since a strong connection allows deeper,

more meaningful descriptions of the phenomenon being discussed (Van Manen, 1990), and is imperative to a Transpersonal approach to research (Anderson & Braun, 2013).

These data were collected through semi-structured interviews, where the majority of the discussion was led by the co-researcher, versus being led by the researcher (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Laverty, 2003; Mertens, 2009). In-depth interviewing is a "particularly valuable research method feminist researchers can use to gain insight into the world of their participants" (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 184). The-depth interview resembled a conversation where the role of the researcher was minimized in order to listen to what the co-researcher was inferring (Hesse-Biber, 2013). During interviews, Osborne (1990) suggests the following sequence for data collection: brief preliminary telephone interview, in-depth face-to-face interview, and a follow-up interview if co-researchers requested (Hesse-Biber, 2013). The purpose of the initial interview of the current study was to discuss the details for the study and to engage in discourse to see if the co-researcher felt comfortable to move forward with an interview. Co-researchers were given the opportunity to choose the location of their interviews; all occurred in their homes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Co-researchers signed the consent form (see Appendix E) and were asked questions from an interview guide (see Appendix F) during the interview. Throughout the interviews, the researcher tried to maintain an open stance to the co-researchers' descriptions.

Confidentiality Concerns

The only individual handling the data was the researcher, who personally transcribed all of the interviews. All of these data were saved on a password encrypted external hard drive. The hard drive remained locked in the researcher's filing cabinet;

only the researcher had access to the cabinet key, and the hard drive password. Please see the ethics section of this chapter for further discussion of these issues.

Analysis

Osborne (1990) asserts that there is no universally acceptable way to analyze data and that the choice depends primarily upon the purpose of the research. The analysis steps are outlined below:

Step 1. Obtain a holistic sense of the data in its entirety, the researcher transcribed the interviews.

Step 2. Once transcription was complete, the researcher began the process of phenomenological data analysis by re-reading the transcripts numerous times. "Meaning is found as we are constructed by the world, while at the same time we are constructing the world from our own background and experiences" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). Notes were made regarding the researcher's reactions and the meanings that surfaced from this analysis. Over time, and multiple readings, large surface themes arose.

Step 3. In this stage, the researcher focused on the experience to which the language referred, namely, on the meaning of the experience rather than on the surface linguistic structure. The researcher focused on what was said and also what was implied, both through silence and by what is not being said (Van Manen, 1990).

Step 4. Once the themes and sub-themes were chosen and titled, co-researchers who expressed the desire to participate in a follow-up interview were contacted and given a list of the themes and sub-themes. The co-researchers were encouraged to share how the researcher's depictions compared with their experience, as well as whether any aspects of their experiences were omitted or missing (Hesse-Biber, 2013). In this way, the

co-researchers and the researcher co-created meaning (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Furthermore, the researcher completed the interpretation and meaning-making from the data alongside co-researchers, as awareness of biases and previous experiences are important considerations for the applicability of this research (Hesse-Biber, 2013); van Manen (2007) elaborates on meaning:

> Meaning is not something that can just be scooped up from the spoils and layers of debris of daily living. Meaning is already implicated in the mystery of pre-reflective reflection of seeing, hearing, touching, being touched, and being-in-touch with the world, and the enigma of reflecting on the phenomenality of all this. New experiences may grant us unsuspected encounters with significances that we did not know before. Thoughtful reflections may bring ancient and novel sights and insights into perspectival view. The phenomenological pathos is the loving project of bringing all the living of life to meaningful expression through the imageries and languages of phenomenological writing, composing, and expressing. (p. 18)

Osborne (1990) understands this to be the respiralling effect, and this process allowed the researcher and co-researcher to achieve a pre-reflexive depth of the experience, and to reach its core (Finlay, 2011).

Step 5: The researcher printed out each interview on different colors of paper, cut out the lines, and placed them each under the theme through which they fit. This was a challenging part of completing the analysis as the researcher found it emotionally challenging to physically cut up the interviews, but also find the placement of the quotes. It became very clear, as the researcher completed this sorting, that it is extremely challenging to place quotes under one heading, as gender, sexuality, and patriarchal restrictions were present in every single quote, and different facets of experience and meaning were often captured in the same quotation.

Step 6. The researcher created a thorough description of the themes and direct

quotations were used to support and illustrate these themes.

Step 7. These themes and quotes were moved and re-written multiple times, before the researcher felt satisfied with their placement.

Ethical Considerations for Research Proposal

There are several ethical issues that have been addressed in this research project. To ensure ethical treatment of the co-researchers, several precautions were taken. First, co-researchers were fully informed regarding the purpose of the study and the nature of their involvement within it. The researcher informed the interview co-researchers how the information they provided would be used after the interviews, stating that the anonymity of author statements would be ensured in any form of publication. Once the oral description of both the confidentiality and anonymity processes were complete, the researcher presented the prospective co-researchers with a written consent form outlining the description of how confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained, along with the research project's purpose. The consent form was signed before the co-researcher was engaged in the study and interviewed. The consent form not only gave the researcher permission to use the acquired responses from the interviews, but it also indicated that the co-researchers were fully aware of the research project's purpose, along with the risks and opportunities entailed in their agreement to participate in the study (Mertens, 2009; Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2000). They were reminded that it was their right to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason, without negative repercussion of any kind. This process of informed consent was completed in an array of ways: there was a gentle reminder on the letter they received before the initial interview, these parameters were explained throughout the orientation stage of the in-depth interview, and was also

outlined on the form requiring their signature (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

The next issue of concern deals directly with confidentiality. All the issues surrounding confidentiality were communicated to the co-researchers through the printed Informed Consent form they received, as well as through conversation. They were asked to sign the Informed Consent form prior to the initial interview commencing. To help them make an informed decision regarding their participation, co-researchers were encouraged to ask questions regarding the research, (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Orb et. al, 2000). Participants did not receive an honorarium for their involvement with this research in order to ensure their purely voluntary participation.

Co-researchers were notified concerning protocols surrounding the secure storage of their interviews on a password encrypted hard drive. The safekeeping of their information was of the utmost importance, as these women were opening up about their very sensitive and personal experiences surrounding sexuality. Other ethical issues included the potential risk that the interview process may elicit distress or emotional and psychological discomfort while discussing their sexual experiences. Co-researchers were offered referral information about free and affordable counseling services. The co-researchers each shared that the beneficial aspects of participating in the study outweighed any distress that arose from their participation.

On completion of transcription, the audio recordings of interviews were destroyed; however, if the co-researchers expressed that they preferred their data be removed prior to this point for any reason, the researcher assured them that she would do so. The only person who had access to participants' real identities was the researcher. The research team (Thesis Committee or Supervisor) were only familiar with pseudonyms,

which were chosen by participants, and assigned to their audio recordings. Any findings published based on themes found in this research will be modified in order to maintain co-researchers' confidentiality. This is especially important because these women discuss details about some of their personal and private experiences, which could make it very easy for people who are familiar with them to identify who they are (Orb, et. al., 2000).

Feminist and Hermeneutic Phenomenological methodology also suggests that it is necessary and ethical to be aware of power dynamics between researcher and co-researchers. The "…relationships in social research should be potentially negotiable and equal, allowing and encouraging participants to challenge researchers to continually reflect on their activities" (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 79). Part of the work during these interviews was to create a space where individuals were learning from one another rather than purposely creating power differentials among them. The researcher opened up opportunities to discuss power dynamics and if they were detected, offered to work through what was arising, in order to alleviate the disparity. Co-researchers were also given the opportunity to articulate what they felt were the main themes through the interview based on their own sexual experiences. As the researcher completing the data analysis, I feel compelled to share that I really struggled with power dynamics while working through the transcripts and in choosing which quotes would demonstrate themes best. My own biases were against power dynamics, and I intended to honour co-researchers' own words and experience, stay with the purpose of acknowledging the power in their words, and honour their vulnerability by questioning the power dynamics associated with these choices.

One final consideration when pursuing phenomenological inquiry was that

researchers must be aware of how their own previous experiences or knowledge impact the research (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Martens, 2009; G. Ogden, 2018; Osborne, 1990; van Manen, 1990). This is known as reflexivity, "a process by which the [researchers] recognize, examine, and understand how their social background, location and assumptions can influence the research" (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 3). This way, researchers can account for personal biases and consider how they may impact how the data is collected and analyzed. I remained as mindful as I could be through this process, by having regular meetings with my supervisor regarding my own biases, experiences, and interpretations of the results, and engaging in reflection about my own experiences and perspectives prior to the research and throughout the analysis and write up process. The next chapter presents themes that arose from interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR: MEETING THE CO-RESEARCHERS AND EXPLORING THEIR VOICES VIA THEMATIC ANALYSIS

There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you.

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on A Road* (1942)

This chapter shares findings of co-researchers' lived experiences with a brief introduction to intersectional components deemed important to their identity of "feminine being" (Lysebeth, 2001). These co-researchers reflected on their sexual identity, sexuality, and the impact of their gender on development. As discussed previously, I am an implicated researcher utilizing a Feminist Hermeneutic method, which, at the heart of these two philosophies, means I am not separate from these phenomena (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Kafle, 2011). Thus, my own experience carries familiarities and connection with the women's self-identified 'grotesque' sexual experiences. The women voluntarily agreed to voice their self-made meaning and understanding, as consent is a critical aspect of any feminist and hermeneutic analysis (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Kafle, 2011).

Meeting the Co-Researchers

> *When I see, someone stand fully in their truth or when I see someone fall down and get back up, and, say, 'damn. That really hurt, but this is important to me and I'm going again' – my gut reaction is 'what a bad ass'.*
>
> – Brene Brown, Rising Strong (2017)

This study was comprised of five female co-researchers. Below is a brief description of each woman, along with their personally chosen pseudonym.

Jax – Honouring Needs Without Judgement

Jax identifies as a 32-year-old cis-gendered woman. She has completed some training in massage therapy. She is in a monogamous relationship, but is not ruling out

moving to a polyamorous relationship with her current partner, should the opportunity arise. She identifies as having a sexually fluid orientation. Jax describes the family she grew up in as emotionally supportive, where most topics could be discussed without judgement. While they never addressed sex directly, Jax spoke about how growing up in a supportive family impacted her arousal template in terms of her need for tactility.

Jax initially struggled to identify with the term 'female sexual grotesque'; when asked to describe what arose for her when discussing the term, she felt a strong reaction. Upon further dialogue, she described her personal experience of female sexual 'grotesque' as activities women are not supposed to engage in. She shared an example of her own hook ups with multiple partners, which defies cultural norms on acceptable exploration of women's sexuality (Vrangalova, 2018). Jax learned to frame these explorations as 'learning experiences'. Other experiences – being sexualized, being 'the other woman', and having a non-consenting sexual experience – deeply impacted how she came to realize her own sexual needs. Jax is active in the BDSM community, and describes the connection as a way to honour her sexual needs and desires without facing judgement. According to Jax, honouring her sexual needs and wants increases her inner empowerment. Jax also discusses the energetic component Atlantic Canada holds for her; she described how the ocean helps soothe her Being, and regularly washes away any negative residue, if she experiences life as being overwhelming. She finds walking along the ocean brings her back home and allows her to simply rest in what reality is.

Sarah – Christian and Kinky

Sarah identifies as a 27-year-old cis-gendered woman. She considers herself bi-sexual and an Ally, and was a vocal advocate for the Gay Straight Alliance formation

during high school. She now identifies as sexually fluid, with a preference for women in emotional partnerships. She is currently single and looking to become involved with a polyamorous relationship. She is completing her degree in Psychology and discussed the impact of taking Women and Gender Studies courses; she now has language for gendered experiences that did not fit the imposed gender binary and heteronormative constructs she was subjected to when growing up. She grew up in the rural prairies, in what she describes as a conservative Christian household. She described a few experiences within her family of origin and the vital impact they had on her sexual arousal template, including her coming out process and relational trauma history. She has reconciled her family of origin's religious values and currently identifies as Christian and Kinky.

Sarah is very active in the BDSM community and makes meaning from these experiences with women by educating them about healthy kink practices, and how to reconcile any shame experienced due to previous trauma. She describes some of her most healing experiences as having been through the Kink community, particularly her ability to share her sexual truths with no judgement. She is a proud feminist and activist for the sexual health of individuals who identify and align with the LGBT+ spectrum.

KT – Kinky and Highly Sexual

KT identifies as a 29-year-old cis-gendered woman. She has completed a post-secondary degree and is currently working in male-dominated trades, until a vocation opens up in her field of expertise. She has been in a monogamous relationship for almost eight years, and identifies her sexual orientation as hetero-flexible.

KT grew up in a rural prairie community and was brought up in a family that allowed natural exploration of sexuality during childhood. She believes this had a

shielding effect of how the ‘grotesque’ impacted her sexual being, and on navigating sexual health. She describes experiences that impacted her sense of the ‘grotesque’, however she believes overall her family contributed positively to her sexual outlook.

She has been active in the BDSM community for 11 years and is supportive of BDSM exploration. She explores her sexual and sensual nature through consensual BDSM practices. She notes that being a part of the BDSM community has not only helped solidify her own sexual preferences, but also adds to her enjoyment in life since she can mentor women who are just entering this domain of exploration. She describes these experiences as helping her solidify her own sexual boundaries and needs, while working alongside other women in the dungeon. She feels she gives back to women and to sexuality by participating regularly in post-secondary research projects about women’s sexuality, including both quantitative and qualitative studies. Her awareness expanded during this interview when she recognized how a deep meaningful transcendent experience can shift how women relate to the world.

Barb – Feminist and Exploring Her Sexuality

Barb identified as a female; however, she also described her self-healing journey as a way to broaden from a binary gender identification into a more energetic and spiritual understanding, while interacting in the world. Barb identifies her sexual orientation as sexually fluid. She is completing graduate school for counselling psychology at 30 years of age. She grew up in a family where the only discussion of sex and sexuality was through an anatomy lens. She described having a sexual trauma background, from her childhood to early adult years, and the impact these experiences had on her understanding of what it meant to be sexual. Barb discusses how her sexual

education experience in school was unhelpful in terms of discussing sex and the exploration of sexuality; an abstinence-based approach in a Christian school perpetuated the shame she felt from the previous sexual trauma she had experienced. She describes growing up in a rural Alberta community and the impact this had on her Being.

Barb shared her insights about the outcomes of these experiences, describing some as painful lessons of navigating the world through "false self-representations", which to her meant the experiences where she wasn't living like herself (an example she used was "acting like a slut"). Barb discusses how her sexual trauma bonded her to an unhealthy sense of sexuality and led to a string of unhealthy relationships. This continued until she entered therapy and was able to move through some residual effects of those experiences. She discusses how some of these experiences contribute to her understanding of female sexual 'grotesque' experiences. Barb recently got out of an unhealthy relationship and describes her current process as working through some residual effects of that relationship.

She identifies as having a past in which she was very active in the BDSM community, but is currently taking a break from that expression of herself. She remains in support of the BDSM community and the opportunities it provides for women in sexual exploration. Barb identifies as a Feminist activist who enjoys working with women and advocating for minorities' empowerment. She is particularly interested in advocating for women's issues such as reproductive rights and reclaiming sexual power. She enjoys giving back to women by working with them in a therapeutic capacity and remaining connected through female energy circles. She finds connecting and processing in the mountains, and being grounded with trees, often aids in moving through triggering times.

Stef – A Wave of the Ocean

Stef identifies as female; however, she describes her orientation to the world through a spiritual and energetic emphasis, rather than from a gendered lens. She has always been curious about how gendered expectations impact her being in the world. She is 33 years of age and is completing graduate school for counselling psychology. Stef discussed growing up in a household with domestic violence; she describes the lasting impact a poor relationship with her mother had on her ability to trust women and make lasting relationships. She also discusses the impact her sexual trauma history has on her mental health and expression of her sexuality. She sees her process of moving through some of her self-defined female sexual 'grotesque' experiences as necessary for her well-being. Stef is engaged and has been in a monogamous relationship for seven years.

By reframing and understanding her experiences through a psycho-spiritual framework, Stef is able to remain open to receiving healing and continuing to grow on all levels. Part of her spiritual process is engaging in shamanic rituals, and she also discusses how being connected to the Atlantic part of the country helps her feel grounded and connected to Mother Earth. She continues to work alongside women who are fleeing domestic violence and trauma as a way to give back to women. She is also involved with some counselling energy groups, where the practice focuses on expanding their awareness of self and spiritual growth, with an emphasis on female connection.

TC – Feminist Advocate & Healing

TC identifies as a 31-year-old cis-gendered woman. She has completed a diploma in child and youth care, and is continuing on to a bachelor's degree, which will allow her to continue to work with youth from troubled families. TC describes her family of origin

as a source of a great deal of trauma and emotional pain; she describes her very first 'grotesque' sexual experience as incest that she experienced at the hand of her father growing up. TC describes a bond that she understood as traumatic and how she continues to process and work through the impact this has on her ability to be intimate with others. As a single female, TC discusses how the hooking up phenomenon has been interesting to navigate, as others' expectations of women's grooming practices has been a way for patriarchy to pressure her on how her body looks.

TC is a feminist activist and is a part of several feminist committees. She describes her advocacy for women's and trans-individual's rights as what fuels her passion of fighting for equality. TC also describes her part time job as a Feminist porn producer; she finds this work to be very liberating as it allows women to be in control of their money and bodies, in an industry dominated by men and patriarchy. She hopes to raise social consciousness through being active in these capacities.

Outline of Themes

The analysis produced three themes. Theme A: *Patriarchy as a Sculptor of the 'Grotesque'*, showed the influence of patriarchy on participants' lived experiences with seeing themselves as 'grotesque'. Many co-researchers described their journey with patriarchy as creating a sense of themselves that was tied to negative labels and messages from external forces, such as media, limited sexual education, peers, or religion. Other areas discussed were their trauma histories and how their understanding of their history impacted their sense of 'female sexual grotesque', along with impactful experiences throughout their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Theme B, *Denying Authentic Self,* outlines some of the dilemmas the co-researchers experienced when they aligned with external barriers and expectations placed on them, and how aligning in this way did not allow them to live authentically. When attempting to live up to patriarchal expectations, these women described suppressing their needs which led to devastating consequences of living through "false-representations"; which for some was a way to express a disconnection from their true selves. Some participants outlined this sense as an "ego", which to them, meant a way to cope with these patriarchal pressures. All co-researchers spoke in some way about this theme of denying their authentic selves. This experience also paradoxically pushed them to attempt to break through these societal restraints placed on them.

For Theme C: *Becoming Transformed Through Transgression,* co-researchers spoke about breaking through the external constraints placed on them (those of patriarchy or what some discussed contributing to the making of the "ego"). Co-researchers noted that transgressing these barriers, and transforming the constraints that they have been living through, allowed them to experience authenticity and sexual empowerment.

It is important to note that each of these themes are not mutually exclusive or linear, and that it was challenging to put them into 'separate phases' or even under different headings, as I found it nearly impossible to tease apart the interweaving of gender, sexuality, and the impact of patriarchal constructs on women's perceptions and enactment of their sexuality. In each section, the women shared their own meanings, created from these experiences and definitions, as a way to make sense of their existence. The reader will see that in each section, co-researchers often shared the value that each of these experiences had for them individually, and for women as a collective whole.

Theme A: Patriarchy as A Sculptor of the 'Grotesque'

Below I outline many ways in which patriarchy sculpts the experience of the 'grotesque', for each woman interviewed. The co-researchers specified that their unique individual definition encapsulates their personal experience, and I see this as an important way to share their voices. Please see Appendix G for individual definitions. Each co-researcher discussed forces outside of themselves and the messages from these forces that impacted their way of Being in the world. Each co-researcher discussed in some way how media messages and religion, and impactful experiences throughout their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood affected them. Interpretation of this theme is informed by Heideggerian phenomenological notion of *Dasein*, "what does it mean to exist" (Moules et. al., 2015), and speaks to how external experiences created fragmentation in co-researchers' sense of self; thereby impacting, reinforcing, and embedding a way of being that was based on patriarchal ideals.

Classic vs. 'Grotesque' Body

> *It's work having a Vagina. Guys don't think that it's work but it is. You think it shows up like that to the event. It doesn't. Every night it's like getting ready for its first Quincearnea, believe me.*
>
> - Amy Schumer cited in Doreen Chila-Jones, Say What? 670 Quotes That Should Have Never Been Said (2018)

Co-researchers spoke about their bodies and compared them to measures that were placed on them externally. Each woman's description has commonalities, particularly in comparing their 'grotesque' body parts, bodily fluids, and body functioning to a classic body (Bahtkin, 1984). The first section explores how male-dominated work atmospheres made dealing with menstrual cycles difficult.

KT and Barb discussed experiences working in male dominated fields, and how male colleagues commented about them having a menstrual cycle. Barb discussed working a summer job in a manufacturing plant, and how she had to navigate the bathroom in the plant as there was only one:

> Yeah, I remember working a couple summers at a manufacturing plant and [pause] I was in my 20s, so I obviously had my period. So, I bought pads and tampons and I knew I should have left them in my car, but I didn't have many breaks, so I just put them under the sink. Of course, there were no doors on the cupboards, and from the day I brought them in, either the men would make comments about my time of the month when they would see that some were being taken out, or they would unwrap them and stick them to the wall and put ketchup on them. And I remember a time where someone unwrapped all the tampons and put them in the toilet… It was so fucking annoying.

KT also worked with men and had an experience that was similar,

> I worked on a construction site and the only place to go to the bathroom was the porta-potty, which there was only one of. Working 12-16 hour days, I couldn't hold it until I got home. I remember standing up and putting the lid down and I saw that there was blood in the bottom [pause] I had gotten my period and there was no way to hide it! The next guy who went in there after me, made a huge scene that he could not go to the bathroom "because there was blood in the bottom of it and a rolled-up toilet paper tampon" [pause], he said this in front of the whole crew… it was fucking maddening.

Both Barb and KT were antagonized by co-workers' responses to a natural process which occurs for each woman monthly. Despite their frustration, both felt a need to make their period inconspicuous by either trying to cover it up with toilet paper or not bringing in feminine hygiene products.

Both KT and Barb discussed how the men treated them after these events. KT further discussed her experience by explaining, "I was made fun of," and describing how the men mocked because her "period was so messy, and [pause] that '[we] didn't realize women bled so much.'" Barb said some of the comments regularly made to her included:

"I think you should be grossed out that you are something that bleeds for seven days and doesn't die"; "How many of those tampon things do you really need in a month?"; and, "I'll let all the men know that this is the 'safest' time for you to have sex." KT and Barb both used humor to discuss how confusing and irrational these comments were. Barb laughed while describing this experience, "wouldn't it be weirder if I didn't bleed every month?! [pause] and some of these men were married with daughters. I felt so sorry for their family; I'm glad my father wasn't that ignorant." KT also laughed at the men by saying during the interview, "What the fuck do they expect, where else am I going to go to the bathroom? I think [pause] it would be more gross if I was outside going to the bathroom and my used tampon was flying around in the wind! Could you imagine [laughs]". By using humor, both women were able to avoid shouldering what the men were saying, but these experiences still impacted them in the workplace.

Stef also talked about times in her life where she would not want others to know about her period:

> …at times in my life [pause] like the menstrual cycle, I'd be like, "Oh, I don't even say the word period." [pause] I would hide my pads and like, be very covert about being on my period, or like, wouldn't want to use tampons, afraid like, if I was swimming my string will come out, people would know. Like, for sure, like, that has been something that like, has been a source of stress for me maybe at times in my life…, but at this moment in time like, definitely, I think I've let go.

For a time, Stef struggled with even discussing her period or menstruation cycle and hid evidence that she had her period. She described a common fear among women: going swimming and having a tampon string fall out of their swimming suit.

Other references to menstruation included experiencing sexual activity during that time of the month and the judgement received from that. TC and Barb both discussed

experiences where men with whom they were sexual judged them for having sex while on their cycle. TC discussed that she did not have sex on her period until she entered college since she had a lot of prior trauma from the incest with her father, as he would only have sex with her when she was on her period, "because that was her and Daddy's special time". Barb described her sexual experiences in her late teens and 20s as "not having a preference of being sexual on or off my period. My high school boyfriend didn't care [pause] unless it got too 'messy'... it's so ridiculous when I reflect on some of this 'grotesque body' stuff." All of these experiences demonstrate how female body functions are used to control girls' and women's bodies in sexual situations and how natural processes that women go through are deemed as 'grotesque'.

The last 'grotesque' body focus for these women was body hair; all of the co-researchers discussed body hair. Stef said, "... some of the things that might be seen as 'grotesque' for women is like [pause] if you have body hair. That's seen as 'grotesque' because as women you're not supposed to have body hair". KT, also shared, "…I have been thinking a lot about the differences between women and men, lately. Where men are often accepted for having body hair, any hair on women that isn't eyebrows or head hair is scorned…". Stephanie and KT discuss the sense of 'grotesque' women feel because they are ridiculed if they have body hair.

TC also described the quandary girls and women go through in terms of keeping body hair or not:

> I do have body hair. There are certain circumstances that I remember just around body hair [pause] I used to sleep with a person, for years and years and you just kind of like, when you are younger you just get used to the idea of like, just don't have it. Like, when you're younger you don't think of "Should I have it, should I not?" I wasn't really given that opportunity, just, get rid of it all, that's just what

> everyone does. You like, talk about shaving your legs in grade six, you never think "Do I *have* to shave my legs?" … It wasn't until like, I was 23 when I started changing, like, getting more involved in political, social non-profits, justice, and stuff like that. … I remember one time I, I got a phone call and it was like late at night and I was like, "Oh maybe" and then I'm like, "Oh fuck, I have to shave," and like, shaving at like, 2 in the morning…

TC commented on the dilemma women experience if they want to have casual sex and their body is not shaved. Jax also discusses her dilemma of shaving, whether she is in a relationship or having casual sex:

> Is it shaved 100% of the time? Oh, fuck no, it's more for the special occasion kind of situation. It's, it's kind of like when you first start dating you shave it up on the regular, or before you start dating somebody, like, when you're just doing random hook-ups for the sexual release of it all, you probably shave on a regular basis because that's what society says you into people, right? But, now, I don't feel like, if I don't shave my genitals I don't feel I'm less of a person, I don't feel less sexy, I don't feel that I'm less worthy of being with a mate. I just feel like, "Man, that takes a lot of time and I just don't care!" [laughs]

TC and Jax illustrate what some of the co-researchers discussed as conditioning around removing body hair, the dilemma experienced when entering into casual sexual relationships, and the time commitment required to shave. Both women describe letting go of societal expectations and being able to feel okay, whether by passing on a casual hook-up or feeling like they are still sexy, even when they do not shave their body hair.

TC also described that at her job, if she isn't shaved, certain generations may comment about it, "I'm a server, at a place that has primarily um, baby boomers, primarily old men, y'know, once in a while they're like, 'Oh, you're doing the European thing.'" Barb also discussed how as a bartender she often would not get waxed in the winter and patrons would mention her armpits, commenting, "Trying something new this week? Is it that cold out?". Both Barb and TC said they were not bothered by these comments; however, these examples make it clear that even when women are working,

individuals comment when the body does not present as a classic body, and often try to bring it up in a 'non-offensive way'. Yet, both Barb and TC mentioned that "…men probably would not have to experience the same questions about body hair." How women determine exactly what constitutes a "classic body" is greatly influenced by mainstream media. The next section discusses media's impact on the co-researchers.

Living with the Media

> *If women woke up tomorrow and decided they really liked their bodies, just think of how many industries would go out of business…Females are far more likely than males to be sexualized in the media. The sexualization of girls through media, interpersonal relationships, and self-objectification appears to be increasing. Consequences include harm to girls' ability to develop healthy self-esteem and sexuality, an over-valuing of physical appearance, and endorsement of sexual stereotypes that depict women as sexual objects.*
>
> - Dr. Gail Dines cited in Blaise Hunter, Heroine: Embrace Your Flaws and Own Your Awesome (2018)

I begin this section with the above quote to illustrate that media is still a powerful force for patriarchal control over women's bodies. Hermeneutic understandings also support the notion of understanding being made, through language and other aesthetic experiences, such as music or art (Gadamer, 1989; Moules et. al., 2015). This relates to something that all of the co-researchers discussed which is the impact that the misrepresentation of women's bodies in the media had on them feeling grotesque. These media-established norms frequently cause women to attempt to become something they are not. Dines (2010) and Orenstein (2016) discuss these very dynamics between media and women's bodies. Co-researchers provided examples of when they pursued what is characterized in the media as a "classic" or "desirable" body, and the impact that had on them (Bahtkin, 1984; Dines, 2010; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012).

Within her definition of female sexual 'grotesque', KT discussed a female sexual image, the box in which women are expected to fit, and the consequences that arose for her when she did not match the box:

> A female sexual image is a society made thing because [pause] society projects this very square image and if you don't fit inside this image then that makes you feel uncomfortable. [pause] It's like, this little square, perfect box that's being marketed, anything that comes up against that and doesn't match [pause] can all be considered grotesque. [pause] I guess female, anything, any experience that reflects poorly on the female image… It can be whether it comes from outside influence or inside influence like, whatever experience I feel negative towards or impacts me [pause] could just be a very general definition of grotesqueness. Like, anything that makes me feel poorly as a reflection upon myself.

KT's quote is important as she discusses the lived experience of not "matching" an ideal image that is presented to women through various means. KT simplified the statement: "There's so many things because of this very small square of 'this is beauty' and if anything clashes with it, that can be a conflict and be grotesque…". The media's "beauty box" is small and anything outside of it is felt as 'grotesque'.

TC shared this perspective through another example from her experiences:

> …beauty magazine as I was getting groceries the other day and like, some female celebrity had sweat stains, y'know and there was like a big circle, like, "look at those sweat stains!" and I'm like, look at the sense of grotesque. She's sweating. Look what she's wearing, y'know, if a man was sweating would we see him on a cover of a People magazine with a big circle around it like she should be ashamed of a natural body function?

TC illuminates the dilemma women have with being expected to hide their natural body functions, and the shaming that occurs on magazine fronts when celebrities fail to hide these natural processes. KT also discusses how advertising frequently relies on male defined sexuality,

> I think it has a lot to do with being feminine, like, the sexual appeal of females towards males is what advertising is drawn off of, so when this sort of very

> stylized sexual image is the one that always projected, generally you always compare yourself to that body image.

KT taps into a deep sense of conditioning women experience as they compare themselves to the stylized, sexual images in advertising (Daniluk, 1998; Orenstein, 2016). Below, co-researchers share personal examples of not matching what is represented in the media.

Not matching what is portrayed in the media. KT, Jax, and Barb all discussed their experience of "being short", the impact of not embodying what is valued by the media, and some of the meanings they made from these experiences at the time. KT's quote emphasizes the internal questioning that occurs for girls and women when they do not match what is shown to them via media; not only do they question if they "measure up", but there is also an interrogation of themselves around their worth in relationships, and even friendships (Orenstein, 2016):

> I'm short, right? So, like, the average, the beautiful model image, like this very sexualized female image is, I don't know, 5'8" or 5'9" so personally I would be affected because I'm short so I don't measure up… I'm not 98 pounds, so I'm not skinny, so I don't measure up… blonde hair and blue eyes, okay, so I *do* measure up so what does *that* mean? Am I desirable? I guess so. Does that mean friends are going to like me? Maybe? [pause] So, now I'm no longer fitting into these categories but suddenly I am fitting in, like, even, once you do measure up you're like, okay, so what does that imply?

KT compared her height to the "beautiful model image, that was the sexualized female image", and how based on this element, she did not measure up. She also discussed the qualities in which she did measure up to these images, and the confusion that created internally. Barb also described the dilemma of not matching some images, but to others, she would be deemed attractive, and the internal questioning this caused:

> …I have always been made fun of for being short, and having really muscular legs. I mean, today I have seen a lot more media which supports women having a 'sportier' looking body, but when I was in junior/senior high school, I was really

> made fun of for having a "manly body" – I played sports all year round, of course I had a built body frame, but media didn't support this "look". On top of this, every image in Cosmopolitan showed images of taller women, with skinnier legs, and wearing clothes, that I could never fit into. Don't get me started on how often I used to have to get my clothes hemmed, because [manufacturers] didn't make pants that fit my leg length. But it was a confusing time for me as well, [because], I was always told I had an attractive face; my eyes were beautiful, my face was attractive. I always received compliments from other girls and women that they would do anything to have the natural eyelashes I had. So it was confusing for me, sometimes I matched what others were looking for and wanted to be, and other times I was totally berated for not having those conditioned characteristics, like model height and skinner woman's body frame, and that's often what I focused on…

Both KT and Barb emphasize a critical aspect for women: that it is impossible to match media ideals completely (Dines, 2010; Nagoski, 2015; Orenstein, 2016), and that they become confused internally when parts of them match and other parts do not (Dines, 2010; Ogden & Fisher, 2017; Orenstein, 2016). Jax focused on how her body did not match in terms of size and what others in her life deemed as beautiful. Jax described how,

> body image is something I've always struggled with, and there are times when I'm still amazed that there are people who would prefer my shape and size to anything that would be considered normal, attractive to men or ideal by society.

KT also discusses how advertising appeals to a stereotypical masculine gaze (Dines, 2010):

> … the sexual appeal of females towards males is what advertising is drawn off of, so when this sort of very stylized sexual image is the one that is always projected, you just generally compare yourself against that body image. And that ties into, "So if I don't look this way am I not sexually attractive to men? If I don't look this way, will I fit in? If I look this way, will I make friends?" So, there's so many things that because there's a very square "this is beauty", if anything clashes with that it can be a conflict and qualify as grotesqueness…

KT, Barb, and Jax described how media forced them to question their sense of attractiveness because their body did not match what they saw in media or society regularly, whether it was through sexualized images of women, pictures in Cosmopolitan,

or if their body size did not match what was displayed as attractive (Dines, 2010; Orenstein, 2016). Each of these women found ways to 'make up' for these differences by trying to fit into the box that is projected in the media, through their facial features or self-esteem, as a way to be liked and appreciated. Yet, there was still an internal struggle to make sense of what this meant.

KT, Barb, and Sarah all spoke about diet fads they attempted in order to fit a different body that would have been seen as attractive. All of the diets were identified as "disappointments", as none worked fast enough, and Barb described:

> … when I attempted to make my body 'more feminine', the first place I lost weight on my diet, was my breasts – I thought, this is terrible! I love my breasts, and now because I want skinnier legs, I am losing my boobs – fuck this! [laughs]… this was such a difficult time for me as my body could not fit into any media image I found.

Barb discusses the difficulty of trying to fit into an image, and the impact of attempting to diet. She spoke about trying to fit the image and her reflections on this:

> wearing heels in order to [pause] to give the illusion of being taller and to try make my legs look longer than they were… I was always made fun of because of "my lack of height." [pause] I finally stopped doing that because the heels were so uncomfortable and I found out you could get long term back and foot problems from wearing huge heels [pause], it made me think every time I looked at a picture and the TV and saw a movie star in heels that they were killing their body, simply for a look… it's really sad that women do this to their bodies…

The efforts women made to fit the ideal image often had limited success and frequently came with physical ramifications for the co-researchers.

Other media. Sarah found that other pieces of media, such as *50 Shades of Grey*, have misrepresented the BDSM community, consent, and how women ought to use their body:

> When *50 Shades of Grey* came out, it was infuriating… the commercials and books are very unsafe, very non-consensual, and the character Christian Grey is insane… [The female actress] had no control over her body or choices – 'We're 50 miles in the woods in Alaska, no one can hear you scream out here. If you move, I will restrain you. If you scream, I will gag you.' These are direct quotes for *50 Shades of Grey*. These are problematic on so many levels…

Above are clear examples of how society and patriarchy place expectations on how girls' and women's bodies are supposed to look. Other major contributors to women's 'grotesque' sense of experiences are the gender expectations placed on girls and women, and what "good girls" are, and are not, supposed to do.

Good Girls Don't – Gender Expectations

All these sections tie into gender expectations, and their contributions to the 'grotesque' sense of experiences. However, almost every co-researcher discussed one or more particular experiences where the words they used were, "…[insert] girls or women don't do [insert]…"; each of them shared the impact of these words on their behavior and the message they received about how they were supposed to engage with the world, because they were female. Some areas shared included awareness that 'something' was placed on them, the language they are *not* supposed to use, how they are supposed to present and act, and expectations around playing sports. The co-researchers below shared about feeling these pressures on them, and followed up with examples to support this awareness. Barb brought this up multiple times through her interview,

> …Where do I start? There are multiple memories and instances where I can recall being expected to be a certain way, simply because I am female [pause] this projection permeates every single area of my life, I always have to stay conscious of these gendered biases – they are cellular! Growing up in a small town, I was always told that anytime I spoke up about girls or women's issues, that I was told, I'm being 'overly dramatic'…

Barb's experience is all too common among girls and women who grow up in communities where women's issues were not taken seriously (Nagoski, 2015; Orenstein, 2016) and by bringing them up, she was perceived as melodramatic when attempting to share her perspective on things. Barb described,

> from when I was even a child, I was always told that I wasn't doing it like a little girl, or a female properly [pause], the way I spoke, what language I used, how I looked and acted… and when I couldn't measure up, I was so shameful.

Barb experienced significant shame when she felt unable to measure up by looking or acting the right way. Barb also shared a couple of experiences where expectations were placed on her because of her feminine look,

> … I've always been told, I look really feminine, but I don't act like it, like with some of the things I say [pause] I can remember so clearly being told numerous times, by different people, "Pretty girls don't say things like that…" I always thought, and once I got older, when I was able to say, "so, would 'ugly' girls say things like this?" [pause] It's so condescending and always felt like they were trying to control me…

Barb highlights that girls and women can find it patronizing when individuals tell them how pretty women should talk and behave, especially since this was an incident that occurred more than once in her life. She felt it was a way for others to control her. Sarah also shared similar sentiments about feeling controlled when others would say to her that "nice girls don't argue, they just do as they're told." Sarah added that, "… every time people said this to me, I felt like they needed to control me because I was out of control, like something was wrong with me, because I had a differing opinion." Sarah and Barb had similar feelings of being controlled when others would say to them that "nice/pretty girls don't …" Other things said to Barb included, "You don't need to ask so many questions and be curious, nice girls agree with what they are told…". For Barb to be told

to just agree felt like, “I had no choice, I wasn’t allowed to ask questions or have curiosity, this was taken from me as a kid [when I was in school and out at functions]”. This event followed her into adolescence and adulthood, when it came to thinking about what she wanted to do with her life, or what courses she was interested in.

> … girls don’t go into welding, you need to go into Home Ec, so that you know how to cook and clean and don’t worry about if you don’t understand Science, sweet looking girls like you don’t have to [pause]; These messages were brutal! I didn’t talk to my parents about it because I didn’t want to cause more trouble than I already was in from school, but I fucking hated Home Ec. All I wanted to do was learn how to use the machines in the shop, so my Dad and I could do things together. [pause] It just made me so mad, all of the time. I felt so controlled by everything outside of myself, and again, if I said anything, I WAS BEING DIFFICULT! [voice raised and hands in the air]. Ugh, recalling this shit, still to this day upsets me… why could we not have a conversation about it. Oh, right, I was being ‘overly dramatic’… [sigh and shakes head].

As she recalled these experiences in the present, Barb still felt upset. Her description above showed she didn’t want to cause more trouble than she was already in, but she was frustrated because she wanted to have a conversation about taking alternative classes, such as shop class. Furthermore, she struggled to even communicate about it at home because she didn’t want to be seen as difficult or trying to cause trouble.

Barb shared another example that occurred during high school,

> I have worked since I was 13 years old; I was only paid 5.00 an hour and was so proud of it! Yet, when I was thinking about what I wanted to do after high school, there was always judgement [pause], initially I wanted to be an attorney, and I was always met with condemnation from the teachers or others parents, that ‘I should learn to look after the house and stay home’. I was never taught this in my own house, but what I was constantly facing outside of the home was so different. My mom was a stay at home Mom and I am so grateful for that; I just wanted to have more of a balanced experience in the world and I liked debating and discussing topics, which was not expected because I was a girl…

Barb was proud to be working at a young age and thought about what she wanted to accomplish after high school. Her experience at home encouraged her to seek a more

balanced approach to day-to-day life. She faced judged by others, outside of her home, when she talked about becoming a lawyer, because it was not expected of a female.

Femininity. The co-researchers discussed how others viewed their body and ways they dressed and behaved according to feminine standards. Barb and Stef both discussed how parts of their bodies may have matched what "feminine" is supposed to look like, but the way they dressed or behaved served as a consistent reminder that they were not aligning with what was expected of them being feminine. Barb shared,

> I've always been told my face may have looked feminine, but I always felt more masculine, in how my body looked and how I felt internally [pause] I guess I aligned more with 'masculine ways of Being' [pause] I had too for survival; so, when I swore, I would get in trouble for sounding like that, but if I was a male, I wouldn't have been, this is probably why I was so good at sports, I played on a male baseball team, and I was pretty decent.

Stef, too, shared an experience about sports and gendered expectations,

> … from a young age, I enjoyed bending the gender expectations, like, I loved being better than other girls at sports at my school, when I had to play sports with girls in school because we didn't play sports with boys at school. But I played with them all the time, the boys outside, and so I had to learn how to keep up to men as a small woman, and being just as rough and skilled, 'cause like, that's all we did. It wasn't because like, I could be like a man, it was just because I practiced so much and like, I just learned from people who were good at sports and all that kind of stuff… I really enjoyed that, but I also really enjoyed being into classical piano, and at the same time kicking ass at sports… I was into things that were typically of like both different types of gender expectations

Stef enjoyed resisting gender expectations and playing sports with boys at school. She learned the skills better by practicing with the boys. She also enjoyed playing piano; more typical of gender expectations. She valued being able to experience a full range of activities rather than being limited by binary gendered expectations.

Stef also recalled a time she went to camp and was validated by a coach on her playing ability based on being a girl, and expressed that she felt like she had one foot in one gender world and one foot in another:

> I remember going to camp and the male coach was like, "I have never seen a girl play soccer like that before, like, I've just never seen a girl play like that before," and like to me, I just really liked having one foot in one world and one foot in the other world. I just always liked that I just didn't like conforming to one expectation of myself from a young age, and it stayed like this for a long time, until the androgynous movement came in the 90s, then I was drawn to that…

Stef and Barb caused confusion by their ability to be both feminine and masculine in various aspects of their lives, but they felt empowered by their uniqueness.

The meaning of being a "slut". The co-researchers all spoke about how the word slut had impacted them. *Slut* is a word that shares a variety of meanings and contexts for these co-researchers; some of the women shared experiences specific to gendered expectations and entanglement with the word slut. Jax's description sums up the dilemma that many women have (G. Ogden, 2007): "society doesn't support women who enjoy sex… that's when you're [women are] called blush, or a whore, or a loose person, or sort of loose morals." Co-researchers acknowledged that there are often derogatory labels attached to a woman who engages in sexuality outside of the gendered norm.

Barb shared that a label of 'slut' led to assumptions of what type of sexual experience was expected of her, even when not negotiated:

> … a time where I was hooking up with a random and he said, he had heard that I was sleeping around and he wanted me to be his 'little slut' or be a virgin and call him 'daddy.' [pause] OK, there is a ton in this scenario alone… but I did put my pants back on and walked out [pause], it wasn't what we agreed to engage in, but also, like, these are my two options I get – BORING! [laughs and shakes head] I've told this story to many people, and everyone always says, how offensive, that he called you a 'slut' – I mean, sure, that's offensive. [pause] I'm fine if that is how he saw me and the matter, which I think was shown when he went outside of

> our agreed sexual conditions, it's like he wanted that to be part of the role play that wasn't agreed to [pause] was interesting, and 100% unsatisfying. [laughs]

Barb's recollection of a hook-up experience illuminates the possibility for expectations that are placed on someone with the reputation of *being a slut*. I also highlight the stark contrast between a 'slut' or a 'virgin" in Sarah's description, where, as opposite ends of the same spectrum, one is often implied by the other. Furthermore, Sarah shared, "Y'know, virginity is now become, in my mind, a very soulful word, and funny enough, right alongside it, is the word slut…" Sarah insightfully demonstrated the vulnerability that accompanies these labels and expectations on women (Orenstein, 2016). This leads into what girls and women learn from their sexual education experiences, and the influence on the perception of rules of engagement (G. Ogden, 2018; Orenstein, 2016).

Learning the Rules of Engagement – Sexual Education

Co-researchers mentioned the lack of diverse sexual education they received from the school system, at home, and even from peers. Some women received literally no sexual education, and for some, the nature of their education shifted once they hit puberty. Each of them spoke about how these experiences impacted the way they felt about their body, their genitals, and how they enacted their sexuality.

To begin, TC described her sexual education from her religious household and school as, "None". She received no sexual education information at home, and was not allowed to participate in the class when it was taught at school:

> So, when you have sexual education [at school] you have to bring a form home that says, 'Do you want your kids to do this?' and my parents said, 'No.' So I was in the hallway during the class, and it was never spoken of again.

Her parents did not allow her to participate in the education at the school, and failed to offer any information on the matter at home.

KT's sexual education during early puberty was based in anatomy: "'This is sex. This is what sex is. Sex is generally penis in vagina.' Like, 'dogs do it, animals do it, people do it, like, this is sex…'" It only focused on heteronormative assumptions and the procreative based connection that animals also have sex. Barb described her sexual education from her household as being based on the medical model:

> … my parents gave me factual information about how the female body works, it was like BIO 30 [pause] this is what happens to the female body monthly, this is why you need to be on birth control, this is how birth control prevents you from being pregnant. So, it's not like any information they gave me was incorrect, it was all correct, but there wasn't anything about pleasure, how to find pleasure, what it means to feel pleasured. It was just like this is the female body, this is how it works. I think a discussion on pleasure would have made my life a lot easier, in terms of exploring my body and sexuality, or foreplay with others and myself…

Barb received factual information about the female body and contraceptives, however, no information was given about pleasure. This is common amongst most women's sexual education, where there is minimal learning about how to discover what they find pleasurable about sex, or even foreplay (G. Ogden, 2018; Katehakis, 2016). This is even more of an issue currently for women, as pornography is the main source of sexual education, especially in terms of the female body and what is expected regarding sexual exploration with others and themselves (Dines, 2010; Katehakis, 2016). Some co-researchers discussed pornography briefly during their interviews. To read more about this, please see Appendix H. The above section sums up the dilemma that the lack of sexual education causes for women and easily ties into the encumbrance of the power of religion on girls' and women's sexual maturity and exploration.

Carrying the Feminine Burden – Religion

Each co-researcher, whether brought up in a religious household or not, discussed the impact that religious stances had on their sexuality. The main religious message women in the study faced surrounding sexuality was that in order to be a woman of value, they need to have children. Further, the religious stances they encountered gave them the message that in order to be allowed to have sex, it must be for reproduction, or experienced in a heteronormative way (Daniluk & Brown, 2008; G. Ogden, 2018). KT described how sexuality and reproduction are two distinctive issues for her, and to reduce women's sexuality to reproductive means is demeaning:

> … I think that this concept of 'womanhood equals motherhood' is pervasive and invasive in the worst of ways. As someone who has made the choice to not have children, this is an area of particular sensitivity for me. To be perceived as not whole or fulfilled without children or a family is reducing and demeaning. As a strong believer in the importance of the necessity for a healthy sex life, to reduce sex down to the method of pure reproduction is unhealthy. Sexuality and reproduction are two distinct issues to me.

Barb and Jax also discussed their choice to not have children and how certain religious pressures have been condescending because their sexuality is not based in a reproductive goal. Barb has repeatedly been faced with questions about having a family:

> …experience[ed] having people ask repeatedly if I am going to have kids, why I am waiting so long? What is holding me back from finding the right man to start a family with? [pause] This started when I turned 18 years old! [pause] It has only gotten worse as I have aged; the questions about deciding to not want to have kids and the looks on people's faces when I tell them my decision. And come to think of it, I don't even know why I respond to them. It really is none of their business, yet it is one of the first questions people ask. In this moment I'm realizing how conditioned I am to respond to the question. [pause] I've always been curious about why, people are so conditioned around these things, like as if men are asked these intrusive questions, at the age of 18 or even when they are first introduced to people [pause] or if they are and they say, they do not have a family, I don't think it's the same for them. "They still have time at the age of 18" [pause] that's what some of my male friends tell me, people say, anyway.

The above quote illustrates that women are repeatedly confronted with the burden of responding to questions about their decision to have a family or not, in day-to-day conversations, and must deal with the pressure to answer these questions. Jax also discussed that people often ask her about having a family and inquire as to when she will be having kids. She often responds with:

> I applaud the women who do not want to have a family equally as much as I applaud women who make the decision to have children and be wives, if that's what they truly want. No one lifestyle is better than any other. Judge not and be respectful of everyone's decision if it makes them happy. [pause] This usually stops people in their tracks before they start shaming me about my decisions that don't align with religious expectations [laughs]. Works every single time [laughs].

By making light of the conversation and gently challenging the status quo of women having families, Jax described aligning with what feels right for her. At the same time, she avoids shaming women who choose something different than her, like marrying and having a family. Barb also mentioned that part of her conditioning included the idea that women's role is to give their husbands sex:

> 'good wives' have sex with their husbands to keep them around. Like the only role women have is to give birth and have sex at their husband's beck and call. So, does this mean if I don't give birth or even align with being a heterosexual couple-ship, am I not worth being sexual?

The above shows the theme around religion raised by co-researchers that women can only be sexual properly if they are either creating a child or pleasing their husband. Further, in order to have sex, one must be in a heterosexual monogamous relationship. This leads to another layer of the burden of religion on women's relationships outside of heteronormative monogamy (Daniluk & Brown, 2008).

Sarah and TC grew up in religious households and discussed participating in regular religious celebrations, and how the power imbalance impacted their definition of "marriage" and their curiosity outside of heteronormative exploration. TC and Sarah spoke about how the messages from the church were challenging to listen to, as they personally did not align with the rigid definitions preached at them. Sarah described the humiliation that came from these messages, "Being defined through people who call themselves the voice of God… by people who preach homophobia, marriage as a monogamous relationship between a female and male [pause] I didn't match; therefore, I am grotesque [pause] I felt humiliated at the time…". For Sarah and many others, it is common to feel humiliated when their needs lie outside of the parameters established by religious definitions of proper sexuality. TC and Sarah experienced inner turmoil when they were trying to decide how they felt about religion and their own sexuality, while attending their youth group. Sarah worried about how she behaved in the group when she discovered that she did not fit into the heteronormative mould the church lectured about,

> … I worried about the things I said a lot. "Was I too Gay? Was that too Christian?", because either, I was either going to church too often, or not being Christian enough. In my youth group especially there was a lot of homophobic, heteronormative messages going on. Most of the people in the group were trans, bi-sexual, pansexual [pause] there were only a few straight women hearing this message and you could tell nobody's comfortable listening to it, but nobody says anything. I eventually had to leave because I just couldn't stay in this group anymore...

TC had a similar experience in her youth group,

> … they would lecture to us about being abstinent and that anyone who wasn't, especially the girls, that they would be reprimanded if it was ever found out, and that God would especially be disappointed and that it could never be undone. And to explore anything outside of marriage or with anyone other than a man, that the consequences, could never be undone in God's eyes, never be pure. Do you know

> how many people in that group were having sex? Most of us! We just sat there and listened [pause] we just took it all…

Sarah's and TC's experiences capture the very dilemma many girls and women feel when they do not align with what God and their Christian values place on them, in terms of sexuality (Daniluk & Brown, 2008). There is an internal struggle of figuring out how to act, and how to be, but even more so, to process what it means when they do not match the mould their religion claims they must fit, in order to be valued in God and the church's presence (Daniluk & Brown, 2008).

Adolescence and sexual pressures. TC also discussed that in her church, when girls started to develop in their adolescence, the leaders came to them to talk about,

> how things are changing and we have a sense that something is up. They noticed that our appearance was changing and that we were wearing make-up, wearing more dresses, and they talked to us about being pure, and they brought up the Purity Pledge. They made all the girls sign this sheet of paper to devout to stay pure [pause] but it was hard because I was the only one who wasn't a virgin and they didn't even bring that up as a possibility. This made me feel even worse with my sexual abuse, when I was younger because I couldn't choose the first person to be with, and I didn't remain "pure" until marriage [pause]. So, I was 'wrong'.

Sarah and TC both sat through lectures about sexuality, without any room for possibilities outside of what is considered "pure" and virginal. TC elaborated on this experience and brought up how difficult it was to not even have the possibility to discuss what was *actually* happening in her life, and how she would not fit into "pure" because of the circumstances of her childhood sexual abuse. All of these co-researcher experiences show dualistic pressures and conflicting messages girls and women face, while trying to explore their sexuality (Daniluk & Browne, 2008; G. Ogden, 2018). A description of co-researcher's traumatic and liberating formative experiences, through childhood and adolescence follows.

Formative Experiences

Each co-researcher discussed certain experiences that were formative and/or pivotal. Some of the women experienced trauma in their childhood and adolescence in terms of sexuality. These traumas influenced their sense of self and sexuality. Others had more positive formative experiences during these phases that they felt shielded them from experiencing sexuality as 'grotesque', to the same degree as the other women who described abuse.

Childhood Experiences

Some co-researchers described traumatic experiences in their childhood, such as domestic violence, which deeply impacted their ability to have relationships with others; some spoke about how incest and sexual abuse impacted their view of sexuality.

Stef experienced domestic violence as a child, and described her relationship with her mother:

> [I was] abused by my mom so I didn't really feel like, very maternal, right? [laughs]. Or very feminine, right, and I grew up with guys around me, like, boys when I was a girl there was not very many girls around me. I had several female girlfriends who were horrible and acting, to me, a lot like my mother did so I just, I remember the moment that I just said, "Fuck women." Right, like, I'm not really gonna pursue female relationships, like, friends, right, because it just wasn't safe for me, right?

Barb also grew up in a family where her relationship with her mother was "…strained and difficult [pause], she always yelled at me, she was pretty cold growing up; women never felt safe to me and I never really experienced healthy maternal loving or healthy female friendships until I was older…" Stef and Barb describe growing up in households where they were abused or frequently yelled at by their mothers. Sarah also shared that her mother was controlled by the church and never accepted her for who she was:

> The difficult relationship with my mother, [is] she refused to accept me if my behavior was anything different than what was expected of me or women at the church, she was so controlled by them, and this really hurt me… I also struggled to be friendly with females, they were never secure to me.

All three of these co-researchers shared and related their experience with their mother to the struggle to have healthy, safe, and secure relationships with girls and women growing up. These relational traumas with the same-sex parents can have lasting effects on the ability to have relationships with other same-sex individuals (G. Ogden, 2018; Lerner, 1987; McDaniels, 2012). KT shared a specific instance with her mother in her childhood:

> … my Mom discovered a notebook where I wrote down all of my stories, that had some sexual stuff in there… her reaction was that I had to get rid of the stories and not tell anyone… I guess I thought that the whole story scenario was bad because of the way my mother reacted, so therefore that must be a bad thing, so then, I must be bad for doing that bad thing. So, I suppose her reaction in that case would've influenced that. I still feel bad that my mother discovered it, not because I feel wrong, but because of the trauma that it caused her [laughs].

KT regretted that her mother found the notebook with her written stories, and felt bad because of how it affected her mother, but not because she thought she was doing something wrong. She expanded on other aspects that most children have to work through to develop a healthy sense of sexuality (Daniluk, 1998). She spoke about "as a child, around like, fantasies, or like expression of one's sexuality. That fed into like, what you would say is a sense of female 'grotesqueness' that you had to work through and accept". TC and Barb shared about their sexual trauma with the opposite sex, and the resulting impact on their relationships and sexuality.

TC's sexual trauma in childhood has been detrimental to her exploration of sexuality and has skewed her understanding of a healthy relationship. Her parents divorced when she was young and all of her siblings experienced some type of abuse in

her family system; however, she was the only child out of the family that experienced sexual incest with her father. She believes this occurred "because I was adopted and my other siblings weren't." TC's experiences of incest occurred from the age of eight to sixteen; she shared the following pieces of the incest, which are most impactful on her sexuality today;

> … he groomed me [as a child] until he went to jail for his behavior… Mom was really sick for a while, so I stayed with my Dad, most of the time. She kept getting calls from the school about my inappropriate behavior, so she asked me why I was being so sexual with boys in grade ten, 'you're either doing this because your dad doesn't love you or loves you too much', I said, 'too much'. [pause] She didn't ask any more questions, and she called the cops, and he was arrested 12 hours later.

TC describes her mother calling the cops as being a powerful experience because her mother and the officers did not judge: "… it wasn't shaming for me, although my Mom felt really bad about all of this happening to me when she was sick, and I think she also felt bad that Dad had to do 'girl things' with me like buying tampons, getting a bra, and those type of things."

Although TC describes family acceptance as something positive that came from the experience, she still experienced many negative things due to the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her dad. She characterized her relationship with him as having a "trauma bond" with him.

> … he was a strange person, as he was secretly taking estrogen to grow [breasts], [pause] it was strange as he was very manipulative, he made it seem like [him and I] were in a relationship… He liked to dress up, like corsets, heels, make-up, like I used to do his makeup for him, and he used to explain what was happening through the Bible [pause] just like, how David had many wives, and how this isn't wrong and how I'm not related to you, kind of way. I never thought it was right, it just was happening. He used to do it through play, and guilt me, and I am sure guilt will be a thing for the rest of my life… If it was something I wasn't interested in, he would make me feel so bad, and then I would ask for it. And so,

> like, those kind of things, or he would allow me 'to go at my own rate' or 'my own pace' cause I didn't want to be penetrated. But, he would be like, 'Well just go slow, and you choose your…' kind of thing, and that's fucked. This has totally impacted me in relationships… I totally have a trauma bond with him…

Overall, TC describes this experience, which lasted for over five years, as having huge ramifications for her ability to be in a relationship and be sexual with others. She elaborated on the impact of her father's abuse, on current relationships:

> I really struggle to date and to trust others, hence why I have not had a long-term relationship… for a long time I cried every time before, during and after sex… and I would think some of the stuff my Dad and I did was normal, and it is definitely not normal…

Barb also shared that she experienced sexual trauma in her early adolescence, and the impact this had on her sexuality,

> I was sexually abused at a camp for a few summers as a child to early adolescence, and that really confused my sexual compass – the way in which the perpetrator shamed me, before, during, and after. And once everything was done, would proceed to 'cleanse me' because I was the dirty one that needed to ask for God's forgiveness [pause]; sex was a murky thing for me, for years and years and years, and even to this day, if I am out of awareness, it can get murky.

Barb outlined that awareness is a significant component for her ability to be present in a sexual relationship as a result of the trauma and shame she experienced in her childhood. Jax and Sarah did not identify a traumatic experience; the co-researchers did not mention any positive experiences in their childhood that related to their understanding of their sexuality. The following section explores adolescent formative experiences, particularly of one co-researcher who provided exceptional depth of experience as she was able to encapsulate most of the issues that all co-researchers discussed.

Adolescent Experiences

Themes with respect to adolescent experiences included: the impact puberty had on sexual development, the belief systems created during these times, and the lasting impact these experiences had on their existence, which they had to work through.

Puberty

KT's description through puberty beautifully summarizes many of the issues these women faced during this developmental period:

> I rejected a part of myself, during puberty. It's hard to think back that far 'cause hormones were a-raging. But like during puberty when you are just first becoming conscious of all of these things, I don't know that there's a big, [pause], push to say that, 'however you're feeling it's OK. Y'know, and it's probably normal. The other girls on your school bus? They've probably thought the same thing too-but don't tell them.' Right? Like there's no real positive movement that says, 'it's ok, these things are normal, don't worry.' Most everything is like, 'if you feel sexual, suppress it.'

During puberty, she rejected a part of herself, as it was a complicated, hormonal time, along with her first becoming conscious of things, but no one helped normalize these experiences. She would often wonder if other girls were going through the same thing, but did not feel comfortable enough to ask them. KT continued to describe:

> … when I was, young and going through puberty that, y'know, when your body started to feel aroused there was such a foreignness to that. And such a rejection of it because culturally, and parents, and community was telling you, y'know, or not even informing you that there is such a thing for girls or women or whatever – when you go through puberty, whatever you're feeling, nobody has ever told you it's ok, so you just assume that it's bad.

Daniluk's work (1998) provides a frame for KT's experiences around puberty. The prevailing cultural norm is that most information shared with adolescent girls tells them to suppress their sexuality, but does not provide any context for why they should do so (Daniluk, 1998). Kids often interpret this to mean what is happening is bad, because no one is talking about it (Daniluk, 1998). Barb had somewhat of an opposing experience:

> Another girl and I were suspended from the Christian school in junior high because the teacher overheard us talking about 'puberty things' she learned from her older sister. We didn't have the internet then, and our sex education was abstinent and fear based, so I would go home and ask my parents, and report back info on the biology of girls/women's bodies and sexuality.

Barb was suspended for discussing sexual and body topics at school, where young girls were not being supported with the information they need to make sense of their experiences during puberty. TC also struggled with making sense of her body becoming aroused, "… I started to get more confused when my body, was starting to be like, tingly and aroused, I thought, 'What is this?'"

The women who shared about puberty highlighted how their development was impacted, with respect to what they and others deemed as 'grotesque' versus not 'grotesque'. KT described it well:

> Perhaps, that there's a lot of grotesque experiences throughout like the transition of puberty, and that's a really important time to be able to recognize what you feel is grotesque or not. [pause] Because during those years there's so many influences that it can either go one way or not, and if you can create some positive images, and like positive experiences with the grotesque being like, "It's not so bad," "y'know". Then that can set a foundation towards being able to approach things in such a, a healthy state of mind later on in life.

Influences at puberty can either help young girls experience the 'grotesque', or they can shape a positive image, which can help counter the 'grotesque' pressures put on girls during this developmental period (Daniluk, 1998). KT provided an example of how "the sex talk changed" in her household once she reached puberty, and the positive impact this had on her sexuality:

> …so even from puberty on, it's like, our family comes from a more open background..., "We're gonna [have] the sex talk probably before I think you're ready but you're in puberty, so you understand these feelings, right? But you're 14, so you're probably not having sex yet. But we're gonna have the talk." They

> were all very open about [pause] like nothing was taboo, so nothing was, in our household generally considered grotesque I suppose, 'cause we were very open.

KT's parents attempted to open up dialogue around sexuality, where everything was up for discussion and nothing was taboo. KT believed this shift in the tone of discussion during puberty played a role in her having less 'grotesque' experiences than some women, and contributed to her healthy state of mind, later in life. This is important to consider, as it offers an idea of what could make the female experience feel less 'grotesque' later in life.

Final Reflections on Theme A

All of the preceding experiences affected the co-researchers' sexuality and sense of self in the context of patriarchal perspectives. These experiences shaped how these women defined their own female 'grotesque' sexuality, and the context through which they experienced their sexuality and its development. For these women, and for many others, negative self-talk about their bodies came so naturally due to comparisons with media representations (Dines, 2010; Orenstein, 2016). As shown by the co-researchers, media also endorses heteronormative and gendered expectations, which are further reinforced in the lack of diverse and pleasure oriented sex education made available to children, adolescents, and even adults (G. Ogden, 2018; Katehakis, 2016).

The above deficiencies lead individuals to seek for their own education, which is often found through pornography in current day, which adds additional complications to discovering what pleasure truly means, for them (Dines, 2010; Katehakis, 2016). The women in the study spoke about not having an issue with pornography, but simply reflected on how they questioned the pornography to which they were exposed, rather

than trying to be like the actors. Please see Appendix H, to read about what the co-researchers discussed in terms of pornography. In hearing their stories, I wonder if the co-researchers showed more critical questioning of the pornography due to it not being widely available while growing up. Co-researchers also spoke about the impact of religion which does not seem to be bound by the time. Religion affected the co-researchers' sense of being female and their developing sexuality. Some co-researchers, experienced many traumatic experiences from religious institutions because of abuse of religious power, and shame evoked when they were curious about sexuality outside of heteronormative expression. A description of co-researcher's traumatic and liberating formative experiences, through childhood and adolescence was also discussed. The next section dives into what happens as these women internalize these experiences. The women shared some adolescent and adult formative experiences of internalizing the 'grotesque', and the resulting impact on their sexuality.

Theme B: Denying Authentic Self

In this section, I present findings related to how the above patriarchal influences further shaped co-researchers' sense of self and sense of sexuality. Co-researchers discussed ways in which they attempted to uphold unrealistic expectations, and the suffering they experienced related to internalizing external understandings of the 'grotesque'. Some experiences they described included: denying their own inner sense of sexual arousal and expression of self; the struggle experienced when they were unable to live up to what is considered a "classic" body/female sexual experience; the powerful condemnation of being labelled a slut; and the consistent pattern of putting their needs aside, as an attempt to meet unattainable standards. Many co-researchers described these

experiences as manifesting through a self-medicating addictive process including alcohol, masturbation, and sex with others. However, co-researchers outlined being able to break free from some of these processes. Some moved away to get some physical space; others accessed therapeutic support, and some had life-changing sexual experiences that encouraged them to be themselves, without judgement.

Deny, Deny, Deny…

This section demonstrates how women repudiated their own sexual authenticity by disowning their own needs, body, gender orientation, and/or sexual orientation. This began early in development, and continued to be an issue until they were able to break free from these constraints. It is not uncommon for internalization to start at a young age, especially when certain subjects were not taught at home or in school (Daniluk, 1998; Katehakis, 2016; McDaniels, 2012). The lack of conversation and acknowledgement of what was happening in the body, even natural functions, impacted KT. She described:

> probably [pause] like the four or five years of puberty were all parts where you're like, "Oh, I shouldn't feel like that," or, "Oh my God, my vagina's tingling for the first time. Deny it! Deny it!" Right? Like, nobody's ever told them this is normal, this is okay and so, at every point during puberty you're rejecting and you're at odds…

As a way to make sense of the silence, she discarded parts of herself and questioned these feelings through a judgmental filter. As a previous quote showed, she isolated from her friends, as she felt too scared to even talk about it with them during the beginning of puberty. KT highlights what each co-researcher shared about their sexual journey: that often without reassurance from family, education, or other institutions, and without visible support or social connection, individuals start to internalize shame. They may only seek information from peers as a way to gain knowledge, or may not feel safe

speaking to their friends about what is occurring (Daniluk, 1998). The interpretation and meaning from these experiences can hugely impact one's being-in-the-world due to the rejection of *what is*, with little to no guidance or knowledge about what is happening to the body (Daniluk, 1998). Individuals may interpret *silence* or *lack* of acknowledgement from others, as something *ab*normal in their experience (Brown, 2010). With respect to denial and silence, Jax shared that, "I had to deny that I even had sexual desires or needs and that sucked." This was a common experience shared by most of the co-researchers.

Sexual Orientation. Co-researchers also struggled during their sexual exploration when they did not align with the binary labels of 'straight' or 'lesbian'. Sarah and Stef shared what happened for them when they were unable to align with one gender or sexual orientation, and the internal stir this caused. Stef shared that after she was rejected and shamed from her friend group because she was being labelled a 'slut', she was then shamed for being gay,

> the next shaming thing was [after slut shaming], y'know, wondering if I was gay, right, because there was no such thing in, where I was from. Like, everybody that I thought I knew was heterosexual like, bisexual, I didn't know what that concept was, I'd never been introduced to what bisexuality could be or even that it's a thing until I was like, in university. And so, at that point, like, the only other thing that I thought you could be was gay, and that was really shameful in my society, and men were only gay, not women. I never heard of a lesbian before, right, and so I automatically thought when, y'know, I was drawn to like, male like, y'know, dress or, just expressing yourself from a masculine type of like, uh, perspective, that, 'maybe - am I gay?'

Stef grew up in a rural area, and where she attended school the only acceptable form of sexuality was a heteronormative expression; she was unaware of a continuum of expression. Stef shared how difficult it was to have to assign herself a sexual and gender orientation, when she felt like neither of the categories totally fit for her. When there

wasn't an option for fluidity, there was an automatic assumption that she was gay. This caused a lot of concern for her as she witnessed classmates bullying a male in her class because he was "more feminine than the others, and they destroyed him daily, and he eventually moved away because he was a 'fem, fag, and gay'". She felt confusion for her own orientation; and because she witnessed this bullying, found herself "shutting down and rejecting myself and what wasn't fitting in with others and how I was supposed to [be]." Stef shared how difficult it was to understand her sexual and gender orientation, due to how the binary categories did not align with what was occurring for her internally, and what she was wanting to express externally.

Sarah shared Stef's experiences about what happens to peers who are not expressing themselves in the same way as others, "they were called fags and told that God will hate them and me, because I am not the same as them." Sarah also described what happened for her at home, where her orientation was also questioned,

> my sexual orientation always being questioned, like by my family and by the church… I didn't feel okay about it especially with all the messages from the church and my dad. … He would use the word fag when he was playing video games, or if things didn't go the way he wanted, he would say "that's so gay." It was so hurtful, and it wasn't like I was allowed any exploration, my mom accused me of being gay when she found some lesbian stuff [pause] and at that point I wasn't thinking about it, I was just curious, and she yelled at me about being a liar. [pause] I just shut it down and went internal with it all…

Prior to these experiences, Stef and Sarah did not worry about or consider orientation to be an issue in their lives. However, once the above incidents occurred, they felt they had to explore and work through the constrictions as a way to break free; after these experiences occurred, they would often question themselves repeatedly, "Am I gay? Do I like women? Do I like my body, or am I wanting to be a man because I don't like

feminine clothes?" This interrogative self-questioning and bullying pushed these co-researchers to shut part of themselves down or attempt to fit into was recognized and traditional in the context and area in which they grew up.

Most co-researchers also discussed that they were not aligned with their sexual and erotic basics, wishes, and necessities. This was complex for the co-researchers. Many shared that they had to deny externally that they had any sexual needs; there was no acceptable amount of sexual needs or tolerated expression of sexuality. If they did not stay within those bounds, they would be labelled a *slut*.

The Making of a Slut – Changing of Relational Connection

> *A slut is someone, usually a woman, who's stepped outside of the very narrow lane that good girls are supposed to stay within. Sluts are loud. We're messy. We don't behave. In fact, the original definition of "slut" meant "untidy woman." But since we live in a world that relies on women to be tidy in all ways, to be quiet and obedient and agreeable and available (but never aggressive), those of us who color outside of the lines get called sluts. And that word is meant to keep us in line.*
>
> ― Jaclyn Friedman, Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power and A World Without Rape (2008)

As previously outlined, each co-researcher shared their struggle with the word 'slut'. In order to avoid being labelled a *slut*, they had to deny their sexual needs, behave based on rules and structures made from others (such as peers or religion), or force themselves to fit into a box of heteronormative expression. The focus of this section is the impact of 'being a slut' had on some of their relationships with others, not only themselves. Some of the women spoke about experiences growing up where they would be labelled as a slut because of who they were hanging around with, which was devastating for them. Stef shared that she often hung out with and played sports with the

boys, as a way to cope with some of the trauma she lived with at home, along with some of the pain she experienced in female friendships. She describes that this changed for her one day in middle school,

> I remember like, the same friends I had all my life, like, people I played with every day, like, sports and stuff like, at one point they told me I wasn't allowed to hang out with them anymore. And like, I remember at one point they were like, 'People are going to think you're a slut' because I was hanging out with them.

Stef believed she was labelled a slut because she played sports with the boys through junior and high school. For Stef, this was really confusing because their relationship was not sexually based,

> I had absolutely no sexual contact, at all, and honestly on my part, no sexual fantasy or energy towards these people, they were legitimately beings that I just hung out with and had a good time with, they were my friends. They were my best friends, right, and so like, y'know, I remember being taken aback by that and so, the notion of what a slut was, y'know, was grotesque for me at that point. So I would say I packed that in nice and good into my shadow bag, right, at that point, and then, so, that's one of them.

Stef was deeply impacted by this experience; she felt a sense of loss of her best friends, and she no longer had the safety of her male friend group to depend on, as they did not want to play or hang out with her, because she would be labelled as a slut. This was also confusing for her, as she did not have any feelings beyond friendship for her friends and the sense of 'grotesque' increased around this time, and ended up playing a huge role in her trajectory of self-medication and shadow work, that soon ensued in her journey. This specific experience stayed with Stef through her life, as her value as an individual was partially based in playing sports and having a safety net in the close peer group. However, once the rumor mill began, this dramatically shifted because she was always

hanging out with the opposite sex. Her "failure" to follow gendered expectations resulted in the label of *slut*. Barb describes a similar experience from her sports team,

> It was like one day, I came to ball practice and everybody was not as friendly with me as they were the day before. One of the guy's girlfriend had started this rumor that 'she [Barb] is built kinda manly, because she is a slut; she is kinda feminine, because she is a slut'. … So, not only did I have to break through the gendered barrier because of these things to be able to play ball and work hard to build the strength to play at the caliber I was playing, they now became the very issues that were used against because I was a 'slut'… This was a grotesque experience, which was devastating to me, I lost my safety and I lost my friends… I was so hurt and stressed out [pause] and this was carried with me for a long, long, time…

Stef and Barb both describe the destructive impact of being labelled a slut based on the qualities or activities they engaged in, which had no sexual component at all. It was the very work they both put into rejecting their femininity, which had come back and was used as the way of labelling a slut, which was devastating for both, along with the changing connection with their peers.

Jax's description sums up the dilemma many women have, "society doesn't support women who enjoy sex… that's when [women are] called blush, or a whore, or a loose person, or sort of loose morals." Co-researchers each acknowledged that there are often derogatory labels attached to a woman who engages in sexuality outside of the gendered norm. KT did not share a specific moment or incident; it was more of an awareness of "in the beginnings [of being sexual] much of my internal discourse revolved around the perceptions of sexual promiscuity. I didn't want to be seen as a slut". Both Barb and KT endeavoured to sleep with individuals from different social circles, to try to mitigate their sexual life being a topic of discussion by others.

Other experiences include Sarah's depiction of navigating the stark contrast of choice between a 'slut' or a 'virgin.', as one is often implied by the other. In discussing

the role patriarchy plays in shaping women's sexuality. Sarah discussed the dichotomy of 'virgin' and 'slut' and the inter-relationship and co-construction of these terms, which she was forced to navigate. In an attempt to avoid the label of slut, she ultimately had to deny her authentic self and was left feeling that embracing her sexuality was 'grotesque'. When she began being sexually active, the peers she turned to asked her two-fold questions,

> you said that you were going to stay a virgin until you got married. What happened to that? Don't you love God anymore? You don't want to be a slut, do you? [pause] Like what I was doing was grotesque and it would never go away because I disobeyed God, and what I was supposed to do, a good girl, or xx woman [pause]. Like no wonder, I got here – if I was allowed to share when I even wanted to kiss or be curious about sex, I wouldn't be here in the same way, I am now… a slut [deep breath in and out]

These questions placed her behavior instantly into a 'grotesque' versus not 'grotesque' category. She found herself struggling to learn how to have relationships with others and especially herself. Furthermore, it deepened the split within herself and frustration she felt because she was unable to ask questions about sexuality, and "not have ended up as a slut". The deeper trouble for her at this time, which she still works through regularly, is that she would never be able to shed the perception of how God may see her. All co-researchers navigated the shifting landscape of relationships, peers' judgement, and the internalized process of self-oppression (as a result of trauma and stress) surrounding the word slut. The barriers created through these experiences and language demonstrate the power of shame (Brown, 2010). The next two sections are heavily intertwined as shame, secrecy, and self-medicating as "way[s] to cope with the endless circle of the pain," and "feeling there is no way out", are described by some co-researchers.

The Dark Pockets of Shame – Scars of the 'Grotesque'

Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change.

- Brene Brown, I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame (2007)

Each co-researcher shared that navigating patriarchy as a sculptor, and constantly working towards not being considered 'grotesque' had profound impacts on developing their sexuality. Aligning with the internalization of negative teachings, this section focuses on how co-researchers spoke about shame. Shame is an important topic for women's sexuality and is often experienced when our true nature fails to align with imposed expectations [cis-gendered, heteronormative, patriarchal] (Brown, 2010).

During puberty, KT's default understanding of her erotic development was often,

> whatever you're feeling, nobody's ever told you it's ok, so you just assume that it's bad. Probably everything feels guilty, because you think you're the only one and you probably think it's really wrong, 'cause nobody tells you it's ok so the default is 'bad'. So, then if it's bad you should repress it, you should try and stop it or make it go away, or not fully experience it.

During this developmental time in her life, KT interpreted and internalized silence as meaning that nobody else was going through this, that something was wrong with her, and what was happening was shameful. For children and adolescents, when there is no dialogue about topics, silence may be interpreted as being because something is considered bad (Brown, 2010; Dines, 2010; Orenstein, 2016). TC described harmful shaming and segregation practices at church while growing up. Not only did she hear individuals shamed if they did not match heteronormative expectations, but she also felt frustration of being shamed and segregated from the boys around age 12,

> [The church] definitely threw some shade at the idea of like, homosexuality that was, y'know we read about it, it was wrong, those are things that you didn't do. I remember I developed really early and I didn't want, I was very sporty, I was the only girl in my class, I didn't want to have to wear a bra, I felt like it set me apart

> from the boys, and I was like "I don't want to have to be that, like, I'm not ready to do that." And, I never wore a bra. And I remember at one point, like, a couple older men in my church was like, "We noticed you need to start wearing a bra and this will be hard for the boys in church to stay focused on God." And I'm like, "I am 12. Why are you sexualizing me? If I'm not wearing a bra it's not to be sexy, I'm 12." And so those kinds of things, or like, I remember, um, we all got sat down, I was about this age as well, 11 to 12, and there was about, like, 'cause they kept you in age groups in churches, like, and they *don't* put you in with boys either, so you have your girl groups…

TC described the discomfort she felt when she was being sexualized in the church. Not only was this a confusing time, as she did not want to be sexualized in a space where she sought safety, but she was also shamed for not wearing a bra. This confusion and shame were further enforced by the separation of genders at the particular church she went to, as she previously did not see herself as separate from the boys.

Stef and Barb felt shame when they lost friends for "being a slut", which caused them to not only internalize these words, but also experience a core moment, that they revisited surrounding the development of a false representation they lived through. Stef explained,

> I reverted back to the other grotesque moment that I had when I was younger, and I was being slut-shamed. I began thinking that I must have been a slut, y'know, "Maybe I'm not gay, so the next best thing would be if I was a slut," [laughs] Right? And then, y'know, and then I got a lot of shame around that...

She began to internalize their words and behave in a way that was considered slutty. Barb shared a similar narrative,

> …yup, there just became a point where I was made fun of for my masculine qualities on my body, my feminine qualities, playing sports with guys, and then I kept getting pulled into that grotesque moment, so eventually it became an internal belief system. I made a deal with myself, "fuck it, I'm gonna be a slut" [pause] oh and I did…but lots came with it as a way to cope in the world [pause] the fun, the learning, the growth, the pain, the embarrassment, the shame, which is all part of the grotesque. Trauma was enmeshed there too, so, sometimes, I felt the worst and it would continue, because I couldn't see a way out.

Stef and Barb capture the essence of what many co-researchers described. Stef shared the sense of 'grotesque' as,

> the grotesqueness has been part of my, like, huge - has been part of my shadow. It was part of my shadow for so long. And it was just part of this discourse I had going on in my mind that I was like, very fucked up and crazy and of *course* I was not one gender. Well, not one gender, one orientation, y'know, because I'm fucked up so that's what a fucked-up person's gonna do, y'know, and, of course I was a slut, or a promiscuous woman, right? Because that's what fucked up people do, y'know…

Stef's inner dialogue was one of not being able to break free from this cycle, or internal feelings, because there was something innately wrong with her. Barb also spoke about feeling "fucked up because I took on what people said I was – this part of my promiscuity and sexual exploration was full of shame and darkness." Sarah's perspective encapsulates the power of shame and the destruction it causes internally,

> This is who I have always been and society came along and imposed upon me, so I kind of slid into this role and grew up in it thinking it was natural. Just knowing that something was either sick or wrong, or something was wounded inside of me…

It is the very belief of feeling something is wrong with them, that keeps the power of shame ignited (Brown, 2010) and is one way in which the 'grotesque' can be internalized, enacted, and contribute to the depletion of a human being. While discussing the residual impact of shame in her system and revisiting the memories that came up as she spoke, TC recognized that even when she tried to embrace being "a slut" she couldn't do that right:

> It's like I remember the first-time I French kissed someone, before all my Dad stuff happened, and he told everyone that I didn't know what I was doing with my tongue [laughs], I laugh now, but I was so mortified [pause]. I felt so embarrassed about "doing it wrong", I swear I had followed Cosmo's how to guide and listened to what the girls in my classes advice was, and it was all wrong, which made me feel like I was wrong [pause]. This is among the many experiences I had that brought-on shame… which probably played into a role of trying to please my father and not

> question against his violations…I sure tried to drink this away later in life, I felt so grotesque, like it was my fault.

Shame is one of the most powerful and influential emotions when it comes to sexuality, and how individuals behave, think, and respond (Brown, 2010; G. Ogden, 2018; Katehakis, 2016). The following describes how the women coped with their shame. Each co-researcher shared some of the addictive behaviours that aided in coping with the yearning to get back to their true nature (Almaas, 2014) and their way of managing 'grotesque' sexuality.

Experiences of Coping

As they experienced losing a piece of themselves, becoming cut off from their true being, and functioning through what Almaas considers to be "false self-representations" they described taking on others' perspectives and beliefs (Almaas, 2000). Co-researchers found it difficult to decipher what was 'grotesque' versus their authentic selves or "true nature" (Almaas, 2000). This progression resulted in some mental health concerns, and several co-researchers self-medicated to cope.

Each co-researcher shared they used substances or sexual behaviors at some point of their journey to endure and survive what they had internalized and experienced from the outside world. These behaviours helped them deal with "depression, anxiety, or feeling so low…"; for some, the very addictive behaviour was an attempt to meet their needs, as they were unable to any other way. Stef described her process as,

> as a way to deal with the abuse I grew up with, the shame I received for being promiscuous and all the other stuff, I drank for years… I was a binge alcoholic, and sex, drugs, and rock n' roll was my thing, for like, years. And I rocked it [laughs]. I was very sexual and I very much expressed myself as a sexual being, but that was when I was black out drunk… and the shame of some of the things that occurred during this time, continue with that theme of sexual grotesqueness…

This was incredibly difficult for Stef as she shared that she was raped during a black out episode and recalled coming in and out of consciousness. She felt this

> was grotesque for me, right, because I never told anybody… and I had to see the boy after and pretend nothing happened because everyone told me if I kept drinking that I would be raped, so I felt like I deserved it, because of how fucked up I was.

Not only was Stef trying to work through previous trauma and stress, but she was also working through the silence of not feeling safe enough to share the trauma of being gang raped, and then blaming herself for what happened. Stef's inner dialogue was one of not being able to break free from this cycle, or these internal feelings, because there was something innately wrong with her. Barb too, became guarded and learned to not share the extent of the drinking and sexual promiscuity,

> I can say that my 'drug' [using hands for quotes] of choice was drinking, masturbation, and sex [pause] and I made sure to master them all [laughs]. You know I just decided, if everyone was going to call me a slut, I was going to do that to the best degree I knew how. And to do that and attempt and medicate the shame I felt for even being alive and fucked up, I drank a lot [pause]. And for a petite woman with muscle, I mean I drank [pause]. My Ego took great pride in the fact that I could outdrink most of the guys at parties, that I could probably have sex non-stop and still keep going, hence why I would leave when one was done, to find another. Now I was never raped during these excursions, and I never killed anyone with my drinking and driving, but the secrecy of trying to keep all of it under wraps. … You know it's confusing because even people who 'thought they knew the extent of it', didn't believe me at times when I tried to share about it; they thought I was exaggerating the amount of people I was sleeping with and the stories, but they were all true… So, I drew deeper into myself because not only was I not being accepted for being who I was before being a slut, but I now couldn't be accepted for who I was as a slut… it was a tough time in my life for sure.

Above, Barb seamlessly described the struggle many co-researchers had when they were not accepted for being authentic, versus living in the world through a false representation, which for Barb was living like a slut. She was stuck in this never-ending cycle of living

through a false representation to get away from the rejection of not being seen as herself. For TC and Jax, their addictive process was a way to not only cope with their underlying trauma, but to also manage denying their own sexual needs, and was a way to fit into what was portrayed as "not grotesque", through the disconnection to self and others.

Stef, Sarah, and KT described using masturbation to safely deal with what felt out of control outside of themselves. Stef and Sarah both described, "masturbating for hours" and even to the point "of being sore", in order to hide out from the world, and to try to give themselves safety, in the only way they knew how at the time. In a previous quote, KT shared her mother's response when she found a journal in which KT had written about sex and romance. Her mother shouted at her, demanding to know where this content had come from, and verbalized that girls are not supposed to do things like this. As a way to cope KT, "…began to masturbate and fantasize, because no one could be upset by these things and no one would have to know I was masturbating, and I masturbated a lot…it was problematic for a while, and eventually I worked through it". Over time KT was able to work through her mother's judgement after her mother finding the sexual stories she wrote. She attributed this to "not having compounded numbers of 'grotesque' experiences to process and work through and I was able to let go of the story scenario with Mom, when I was little older", KT was able to let go when she was old enough to make sense of it.

For many co-researchers, addiction, 'problematic' behaviour, shame, and mental health issues influenced how they related to themselves, their sexuality, and day-to-day life. However, these things also served as the very force that encouraged them to oppose the more negative struggles they experienced.

Confronting Contradictions

> *They tell you to develop a thick skin so things don't get to you. What they don't tell you is that your thick skin will keep everything from getting out, too. Love, intimacy, vulnerability. I don't want that. Thick skin doesn't work anymore. I want to be transparent and translucent. For that to work, I won't own other people's short comings and criticisms. I won't put what you think about me on my load.*
>
> - Viola Davis, Courage and Power from Pain: An Interview with Brene Brown, (May 9, 2018)

Each woman discussed experiences that helped her confront the contradictions associated with internalizing the 'grotesque'. Gadamer describes this type of shift as *a learning experience*, which means to create a radical shift in consciousness, and informs us that our previous understandings, no longer fit (Moules et. al., 2015). The co-researchers shifted towards confronting these contradictions in a variety of ways: some women literally created physical space by travelling to a different continent or province. Others were able to explore their trauma through therapy, develop an understanding of how trauma intertwined with the internalization of the 'grotesque', and how they might detach from this. Finally, two women explored their sexuality and enjoyed some sexual experiences which encouraged them to let go of what others had put on them, and embrace their day-to-day self, relationship, and sexual needs. It is important to note that the two women who explored their sexuality were brought up in families that were more open about discussing sexuality; they describe having "not as many grotesque" experiences to overcome, which they attribute to having support from their family and others, most of the time.

TC and Sarah noted that physically moving away for a while helped them work through the conservative biases that were placed on them. This helped them break free,

subsequently honour their own explorations of the world, and create their own attitudes. For TC, in particular, "moving away allowed me the time and chance to process some of the incestual trauma I had experienced in my family system by my father," and allowed her to disentangle her sexuality from her father and sort out how she felt about her own sexuality. She continues to work through this, but moving away and giving herself space was a key aspect in helping her detangle from the confusion. From this she learned,

> [the incest] was not about me and is not mine to carry [pause], I know this cognitively, but is often something emotionally I need to remind myself [pause]. My feminist group of friends really help me with this releasing of this mess.

She further spoke about how the distance she gave herself benefited her as she was able to shed the induced trauma from the incestuous experiences, and have momentum to swing forward and find meaningful relationships where her partners appreciated, honoured, and embraced who she was, and shared similar values. The change in physical location and exposure to feminism aided in developing a deeper connection to her true nature and provided her with flexibility to move through societal pressures and negative internal dialogue. Sarah also needed to leave and take physical space, to become more autonomous and rediscover who she was and what she enjoyed in terms of sexuality.

> I took an opportunity and travelled to [Asia] for six months and wow did my eyes ever get opened up while I was there. I also started to spend more time on FetLife.com, which is essentially a kinky Facebook, and I met people from [southern Alberta] too, through there. While it was nerve wracking, it was liberating as fuck [laughs] I could be Christian and Kinky; I didn't have to let either part of myself go to be accepted [pause] I was free to have both… There was no misogyny and patriarchy in this space, just could be OK… but it sure revealed where I still held onto unhealthy ways of thinking, so I also went to therapy and were on anti-depressants for a while before I didn't have to self-harm…so these things helped me leave this shadow behind or not struggle as much as I did before… I was no longer chained.

Through the change in location and opportunity to connect through an online community, Sarah found that she was able to break free from the external restraints and explore a world where others normalized her feelings and curiosities, and revealed what she needed to work on further. As a result of therapy, Sarah shared, "… discovering mental wellness has very much centered around my internal kink and slut-shaming, my internalized homophobia, my internalized... religious fear. So, if I hadn't treated that I don't know where I'd be." Therapy was a part of her process, as well as for other co-researchers.

Stef and Barb spoke directly to their process in therapy as a way to confront the contradictions placed on them, and their attempt to navigate this place of the 'grotesque'. Barb described going to a therapist who worked from a "transformational perspective" and the impact attending this type of "deep therapy" had on her,

> Well, I am not sure how to sum up how I was able to come into awareness with this stuff. I mean, obviously attending college and going to my first Women Studies course, played a huge role for me. But, I struggled to keep all of those learnings in my consciousness and awareness… I always felt like I had to fight about these things [pause], then I went to deep therapy, and realized this was my Ego, and that even though what I was saying was not incorrect, I was suffering A LOT! Through therapy I found that I didn't have to suffer all of the time and that by becoming reconnected to parts of self and beyond, that I disowned, that I could reclaim a lot of what was missing and not suffer so much… I didn't have to be a divided being… I didn't have to always be in a split, or if I was in a split, I could be aware and try to hold both pieces, as I moved through the work. This is a very brief description of what I went through, and am still working through, but I owe it to this work, as it helped shatter some of these pressures in my system, and helped me reclaim, parts of self, so I could be more whole and function from a connecting place, rather than trying to fight all the time… it is deeply transformative and changed my life…

Barb's experience in therapy deepened the awareness she gained from Women's Studies courses during post-secondary education; by attending therapy she realized that her Ego was always trying to fight and therefore she lived in suffering regularly. Barb became

reconnected to lost parts of self, which helped her function from a connecting place, and not be split all the time. Through attending therapy, she realized she did not need to hurt all the time. Stef said,

> Well I've had a long- I had a long period of depression. A *really* long period of depression that really started to work through when, in 2012, because I was like, "Well, I'm going to be doing a Master's degree," and I'm like, "Okay, well, I can't be depressed and I can't be an alcoholic, and I can't be a drug addict, so we gotta fucking stop this." [laughs] So, I did. And I went to therapy with a decent therapist. What he did do was help me kind of, y'know, get [me] on the right track with like, treatment and kind of helped me like, make different lifestyle choices and stuff [pause] And so, structurally he helped me, but not with the deep stuff and I knew that was coming, 'cause I knew what kind of program I was heading into and I was fine with that. Yeah, I just took like, St. John's Wort and stuff like that for my treatment and everything but like, the depression has been huge.

She shared similar sentiments with her therapeutic experience, seeking structure and skills to her life led her to therapy that was also "transformative"; Stef learned through her exploration in therapy that drinking was a way for,

> me to be intimate with others, to be nice and kind and caring… I didn't know how to do any of these things sober… I have a total different understanding of my drinking now, I look back and see all the good times and that it was my attempt to be free enough to have intimacy, to be with another human…I was very sexual and I very much expressed myself as a sexual being.

She realized that she medicated through drinking to attempt to have her needs met through another human; she was craving intimacy from these expressions and her eroticism. The last two co-researchers spoke about how they overcame barriers through sexual experiences.

Jax described having to work through being 'the other woman' in one of her first relationships, which contributed to a lot of shame surrounding her sexual process. She immediately left the relationship after she learned that her partner at that time was married. She describes this as,

> a really hard time and the guilt I felt was immense, but it helped me after I let go of the guilt... These experiences only made me more confident to know what I want, to strive for what I want, to go for what I want. And while some relationships between then and now, I did put my sexual needs off for the betterment of the relationship, I let go of those and now know that I will not deny that I have sexual needs, and right from the beginning I now talk straight about sexual compatibility, because I am not going to let bad sex run my life again…

For Jax, the need for sexual compatibly was the most important component to take away from this experience; she was also very clear about her sexual needs in relationships moving forward, and was no longer willing to compromise her sexual needs for others.

KT did not speak directly to an experience that shifted her thinking, but discussed her exploration through the BDSM and Kink community, which changed the way she viewed what was 'grotesque' versus not 'grotesque' for her,

> You know if [sexuality] is safe, sane, and consensual, and those sorts of things, if within these parameters, it's okay, it's not grotesque. This all builds towards a positive [pause], towards creating a very positive image inside of oneself… Like what society views as grotesque you can take it and you're like, 'yeah, but not really, I don't mind it.' Y'know, so, you can see the beauty in grotesque things, they don't all have to be bad… BDSM and that community and specific kinks have helped me embrace [me]. So by not being like, 'okay, that's really bad, like, it creates a conflict in my life with all the sexual tension, like, I like it but then you feel so guilty afterwards for having liked it, like it's a terrible conflict. You can then be like, I can see it that way, *or,* I can be like 'hmmmm, this is interesting', right? Look at all of these positive role models there are out there' or like, safe, sane, consensual communities, and y'know like, you can either be ashamed of it and guilty, or you can sort of just see what's out there, y'know. And that sort of, being able to go, I recognize other people would see the ugly in this, the grotesque, but I chose to see sort of the other side of it… I no longer have to deny it, I can just recognize it… Because every time I denied my needs it became destructive and obsessive; it's so much easier to recognize and make a decision from that place inside…

KT's experience in the Kink and BDSM community granted her the opportunity to explore her curiosities with role models, under the protection of safe, sane, and consensual agreements, which were fulfilling and helped her rediscover her preferences.

Through this she was able to accept that others may not enjoy the same activities, but that their likes or dislikes did not have to limit her preferences. All of the co-researchers involved in the BDSM/Kink community discussed the importance of "safe, sane, and consensual" and the value this brought forth in their own sexual empowerment and exploration. Overall, each of these co-researchers had experience(s) that pushed them to break through the barriers and drop into their own "being", to the best of their capability, versus focusing on external pressures and demands. In the next section, we look at how each woman made meaning regarding her experiences by exploring their own boundaries, and deciding who and what was worth their energy. KT's deep awareness of recognizing what she liked and letting go as above, is a perfect segue into the next section.

Cyclical Nature of Learning and Awareness

All co-researchers discussed remaining reflective and responding to the "external world". This section resonates with a hermeneutic phenomenological sense of navigating the world, as humans do not ever have a blank slate, and that we will always be revisiting experiences and making understandings as we are always experiencing. The co-researchers described their re-visiting as a continual exploration in responding to certain events of their lives, and in particular negative memories, traumas, and a continual internalization of external messages from others and media. For some co-researchers, it was how their most intimate relationships and closest friends (who knew about the evolution in their sexuality) continued to judge them or be confused by choices they make. For KT, much of what caused distress in her life was that,

> There are still times, however, that I struggle to entirely shed the negative perceptions associated with my choices. These negative perceptions exclusively arise when discussing sexual history with my partner (which isn't often discussed

> due to its challenging nature). Because he hasn't had the same opportunities to explore himself sexually and come to the same self-actualization that I have, he can still struggle to understand how someone can take sex so casually as I did. And in those moments, I still feel judged by those who are closest to me and mean the most to me.

While she was able to move forward, she still had challenges in her interpersonal relationship related to some of her sexual behaviour before they were together. She relates this to her shame,

> …as I said earlier, I don't know that shame ever completely goes away, it like, will still show up, I think, especially in meaningful relationships… like my current partner did not have as much 'sexual experience or partners' as me, and there are times where it bothers him. And it doesn't always feel shaming, but I often put out there that I wonder if men have to go through this scrutiny… and I often try to stay curious with why this is something that bothers [my partner], and even if the answer is cringing [pause], and I think that's part of a relationship. But it's difficult, because the things that bother him, don't phase me in the least and I never lied about these things when we started… so there's still things that pop up from my previous behaviour, even if it's been awhile…

KT continued to work through shame from her previous sexual experiences, as it continued to pop up when her partner felt triggered, based on them not having the same sexual trajectory. Sarah also continues to deal with learning how to navigate these kinds of conversations in relationships, especially the individuals who meant the most to her. Yet, she reframed her experience as part of her growth and learning:

> …that part of recovering from that was dealing with the fact that a person had rejected me, but I hadn't. I was still the same person, and I didn't have to change my views on sexuality to match theirs just to please them, even though I wanted to have a relationship with them. And it was just a matter of learning: ok, this is not something that they want any discussion about in their life. Which is really difficult because they're supposed to be someone you can talk to about everything.

She learned to be able to have communication about their needs, and not shoulder the discomfort that comes from her partner. Barb experienced shame too, and what is difficult to be mindful of, as she experienced this debilitating emotion,

> Ugh, shame… is the fucking worst… and it's an on-going issue, ya know? And the worst part is when I'm in deep, it feels like forever, like it will never end, except it does… it's just hard, but it also uncovers what else needs to be worked on or any residue that is in my system [pause] still painful at times… it's like trying to let a wave wash through – sometimes it's a tsunami, other times it's a ripple…

Barb acknowledged the pain that shame brought into her life, but the very powerful piece was the continuum through which it revealed itself; sometimes experiences brought a lot of pain, and others could be a gentler reminder. Jax described her learning as,

> …every once in a while you get hit and you get knocked down a little bit, but you have to always get back up and just realize how you're thinking, 'well, apparently that didn't work, and I don't like how that made me feel', and you can't have a do-over, you just have to take it as a learning experience and grow form it, 'cause it happened, there's no taking it back, so you might as well make peace with it and move on…

Part of Stef's cyclical discovery was with her body and she believed, "Like, I think I've like, totally got really integrated, kind of shame around, around menstrual cycles and stuff and I have discovered my preferences, and most of the time it's OK." Through this integration, Stef spoke specifically about how changing how she related to her menstrual cycle over the past few years really shifted things within her being:

> Yeah, I just feel like, that within my being, within my thoughts, within my emotions, physiologically, what ends up happening on the outside of my internal world like, what like, people end up doing, or I do, actions, I find everything I need to work on in my unconscious comes up during my menstrual cycle. Yeah, and so, like, whereas before I thought I was just fucking crazy around my period, what now I see is that this is just stuff that's coming up from my unconsciousness that if I sit with these like, this rage, or, this irritability, or fatigue, or, y'know, just general malaise like, around like the, menstrual cycle, if I sit in it long enough I'll feel, I'll get these gems, like these, these points towards things that I need to be

> seeing that was in my unconsciousness. So, like, for example, y'know, like issues around letting go uh, of pieces of myself like, recognizing what I am doing that is limiting me, grown past [pause] like I become much more sensitive and highly aware of my unconsciousness around my period, so, like I actually kind of like, kinda, as much as a pain in the ass it is sometimes, like, physiologically, like feeling like very drained and stuff, headaches and all that crap, like, I feel like it's a time of shedding, like, that thing you need to shed. But not just like, physically, like, I feel like, like you can really go uh, deep with that and like, kind of let go of um, energetically, stuff that really doesn't belong to you anymore, things that you just need to become aware of. So yeah, almost like a, almost like a cleansing, so it's like, a lot different than what I looked at that before when it comes to menstrual cycle…

All of these experiences, emotions, and processes which the co-researchers returned to through their experiencing the world, lead to the final theme that emerged in the hermeneutic analysis. The next section outlines this theme, and focuses on the co-researchers' learnings, and making sense of the 'grotesque' and their sense of the cyclical nature of their lives. The way in which the women described transgressing barriers, developing their own identity, erotic evolution and meaning in their day-to-day lives captures what Gadamer (1989) and Heidegger (1962) describe as "working the fore-structure", which is working through the incessant habits of thought which are the projections of meaning imposed onto the individual; which in turn guides their new sense of understanding of the self (Gadamer, 1989).

Theme C: Becoming Transformed Through Transgression

> *Becoming aware of who and what is really worth your energy is one of the best gifts you will give yourself.*
>
> - Mari Lee, Counselor Coach Facebook Post (2018)

Each woman described transformational experiences that they found to be life changing. These descriptions spoke to how they embraced their sexuality, and made meaning in their day-to-day lives. Some women experienced these transformations by

setting intentions; others experienced a spontaneous occurrence that arose when they found themselves in an open state of consciousness; and some discovered this openness through their sexual experiences. The common thread amongst all these experiences was the women letting go of what the world (or other people) told them about themselves, being able to live authentically from their own truth or their "true nature" (Almaas, 2000), to discover what felt right for them. Heideggerian phenomenology might suggest a new *Dasein* (Laverty, 2003), has emerged for these co-researchers; that through these shifts in consciousness their relationships and experiences have been transformed.

To Hell with Permission

If you cannot find it in your own body, where will you go in search of it?

- The Upanishads, Science & Nonduality Facebook Post (September, 2017)

The co-researcher's *Dasein* shifted as they each discussed in some way, no longer searching for approval externally. Some of the co-researchers discussed a shift in their Being, behaviour, and feelings, as soon as they started to let go of approval from others. These changes seemed to come about by letting go of permission from patriarchal structures about their true natures (who they were supposed to be, how they were supposed to act, what they were supposed to enjoy in life and sexually). In letting these structures go, they experienced a shift towards seeing who they were from internal sources.

Shift in being. KT described her shift as not necessarily rooted in sexuality, but rather in how she chose clothes that did not align with expectations of the female body,

especially since she identified that her body did not align with what could be considered a classic body (Bakhtin, 1987; Dines, 2010),

> …is mainly the *choosing* to express sexuality. This can range from wearing 'inappropriate' clothes, being 'too sexual' in language, or pursuing a sexual partner. Anything that is not flaunting the cultural expectations of a quiet, demure, sexually virginal woman can essentially be transgressive. As far as how I have experienced it, one example is that within the past year or so I have become comfortable enough in my own body that I have started to wear clothes that aren't perceived to be suitable to all body types - tight legging and short shorts specifically. And while this action isn't specifically sexual in nature, by wearing something that doesn't meet with expectations, I'm allowing myself and hoping to give others the option of freedom of non-conformity…to hell with permission… if I can do it, so can you!

Through these experiences, KT became more comfortable wearing different styles of clothes than what was societally deemed appropriate for her body type. She described the experience that influenced her to try this new style of clothes for her body type,

> …I started to wear these things, and be okay with it. [pause] Once I saw a woman with the same body type as me, wearing tighter pants/leggings … I was like [pause], yup, I am so getting a pair of those…and I even told her how awesome she looked, and we talked about how challenging it can be to find "in-style clothes" for our bodies [laughs].

For KT, seeing another woman who had a similar body type wearing clothes she liked was eye opening. She found herself connecting with this woman and validating the difficulty of finding clothes that were in-style for all body types. Barb also shared that she really struggled with finding clothing that wasn't "old-school":

> …Where do I start? Every bit of clothing I have ever owned has had to be altered to fit my height, my breast size, my hip size…I used to think [pause] am I the only one with this body type?!... the worst thing about this, was when I would walk into a store and see what was on the mannequin [pause], dig it and then try it on, and it not fit ANYTHING on my body – seriously the worst! I hated shopping until my late twenties… as the only thing that stores had for someone my size was old school clothes - plain and boxy shirts and jeans… it was depressing to shop…

Initially for Barb, these shopping experiences made her feel depressed, and she hated shopping because of it. Barb also shared the experience that changed this for her,

> … I was in a change room, [pause] I just tried on something I was hoping to wear for an event I needed to attend and I started to cry after the saleswoman told me that "someone your size and height should consider a more flattering color like black as it will make your body look skinnier…", once she left, I started to cry and felt so much negative shit, and a woman in the next stall knocked on my change room door and basically said that all bodies are beautiful and she needed help picking out an outfit too, and could we help each other find what we needed… I ended up staying in that store for a couple hours, laughing with this woman, sharing stories, and learning a bunch of information about what happens to women's bodies in their 40's [pause, tears in her eyes], I pretty much owe this woman for my shopping addiction now [laughs]… and the cool outfit[s] I bought that day. I'm not sure I would have stepped foot into another store or even bought clothes again, if I didn't have that connection with her at that moment… I'm pretty thankful. This helped me not be scared of my body, but to embrace it.

KT's and Barb's experiences may seem like small victories in combatting how 'grotesque' female sexuality is immersed in every consumer industry that advertises (Dines, 2010). However, these seemingly insignificant experiences were part of the catalyst to these women being able to trust themselves, trust in connecting with others over simple things, and help combat the veil through which they are judging themselves and their experience (G. Ogden, 2018). Barb felt more comfortable in her body; KT also shared later in her interview that "this changed my life… I just find it easier to accept this body and go with it… I'm actually pretty fabulous and awesome, and so are other women's bodies [big smile]." For these women and others, it is often these experiences and moments, whether by themselves or with others, that can be the 'smallest' catalyst to moving past some of the restraint they feel from the external pressures.

Stef shared that re-connecting with women, herself, and her feminine spirit served as a means to break through some of her difficulties,

> … I worked with a female practitioner, and together we untangled the messiness of the domestic violence I grew up with… I now can trust women and have female relationships and this is huge as I no longer reject them and I no longer reject me…I'm okay as a feminine being…

By working through issues with her female therapist, Stef no longer sought out female relationships that were harmful, or rejected having female relationships and friendships. This allowed her the flexibility to have relationships with women without fear, which enabled her to accept others and herself. The following theme builds on this momentum, and describes ways in which the women refused to shoulder the 'grotesque', placed it back on the people bullying them, or were able to let it go internally. This awareness created a flow, and allowed them to embrace the discoveries this awareness brought into their lives.

Delightful Discoveries

> *Something that helps me not give a shit, is that I know who the fuck I am.*
>
> – Amy Schumer, InStyle Magazine (2018)

The co-researchers outlined some unexpected discoveries that helped them avoid shouldering what was 'grotesque' to others. Jax and KT both described their family systems as having a positive impact on their learning, and the way they engaged with sexuality and exploration. Jax said, "I learned to value, like, just touching each other and feeling that physical connection with somebody is important; I think I was born to be a sexual person and I know that." KT described a positive experience post-puberty when sexuality was not a taboo topic to speak about in her family. She ascribed her positive development after puberty, which she felt was a critical period for girls and for her maturity; "besides the angst-y bit of puberty, once, *after* puberty, I still have a very

positive self-image, so there wasn't much, conflict further on… it was like you [others who judge her] can keep your grotesqueness is what I discovered…". Other shifts that took place for her after puberty included,

> One transformational experience I had one night where I had two separate partners and encounters. Both men were liberated, knew each other and neither was particular upset by the turn of the events, I felt no judgement from either. The feeling of empowerment that I got from the whole experience was monumental. The combination of just having what I wanted, with total transparency and no judgement, has stayed with me to this day… I know that not everyone in the world is going to find me attractive, but there are plenty that do. And in this revelation, I saw that as long as I made an effort to be genuine and true to myself, there would always be someone who I could connect with. From that, bloomed the confidence to acknowledge the truth in the times that an interaction did not end positively, and the poise to find people who I connected with… It changed my life and how I felt about myself in all sorts of situations…

Almaas (2001) may characterize the above stories as showing how *being* has been transformed. For Jax, being transformed was due to having all of her needs met, without judgement. Consequently, she was able to connect to a space where she had more acceptance for herself, as a whole. Yet, there was a deeper awareness that emerged for the co-researchers who were able to fully embrace who they were. KT encapsulated the paradox and deep learning surrounding an area that each co-researcher discussed,

> I have had to accept that my body is exactly as it is, and that I don't have the body of a supermodel. Though the act of having sex with multiple partners, I discovered that men and women both feel the same insecurities, and by accepting both my own body and others' as is, I've allowed myself to take pleasure in myself and others. I've also thought a lot about the different expectations put on women versus men lately. Where men are often accepted for having body hair, any hair on women that isn't eyebrows or head hair is scorned. By allowing my body to do what it does naturally and not constantly fighting to have it shaved clean, and I can cum however I fucking want to; I've found more acceptance for both myself and others.

Jax and Barb shared how they gained similar awareness, melting away their "shame for having squirting orgasms" and as Barb states, "everyone can orgasm differently, and it

doesn't mean anything, so long as there is pleasure and no judgement… I know what I like and now I have more acceptance for what others like too, which is cool." Through acceptance of their body and natural outcomes of some of their sexual experiences, these co-researchers could accept themselves and the discoveries along with this.

Sarah's discovery of the BDSM community provided her opportunities to explore multiple aspects of her sexual learning. She discussed her most powerful breakthroughs,

> Well, not everybody in the same room is the same orientation, but there's that general air of acceptance, and enthusiasm, encouraging you to try things, and teaching you at the same time. So there was that mentor/disciple kind of attitude, where 'I will take you under my wing and let you explore and when you are ready, take off and bring other people'. And, they explored all kinds of stuff and my confidence skyrocketed. It was incredible.

TC's discoveries while participating in the BDSM community were, "Kink is beautiful, but there are some aspects that are not for me…" Some other learnings that TC embraced included her ability to speak up for herself, whether she wants to be sexual or not,

> I have a lot more use for communication now versus being younger, especially with talking with people about sexual things, if I don't want to do it, I won't. And I no longer feel the pressure to go through with it just because we're both there... These kinds of things took a long time to learn… I no longer put myself in situations that will make me feel gross or even grotesque after.

TC was now able to make decisions based on how she felt, and no longer engaged in relationships or aspects that she knew would make her feel 'grotesque' after. This leads into the next section of women engaging in transgressions by exploring and transgressing the women learned to embrace their own needs and realities.

Sexual Transgressions as the Path to Freedom

> *To be wild is not to be crazy or psychotic. True wildness is a love of nature, a delight in silence, a voice free to say spontaneous things, and an exuberant curiosity in the face of the unknown.*

- Robert Bly, The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart (1992)

For some of the co-researchers, exploring their sexuality through casual sex, was a means to gain freedom; it seems this occurred for the women once things began to shift internally. KT, Jax, Barb, and TC discussed *casual* sexual experiences as means to transgress the bounds placed on them (and women in general), enabling them to become empowered. As mentioned earlier, the women did everything in their power to avoid being labelled a slut, which is common for women who engage in casual sex. However, co-researchers were influenced positively by their casual sex and hook up experiences. KT described the impact:

> Yes, casual sex empowered my own sexuality. By choosing to sleep with who I wanted to rather than letting societal expectations guide my choices, I was able to discover what I liked and didn't like both sexually and personally. By learning and growing sexually through this exploration, I became more confident in myself and, in turn, allowed myself the freedom to further ignore expectations of others.

KT was self-empowered by independently choosing her sexual partners, and not allowing social expectations to fully guide her choices. Through these experiences, she learned her personal preferences, which were often not compliant with what is expected from women socially (Daniluk, 1998). Barb and Jax also shared that they learned a lot through similar exploration and developed confidence in themselves in the world. Barb shared many of her experiences of hooking up,

> Hooking up let me experience variety, I was choosy about who I slept with, and attempted to try to calculate for overlap - we didn't have Facebook back then, and cell phones were not as big of thing as they are now, so I didn't worry about sleeping with someone from the same circles… although it happened from time to time [sigh]. College was a turning point for me in my sexual exploration. I was no longer with the same partner from high school and was living on my own. Now, I am not going to say that all of my experiences were safe, or practiced in best judgment [pause] they weren't. But, I can say that I am one of the fortunate women, who did not experience anything 'too bad' or severe consequences, from

> these experiences… just sometimes waking up in a soberer state, thinking, 'wow, that would have gone bad, be smarter about it next time', and sometimes I was and sometimes I wasn't [laughs]… I feel pretty fortunate that I did not experience certain parts of the negativity that some women experienced at my age… These eye-opening experiences changed how I practiced safe sex, so there was a gift in there [laughs], even though it may have taken me a couple years of practice…

For Barb, casual sex allowed her the opportunity to explore an assortment of sexual experiences. She and KT had a similar strategy for protecting themselves from being labelled a slut, by endeavouring to not overlap partners in social circles where individuals might know each other. They were also clear about what these spur-of-the-moment opportunities gave them, in the long run. Jax, too noted,

> there were times, y'know like, that was stupid I shouldn't have done that. Like a random one-nighter that I went to his house, not safe, did not know the guy, should have not done it. But, live and learn, you don't do that again. Or, in theory, you shouldn't but probably did [laughs].

Jax and Barb share that there were times during this part of their exploration where they may have engaged in some unsafe activities, and may have done this a few times before they recognized what was safe for them. Both shared that it was a learning process and they were thankful that the negative consequences were not as devastating as what others have experienced. Jax deepened her reflection,

> I feel these transgressions are what hold me together sometimes. Sex is something I physically need in my life, so I would say that my sexuality is hugely important, not only to my identity, but also to my health and well-being. This comes in the form of not settling for mediocre sex/sexual partners/relationships. Also, most recently, not settling into a traditional relationship and putting my needs on hold all for the sake of gender norms, making people around me feel safe and what expectations are put on women. It gives me confidence that knowing I feel fulfilled from casual sex and that's ok. I don't need to bow to social norms and need to find a husband, the house, the kids, etc. I can be comfortable with fucking and then carrying on with my own life.

Jax embraced this as the very thing that helped her discover and break through the mould of what society deems is expected of women who are engaging in sex. She found that through these explorations she could feel safe, fulfilled sexually, and be okay with not being in a relationship. TC also expressed some of the "deeper learnings" she took away from her experiences with casual sex:

> it's not for me [pause] I don't like casual sex, like I used to, I would rather be in a relationship and learn how to be with one person and grow that relationship… casual sex reminds me of my trauma with my father, so I'm glad I learned that [pause] I don't care if others are doing it, as long as it is safe, sane, consensual [pause] but not for me anymore…

TC's deep discovery through casual sex was understanding what type of sex and relationship feels good given her trauma, and what does not. TC discussed how at this point she is no longer interested in seeking casual sex, but has found freedom through an outlet to counteract patriarchy through producing and contributing to feminist pornography. She shares her relationship with feminism and how feminist pornography challenges the assumptions tied to mainstream pornography,

> …because I've had my relationship with feminism and the way that like, if I'm gonna watch porn I'm gonna pay for it and it's gonna be good. Everyone's gonna get paid in that film, it's gonna cost me $27. I lived with a bunch of women before I moved here and they were all really like, "Queer world! Queer focused!" and they subscribed to a lot of different, like, porn channels and we'd like, all watch it and like, critique what we liked and didn't like about it so, it can be like a, it's a really cool like it, it's a world that's there. It's huge.

By connecting with the Queer community, TC found that having open dialogue while watching pornography and critiquing it with others was a cool and important experience for her as she heard other viewpoints. She further explained the difference between mainstream pornography and feminist pornography,

> Well, feminist porn everyone's paid a living wage, everyone is safe, and well, it's consensual. So... whether or not you see it, like, you know if you're buying like, say, one of the people we follow, her name's Courtney Trouble, and she makes a lot of them and you know ethically, everyone in this film wanted to be there, consented to doing this. There are those three things and you know that if they say this is feminist porn and like, there's, most of the times they kind of keep their actors like, you use your like, same 10 actors, and in feminist porn and you kind of like, make your own different kinds of things, so, like in hers specifically, there's another, it's called *Crash Pad*, or like *Auto Straddle*, and those are like, sites that you know people are getting paid well, they want to be there.

According to TC, in feminist porn the individuals making the film are properly compensated, safe, and the sexual activity in the film is consensual; there are a variety of actors and sites built for feminist pornography, but these three elements remain consistent. Other areas in which the feminist pornography she produces is different is, "I also use a condom, there's not a lot of condoms being used in porn… No slapping of 'pussies'… jizz in the face because someone is sitting on you… I'm so not interested in having [jizz] in my hair…". For TC, producing scenes that include condom use, avoid mainstream scenes of 'jizz' in women's faces, and staying away from non-consensual situations help her films embody the three components of feminist porn. Being part of this production has helped TC, "… feel like I am helping women find out that there are other options to what they can watch, and see if they are into that sort of stuff, instead of mainstream porn and the BS that goes with that." She has made meaning from her contribution in feminist pornography by helping women have the option of viewing videos as they experiment with their sexuality.

These experiences helped the women have more compassion for other individuals' experience of patriarchy and also provided the freedom to break through these ideas. Barb noted:

> The more hookups I had with others, the more I learned about others' tastes, fears, and curiosities of sexuality. I think there may have been a handful of boring hookups, you know, show up, get it on, and leave… A majority of mine, I often got to experience the other person in their element, whether at their work, around their friends… and often, I had conversations about things, like difference cultures, differing needs, their sexuality, my sexuality. But this is when I started to hear more about and talk more about how patriarchy or expectations are put on others bodies, and even men's bodies… I became more empathetic for others' situations and the oppression we all go through. I also learned about my privilege, too, though. I think this is also what made me feel more comfortable with myself, or to at least recognize when I am struggling, and how to get through it.

Barb learned a lot about other people and had the opportunity to experience people in their own element, like their friend circles, or at their jobs. She was able to develop more empathy for others, and understand the 'grotesqueness' that was placed on them, which helped her feel more comfortable with herself. KT shared similar sentiments,

> my casual sexual experiences taught me that men and other woman also have to work through grotesqueness and expectations of their body or what they are supposed to do in sex, and this gave me a lot of empathy for what others have to go through as well.

KT and Barb discovered that men also go through struggles with expectations. TC agreed with this by sharing a recent example of what she saw in the grocery store,

> … there was a picture of Leonardo di Caprio the other day and he has like, gained a little bit of weight and they're like, circling his body fat. And I'm like, "What is this? Why don't we just not?" Now, equality in celebrity means making fun of fat men? The same way we make fun of women? Like, what the fuck?

TC illuminated how pervasive this type of shaming is in the media, and how men and women are both receiving negative attention if they do not match these impossible standards (Brown, 2010). This leads into the next section of women embracing their erotic self, and what that means to them; Sexual transgressions helped the women learn to embrace their erotic selves.

Embracing the Erotic Self

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

– Maya Angelou, Still I Rise (1978)

One key component for co-researchers who moved through their sense of the 'grotesque' was embracing their erotic self; this came in different forms for the co-researchers; however, this understanding was monumental to how they lived their life and approached their sexual evolution. KT shared that from the beginning she was not a passive sexual partner,

> Even thinking back to my first partner, I don't ever remember taking a secondary role in participation. I can remember masturbating as soon as I was sexually aware and writing my own sexual fantasies. As soon as I could I bought a vibrator. In my household, I was encouraged to have a strong sense of self and emphasis on the ability to say no. At much of the core of the active female component; I feel that the ability and strength to say no is equally as important as the ability to say yes. In my current relationship, there is complete understanding and acceptance if one or the other party initiates sex and the other politely declines. Part of my core sexuality is the participation in the act of sex and sexuality. To be passive and unengaged is unfulfilling to me, and just isn't fun! Engagement in the moment can range from initiating sex, to asking for lube, to changing positions to the initiation of dirty talk or fantasies.

KT powerfully recognizes that being passive is unfulfilling for her and that she prefers being actively engaged in her sexuality. Barb also shared, "I'm not a passive participant in sex, and the times I have been, it has been so boring and I was making a grocery list while it was happening… I know now, how to speak up for my needs." Along with this learning, Barb shared when she made a commitment to herself to be okay with who she was and what she wanted sexually, that the focus became less on the other and more on,

> … not focus on the other, to tell me what my needs [are], and [what my] sexual needs [are], and what I am supposed to look like every fucking day… it's totally exhausting [pause], to constantly try to keep up with 'what I am supposed to be

> doing, looking like, and acting… no wonder I needed so much therapy and support! I was constantly looking outside of myself to 'find myself' and now I don't have to…it was painful to leave those relationships, but I'm so glad I'm not still with them [laughs].

Jax shared a similar realization, "I realized that I do deserve to have my own needs fulfilled, I need to stop putting that off, and the person who I was with couldn't do it, as much as it hurt to let the relationship go…" For both women, leaving relationships that were not allowing them to be who they needed to be or enabling them to speak the truth of their needs was painful, yet beneficial in the long run. A few women mentioned some of their process focused on not needing to please another person, and forget their own needs.

KT, Jax, and Barb all mentioned that things changed for them because of "ageing and developing a strong sense of self." KT deepens this when she said,

> The development of self directly translates to sexual empowerment for me. By expressing myself unabashedly and completely truthfully in all aspects of my life, I don't feel like I am being kept in a box. I do what I like for me now, and not because it's expected of me, sexually or otherwise. Others often perceive this as confidence, and while confidence is part of the equation that makes me so empowered, it's also the knowledge that even if someone perceived me in a less light, it wouldn't affect me…

KT and other co-researchers' empowerment came from growing out of a stage in life where everything was dependent on what others thought of them, which could be considered a possible common pathway for women's self-growth and discovery (Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2018).

BDSM and Sexuality Shifts. For some of the co-researcher's, there was a shift in the amount of pre-occupation around sex and sexuality, due to the new learning and awareness of aligning with what they needed. KT shares, "It's being conscious in the

sense that [sex is] not addictive, not obsessing or pre-occupied or destructive…it's fulfilling, it's furthering and building up your self-image as opposed to destroying and bringing yourself down." She further expands on how BDSM and Kink has helped her,

> … Kink, and BDSM, has been something that's really helped me integrate to wholeness, because if you, if you recognize something in you and then deny it that would create tension and conflict and grotesqueness in your life. Where, and especially sexually, if it gets you sexually frustrated or, if you end up obsessing over it or fixating over it because you're not properly addressing it, well that's gonna be serious bad things. Instead, if you embrace it and you're conscious of it, you can build it in a positive light as opposed to really self-destructive light. And, again, especially sexually, like it can affect so many other parts of your life, your personal relationships, your sexual relationships, it can cause like, just life tension in your life, and who knows where else that goes but yeah, totally, like, if you.... It's either gonna be one or the other. Like, if you don't embrace it it's just gonna bring you down.

Kink aided KT in helping her address her needs and overall well-being, by decreasing the amount of pre-occupation around sexuality.

Sarah specifically focused on how the BDSM community gave her life back and shared some powerful realizations about her experiences in this open and communicative group. While she spoke at great length about specific times where she found certain kinky behaviors to be liberating, she also described the after-care she received, and the emotional aspect of BDSM; "It's an act of realization when I know I can take off emotional bandages by putting on a rope…" Sarah also found she was able to reclaim herself through using words and language to embrace her multi-faceted erotic self,

> I am fluid and that's okay [pause] I am the person who calls myself a fag, I call myself queer, I call myself gay, and I identify as poly-sexual and pan-romantic [pause] and I learned that sometimes my romantic attraction does not align with my sexual orientation.

For all co-researchers, it was important to be able to embrace the fluidity of their sexual orientation, and all said they found relief in that this was well documented in research.

KT focused on how she framed her sexual process,

> My sexual discovery was mainly one of personal growth [pause]. I have been able to embrace it as a core part of my discovery of my humanity and others. My sexual discovery was mainly one of personal growth, and I have never really seen it as a constraint. I have been able to embrace it as a core part of my discovery of my humanity.

Like many co-researchers, her sexual discovery occurred through hooking up and casual sex. Additionally, she rejected the shaming by others, outside of her intimate relationship:

> …if I want to sleep around, I'll sleep around… ugh I hate slut shaming. But for me, outside of [my partner], it's like 'Fuck you! Whatever, you're the one being all angsty over this, not me, so that's your grotesqueness, not mine' Like I'm totally happy with how and who I am, so any negative feelings you have, that's your fault and yours. I'm not letting your grotesqueness impact me'…it's like you learn enough about human nature and realize, it's not bad…

Co-researchers also embraced their eroticism and exploration through casual sex. Other ways the women were able to stay present and not get bogged down by these pressures, some of the co-researchers have found ways to blaze their own trail.

Blazing Their Own Trail

> *Action has meaning only in relationship, and without understanding relationship, action on any level will only breed conflict. The understanding of relationship is infinitely more important than the search for any plan of action.*
>
> – Jiddu Krishnamurti, Colombo Ceylon 1st Radio Talk (December 28, 1949)

TC, Stef, and Barb each embraced their own Feminist viewpoint as a way to stay in awareness about patriarchy, and its impact on their being-in-the-world. Barb shared,

> I'm so thankful for feminism, and attending my first Women Studies course in college, it helped me not feel crazy and try to keep this in awareness… growing up in a small town, I was always told that anytime I spoke up about girls or women's issues, that I was being 'overly dramatic'.

Barb found it important to stay connected to feminism as a way to dwell in consciousness around constant gender expectations. TC also found feminism was helpful with staying aware of these, "…gender biases - I mean, [women] are so conditioned in our society, I used to get affected by everything in pop culture...now it's not as much, due to being a feminist." Both Barb and TC appreciated feminism as a way to stay aware of these biases and conditionings, and attribute their ability to transcend these expectations to feminism. Feminism impacted TC's views on sexuality by opening her eyes to privilege. She shares a relatable example,

> …a lot of the people that say they don't agree with it [feminism], don't realize how much privilege they have. A lot of the celebrities that say they don't feel that they need to be, is because they don't realize that they've already benefit from it, and those are the things too like, with sexuality, like, it is a daily struggle. I'm very privileged with being like a cis white woman. And so, those are things I know a lot of my friends struggle a lot more with sexuality on a daily basis, like, so like, it's just, and that just like comes even from having an average life. Or whatever you say is average, but [pause] there's a lot of struggles that come with it and, like, even little, I don't know, I just think that it's just like, feminism, I didn't really care about the labels or what people say about themselves but, I just, empowering people to know their worth. You're worth an orgasm. You can say no at *any* point in this junction, like, just know those things, like know how awesome you are. You deserve whatever you want in your sexuality without judgement…and feminism taught me this.

TC's quote illustrates the multiple layers of privilege that are often enacted through many interactions. TC owned her privilege and acknowledged issues others experience if their sexuality and intersectional identities do not align with patriarchal expectations. She envisions feminism as a way to become aware of power, embrace who they are, pursue what they are seeking in their sexuality, and release the judgement of their expressions if they do not align with the mainstream. Her perspective of celebrities and the lack of awareness around privilege, is a commonly mentioned viewpoint (Levy, 2005; Orenstein,

2016). Sarah also shared that she found by writing short stories and blogs for "… women who are part of the BDSM community and reconciling their connection to Christ…" has been a way to stay connected to her own journey, while also connecting to an online community of women, who are working through a familiar struggle.

Some co-researchers mentioned religion as an area of power and privilege. Sarah shared an important piece of her spiritual reconciliation with God as part of her ability to move forward with her sexual needs and tastes,

> I did have some spirituality issues, but I came to terms with my own personal situation. I still don't have an answer for anybody else in that regard, but I know that God and I have an understanding about my sexuality and where it goes... He loves me, regardless, so I don't worry about that aspect.

By not fearing judgement from God, she was able to embrace her own sexual needs and not constantly question this exploration, but simply explore it, see what she enjoys about it, and what she doesn't. Barb noted that,

> my sense of spirituality no longer is forced upon me, but is more of an exploration into nature, and in the creation of this beautiful world. I do not believe in God, like what the Bible tells us, but I do believe there is something bigger than ourselves, that does not hold the same privilege and properties of God as he is preached about… This was a big learning for me, because I used to attach anyone who believed in God was just as awful as the people in my childhood and the abusers, but I no longer hold that judgment, I am much more open about this, and can have discussions, without getting angry. I have met some pretty remarkable people on my journey and have learned about the powerful energy Christ holds in healing, and I can accept this, and accept that others may not have the same beliefs as me…

Letting go of what was not working for her spiritually opened Barb up to other ideas and philosophies regarding religion or God. She no longer felt angry when engaging in discussions and found this helped her be more accepting of others' views and the

positivity they receive by believing in God, and whatever that means to them. She expands on this,

> being open to this belief opened me up to loving people as they are, rather than trying to do what was done to me, fit them into a box or label things grotesque, when they were not. This was learned from my feminist experiences and being in relationship with women, who were 'bra-burning feminists' but also had a deep belief in God… was cool.

This belief helped her avoid perpetuating the very external pressure that was placed on her; she was able to accept others' beliefs and ways of being, without judgement.

The previous sections illustrate different ways in which co-researchers were impacted by experiences they shared, some of which were sexually oriented, and others which indirectly impacted sexuality. On their individual path, each co-researcher experienced some liberating revelations, which shattered some of the patriarchal constraints and egoic false-representations they were living within. This changed their relationship with themselves, with others, and resulted in liberation and empowerment. There was an ebb and flow orientation to their existence, which accepted a dual and non-dual reality; each co-researcher shared these learnings, and the meaning attached to their value, purpose, and existence. The following section details these learnings.

Liberating Revelations

> *The whole point of liberation is that you get out. Restructure your life. Act by yourself.*
>
> - Jane Fonda cited in Carole McKenzie, Wise Women: Wit and Wisdom from Some of the World's Most Extraordinary Women (2013)

Through the interviews, each co-researcher shared a sense of liberation, along with the learnings they each took from this release. Some bring this liberation into their day-to-day life in how they navigate relationships; some shared revelations and themes

arising as a result of the questions and time spent reflecting during the interview. Some very powerful themes were revealed, which directly linked to liberating revelations, and informed their ability to move beyond the "Ego" and include sacred space as part of their existence.

Some co-researchers used the word "liberated" in their interviews to describe the wisdom experienced and embraced from some of their experiences. Sarah shared that a few effects stood out for her as a member of the BDSM community,

> …my experiences with this community, my first association is joy and liberation, and... this counteracts me thinking of other peoples' reactions to me and define me as grotesque, or as, y'know, freakshow. [pause] [Members of the BDSM community] validate me, honour my needs, and suggested new things, new things to explore, and my usual response is either "let me watch it" or "I'm first in line to try it" y'know. That's a very exciting part of it that came out of it for me...

Sarah's BDSM community gave her the opportunity to engage in a process that allowed her the freedom and safety to explore whatever she was curious about. By breaking through barriers placed on her previously, this community helped her feel comfortable in her interests and tastes. Sarah also shared that she learned a lot about consensual sex, which helped her undo some of her previous conditioning,

> Through this community I learned, I do not dig certain types of humiliation… but I love safe, sane, and consensual experiences, and the importance of fulfilling *each other's* needs, not just the one. It took me a long time to undo my conditioning, y'know, and to realize that wanting to please a man is not because he has trained me to, but because I genuinely desire him… this is cathartic.

Sarah gained more clarity than ever before about her arousal template, what she was into, and why. She no longer felt she had to please someone else, but would if she was attracted to them. All co-researchers discussed how they were open to others' sexuality preferences as long as they were "safe, sane, and consensual." Barb had a similar

experience where she "felt a sense of liberation" from a few experiences she had sexually, therapeutically, and educationally:

> These experiences changed me… I began to just be OK with me! I didn't need to fuck to be okay, I didn't need to drink to be okay, I didn't need to fight to be okay…I could be free, if I was out of the Ego, or in awareness of the Ego, and that has helped me have a better relationship with myself, others, and my sexuality. I don't have to live through a false self-representation. I don't have to be abused to be loved, and neither do others…Like I no longer have to seek out conflict to thrive, I can just be myself and be a feminist who likes sex, likes to talk about sex, likes to talk about when I don't want to have sex, and the stir this causes, like, 'I'm crazy' is interesting, but I'm not bothered by it, I'm more curious. You know what's crazy? Not talking about it!

These experiences changed Barb as she could now have a healthier relationship with herself, others, and the world. She no longer needed to engage in unhealthy dynamics or consuming substances to be okay; she could be a feminist with a curious way of being in the world. KT had similar sentiments: "fuck it, I'm a liberated woman. I don't care." Sarah shared, "… my work is to find all the barriers inside that take me away from me… and since I have done this, I do not reject myself anymore, even if others do…" All of these women shared what they were able to let go of, and able to tune into. To read more about the co-researcher's embracing their sexual interests and preferences, please see Appendix I.

Self-Identified Themes. I hoped to embody Gadamer's focus on the power of conversation and language during the interviews, in order to encourage co-researchers' meanings and reflections to come forward (Moules et. al., 2015). I hoped to put into practice what Gadamer encourages interviewers to do: actively listen and internally question. I think I accomplished this as most of the women described a form of acceptance and curiosity from me, which they described as being facilitative of the

feeling heard, understanding the impact of their own meanings and expanding their awareness about their own sexuality. I asked each co-researcher if they were able to identify any themes from the interview and their sharing. Themes Jax identified were "…. sexual awareness, empowerment, and vulnerability [pause], and what makes things grotesque and not grotesque [pause], it just felt good to talk about it and not be judged…". Acceptance by the interviewer helped Jax feel positively about what she shared and what is deemed 'grotesque'. To build on the importance of 'no judgement', KT hoped this research may offer and encourage women to change the

> … grotesque image, to be able to accept it and see it as a positive thing. So it's like [pause] taking a negative, or what could be perceived as a grotesque or negative experience, or something that affects us being in the world like, badly, and sort of having no judgement around it. [pause] Yeah, just not having negative judgement around those, because sometimes, sometimes you can still, be a judgement but not necessarily a negative one like, "Is it black or is it white?" right? It doesn't mean it's a good or bad thing, but... Yeah, seeing the truth of the experience? Yeah, just approaching it in the best, as in try to be non-judgmental [pause] the truth of the experience, [pause] just see it for what it is without trying to project anything on it. Yeah. Just, it's not a good thing or bad thing. [pause] It's just a thing.

Stef, Barb, and TC each described the benefit of "acceptance and no judgement when it comes to experience". Here are Stef's words:

> So, this has really been huge like, for me, because well, y'know, I never told anyone a lot of this before and like [laughs] y'know, that means a lot to me too, right like, 'cause it feels good to just be real and be who you are and so I've gotten a lot of that out of this time and, I'm really appreciative of that and, y'know, like I said it just makes me more awareness like, about the wholeness of my journey. Like say, beyond like, what I'm processing at this time like, narcissism issues that may have come up. Or, um, shamanism, spirit animals coming to me but like, adding the sexual component to it, like the- or the intimate component to it- and, kind of blending them together and y'know, it just really adds a lot of dimension to this whole spiritual process that I've had that I think, y'know, is just- is with you when you're created like, whatever, but like, attuned to it y'know? [pause] Okay, intimacy and sex I guess, like, there's no difference but.... yeah, it's brought a lot of wholeness. I feel like, even just sort of talking it out and getting to know you more on this deeper space it's been [pause] well, it's

> been a gift but it just doesn't feel weird or anything, it just sort of feels like we're just chatting. Except there's a fucking record button on [laughs]. I think that your ability to... lay out a process that allows being open to explore the places that don't feel as clear, adds so much to it because you're putting so much of your own journey together. And, these are the dots that, much like a lot of the women that you've worked with, many of the women that I've worked with, that we're having to put together day to day on our, on our own. [pause] And you sharing that gives me sort of a landscape to lay out for other women to sort of understand their own sexual experiences and not grasp onto labels, or understand their own orientation, or get caught on grasping and addictive pathway to sort of cope through trauma. And that's exciting, 'cause that's not really out there. I mean it is, but it's not in its own way, if that makes sense. So, it just is really cool to see that like, um, y'know, it follows like, a language, it's very interesting. And that gives me a lot of validation as well…

Stef's reflection encapsulated much of what other co-researchers shared in regards to this interview question, that they appreciated the opportunity to share parts of their story for the first time, and be real, without feeling like they were being judged, and that it felt like a conversation and not research, or being 'under investigation'. Stef also complimented the interviewer on her willingness to explore topics that are uncomfortable to visit. Stef, KT, and TC all mutually shared that they hoped this research helped women to not feel like they are dealing with some of these 'grotesque' experiences or unrealistic expectations alone. Stef specifically shared that the language used during the conversation was important as it validated her experience. Each of the above self-identified themes capture the power of language and disclosure to the world; Gadamer suggests that the understanding and interpretation can be life changing (Laverty, 2003; Moules et. al., 2015). These co-researchers also hope that others could find some relatability in overlapping meanings of experience, and described that these overlapping experiences helped them feel less alone. To read more about the co-researchers'

descriptions of the types of experiences that fall under energetic or non-dual, please see Appendix J.

Final Reflections on the Themes

The learnings shared by each co-researcher through this chapter represent potentially valuable gems that are highly relevant to women's sexuality research and education, including: empowerment, connection to self and others, freedom of choice, and total acceptance, with no judgement. Ways of living are not just connected to Nondual states of consciousness, but can also be described as exploring, with an inclusion of a spiritual domain (whatever that means for each individual). Specifically, a Tantric nondual perspective may represent a beneficial way to help encompass and explore the multi-dimensional manifestation of existence. The following chapter discusses these findings, and how they relate to previous research and theoretical perspectives such as Tantra. In addition, the relevance for these findings in the counselling field will be discussed, along with the strengths and limitations of this study, and potential areas for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

True sexual liberation, then, must include the healing work we do to recover an authentic, holistic sexual expression that is not dictated by external powers. Sexual liberation must now come to signify an inner peace that lets us make conscious sexual choices without shame, guilt or fear.

- Dr. Alex Katehakis cited on Centre of Healthy Sex Facebook Page (2019)

Introduction

The intent of this work was to begin a conversation surrounding the meaning of "grotesque" in the lives and sexuality of women. I sought to speak directly to women, as women's sexuality is often subsumed within a discussion of men's experience due to patriarchal perspectives (Daniluk & Brown, 2008; Nagoski, 2015). Drawing on both Feminist and Hermeneutic Phenomenological perspectives, and encompassing Tantric viewpoints, I make the case that women's meaning-making of their 'grotesque' sexual experiences can provide an opportunity for them to break free from the impact of patriarchal bounds and live a more authentic life, through their own being and according to their own value system. Encouraging women in therapy, through use of a non-judgmental openness to a continuum of what a healthy sexuality lens means individually, to confront the societal power relations that reinforce gender expectations, is a potentially empowering approach to counselling women (Brotto, 2018; G. Ogden, 2018). Additionally, allowing space for women to make meanings from their experiences, while being inclusive of spiritual domains, could be transformational in their healing process (G. Ogden, 2018; P. Ogden et. al., 2006; Wade, 2013).

Chapter Five summarizes study findings in the context of the research questions. In addition, the strengths and limitations of this research are explored, as well as

implications for clinically working with women's sexuality. Further, the benefits of using a contemporary integrative counselling model as an orientation that is inclusive of women's experiences of sexuality is examined. The implicated and reflective researcher is revisited, followed by suggestions for future research, with concluding remarks.

Discussion of Findings

The power of Awareness changes our well-being.

– Dr. Daniel Siegel, AWARE: The Science and Practice of Presence (2018)

The above quote captures the essence of the awareness that each co-researcher described as essential in honouring their own needs in day-to-day living, and exploring themselves and their sexuality. The analysis and interpretation of the transcribed interviews resulted in three categories, which are framed as Theme A: *Patriarchy as a Sculptor of the 'Grotesque'*, Theme B: *Denying Authentic Self*, and Theme C: *Becoming Transformed Through Transgression.* Please refer to Appendix J for a summary of the thematic structure of these data. I now outline where future work and exploration might go from here. I revisit some current literature about women's sexuality and experiences of "grotesqueness", and reflect on the findings presented in Chapter Four.

Revisiting Experiences of Grotesque Sexuality

> *Even when it's not pretty or perfect. Even when it's more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.*
>
> - Michelle Obama, Becoming (2018)

Co-researchers described their historical sexual and grotesque experiences and how these impacted on their being. Gadamer describes this as, "historically effected consciousness" (Moules et. al., 2015, p.38), in that individuals always use language from

a historical-cultural context because "not only do events keep happening, but we (both in the personal sense and as members of larger, cultural units) are also moving and changing so that our position in relation to events is forever becoming, rather than static" (p. 38). As discussed in the previous chapter, incidents which significantly influenced co-researchers' 'grotesque' life experiences frequently coalesced around women's gendered understanding of the peripheral bounds placed on how they were to enact, express, and explore their sexuality. The conflicting messages that dominated their 'grotesque' sexual experiences included societal pressure and media influence, along with ways gendered expectations were engrained in their being-in-the-world, through relationships with self and others. Some of the most influential associations were made when describing experiences involving their family of origin, peers, and experience in the educational system, which aligns with much research in women's sexuality (G. Ogden, 2018; Nagoski, 2015).

For the five co-researchers, navigating the gendered expectations placed on them as women was central to their relationship with their sexuality and to how they understood their own 'grotesque' experiences. Research supports that gender and sexuality are two constructs that are so deeply intertwined, they are nearly impossible to tease apart (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2014); this was echoed by co-researchers throughout their interviews. The hierarchy of gender was also clearly apparent in co-researchers' stories – with women often assigned lesser value in comparison to men (Lerner, 1988; Schippers, 2007). All co-researchers described complications they felt and lived due to their gender.

The focus for each co-researcher discussing their sexuality seemed to be about comparing their own definition of what 'grotesque' *is,* versus what 'grotesque' *is not*. Within this contrast, there was a shared awareness of the collective endorsement and sanctioning of limitations imposed on the female gender, especially in the area of women's sexuality. Many co-researchers' life experiences, and their interpretations of these, include descriptions of how 'society' often framed what was acceptable for women.

Needs of women as secondary. The definitions shared by the co-researchers of what female sexual 'grotesque' meant to them were intertwined with dynamics of sexuality and gender (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2014). Each definition the women shared emphasized the stark reality that women's pleasure was placed as a second priority, within the power dynamics of hegemonic heteronormative masculinities and patriarchy (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2014; Schippers, 2007). In these definitions, women shared the dilemma that their lived enactment of sexuality did not abide within the societal expectations imposed on them – a dilemma often collectively experienced by women. Patriarchal structures do not prioritize women's sexual pleasure, or even equate it as equal to men's (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Daniluk, 1998; Schippers, 2007). Jax outlined the quandry for women who embrace their sexuality outside the bounds of patriarchal preference, and the judgement accompanying this exploration. Stef and Barb directly mentioned patriarchy as a contributing factor to the label of 'grotesque' in women's sexuality, in relation to certain sexual behaviours or heteronormative expressions of sexuality. Other aspects of their definitions of the 'grotesque' included images that emerged based on their description of previous

experiences. All the women experienced gender socialization and messages surrounding their sexuality from an early age, and continued to be mindful of this socialization as an adult. Co-researchers shared many examples of their experiences, which were considered 'grotesque' by others, and which were internalized by themselves with some somber consequences for each of them.

Revisiting Early Understandings and Experiences

As understanding is made through reflection and revisiting past experiences, Hermeneutics supports that we gain new understanding when we revisit or reflect on earlier experiences (Gadamer, 1989). Each co-researcher described the essential role their upbringing and early life experiences had on the development of their sexuality. These experiences have an impact on individuals' development of their arousal template, which is "the total constellation of thoughts, images, behaviors, sounds, smells, sights, fantasies, and objects that arouse [individuals]" (Carnes, 2015, p. 46). Revisiting these experiences revealed a different impact for each co-researcher. For some, belonging to a family which fostered affection and comfort to discuss any topic, while connecting within a non-shaming place, benefited their sexuality in a positive way. Jax described that growing up in this way provided reassurance as an adult to be able to talk openly about sex, and gave her the awareness that her need to request tactility through intimacy was acceptable. Patrick Carnes (1991) and McDaniels (2012) describe the benefits of awareness surrounding one's *arousal template*, when the individual does not come from a rigid or chaotic family system. A considerable body of research supports the perspective that child development occurring in a family context that is not shaming, is attuned, and engages in appropriate physical demonstration of affection, can exert a positive effect on

developing the child's regulation; benefits include improved consciousness, the ability to maintain self-connection, and possibly a healthier sense of attachment as an adult (Daniluk, 1998; P. Ogden, et.al., 2006).

Conversely, other co-researchers shared that their upbringing was full of trauma and stress, which seriously impaired their development of self, especially in terms of sexuality and awareness of their needs. Every human being is impacted in some developmental way by circumstance, or family-of-origin experience; these experiences have direct impacts on their state of consciousness and ability to stay connected to themselves, as opposed to focusing on the other (G. Ogden, 2018; McDaniels, 2012; P. Ogden et. al., 2006; Siegel, 2016). Becoming aware of how these formative traumatic experiences impacted their sense of self and ability to connect to their own needs, was ultimately helpful to these co-researchers as they learned to overcome the role this trauma had played in shaping their lives and sexual experiences.

The co-researchers who shared they had experienced stress and trauma in their household, or traumatic events that occurred outside of their family of origin, experienced serious consequences in their ability to make meaning and form safe and secure relationships, with themselves and others. The range of suffering shared in this study included domestic violence enacted by a same sex parent, sexual trauma enacted by a stranger, and incest enacted by an opposite sex parent that lasted from childhood to late adolescence. Stef's experience of growing up in a household with domestic violence taught her not to trust women or form relationships with other girls. This belief system, to mistrust other women, developed as a result of a fear that other girls or women were going to hurt her. Sarah and Barb also shared that they experienced their mother's cold

rejection of them, and a lack of maternal loving. For these co-researchers, not having a healthy bonding experience to draw upon from their same sex parent had huge repercussions for their ability to connect with other women, or to develop a healthy sense of self. Further, they spoke about how this lack of healthy bonding caused an internal struggle related to forming trusting relationships with other females. Their description of developmental impacts and the pain they experienced due to feelings of rejection by their mother, aligns with Kelly McDaniel's work "Mother Hunger" (2012). Furthermore, these feelings may become unbearable over time because these ongoing rejections by women are often re-enacted relationally throughout life (McDaniel, 2012; P. Ogden et. al., 2006). Experiences like these have strong impacts on women's sexual and relational development and related directly to the experience of 'grotesque' for the co-researchers, which they described as having strong and lasting impacts (Daniluk, 1998; Kasl, 1991; Lerner, 1988; McDaniel, 2012). For further discussion of these impacts, please see Appendix L.

For TC, surviving incest from a young age until well into her teens skewed her capacity to know what healthy sexuality and healthy relationships were. Trauma research supports her discussion around these impacts. P. Ogden et al. (2006) discuss how a violation such as incest causes a sense of confusion about what a healthy child/parental dynamic is like. This understanding also fits for Barb who experienced sexual abuse by a "trusted adult". She also described the negative impact this had on her sexuality.

Traumatic experiences can result in a central nervous system that does not trust the world, does not trust the individuals, and often leaves individuals seeking the familiar insecure and chaotic neurobiology they experienced growing up through relational re-

enactments (Siegel, 2014, 2016, 2019; P. Ogden et. al., 2006). This outcome relates directly to 'grotesque' sexuality, as described by the co-researchers, as the trauma can lead to finding comfort in the so-called 'grotesque' sexual experiences.

Puberty and silence. Puberty represented another critical period of development for co-researchers, which impacted the meaning of 'grotesque' sexuality to each of them.

KT's description encapsulated what many co-researchers shared through their interviews; puberty was a confusing time due to the lack of education and discussion surrounding what happens to the female body during puberty. Due to this lack of discussion and education, they were left alone to make sense of physical sensations they felt. Daniluk (1998) shares the complexity of making meanings around these experiences, especially for girls, as most young women are especially sensitive to views shared by others, and/or the silences around sexual topics. Most parents and family systems are inept in terms of discussing sexuality with their children at a young age, and even during pubertal development, which is a clear example of the misinformed transmission of knowledge from generation to generation (Daniluk, 1998). Further, many parents fail to meet their adolescent's needs around necessary information, to help adolescents make sense of what is happening in their body (Daniluk, 1998; Siegel, 2014). This is incredibly problematic, since child and adolescent girls are left to fill in the blanks with their own interpretation of the silence (Daniluk, 1998). This happens in a variety of ways: some attempt to 'normalize' their experience by comparing themselves to other girls, some seek information from peers and their experience, while others develop a sense of internal shame, as they may think they are bad because no one is talking about what is occurring in their bodies (Brown, 2010). For some, the silence is pervasive as parents are

uncomfortable discussing sexuality with their girls. For others, if discussion is initiated by parents, it is frequently limited in its scope and is based on a medical model of understanding (Orenstein, 2016), or a morality model from a religious perspective (Daniluk & Brown, 2008). These approaches are both problematic as a vital component is missing from the emphases of these discussions: these discussions fail to acknowledge pleasure based orientations and information that relates to their experience in their body (Daniluk, 1998; G. Ogden, 2018; Orenstein, 2016). Left in limbo by the silence related to these areas, many girls and women seek information and answers in the images they are bombarded with by media (Dines, 2010; Orenstein, 2016).

Influence of the media. The female body has been commercialized, fetishized, and used to advertise (Dines, 2010; G. Ogden, 2018; Orenstein, 2016). Many co-researchers described what media outlined as a non-'grotesque' female body, which could be understood as a classical body (Bahtkin, 1984). This included having the "right' size of breasts, the right height, appropriately sized legs; not having body hair, or discussing their menstrual cycle. During formative years, if families and caretakers are not sharing information and guiding girls through their developmental process, they will look to external messages and representations to understand themselves and their bodies (Orenstein, 2016). This is especially problematic since media so often commercializes and sexualizes girls'/women's bodies (Dines, 2010). As a result, society, through the means of media and external sources, often prescribes how women's bodies are viewed (Orenstein, 2016). Most co-researchers discussed that their body did not align with the depictions they viewed outside of themselves, or with what males are often conditioned to 'appreciate' about the female body. This misrepresentation of female bodies in the

media has ramifications in terms of women's perception of their own worth and acceptability, which often encourages girls and women to seek out external means to meet these impossible standards (Daniluk, 1998; Dines, 2010). For the co-researchers, these means included diet fads and wearing high heels. These means can affect women's bodies in ways that may cause lifelong damage (Orenstein, 2016). For others in the study, reacting to the media began an addictive cycle that can be difficult to break (Katehakis, 2016; Kasl, 1990). Lerner (1988) expands on the impact of the above experiences, by stating that women internalize these media images and think something is wrong with them. As KT shared "not fitting into the box of the [ideal female image]" creates a set of issues, including shame, which can be entrenched throughout the lifespan (Brown, 2010).

Menstrual Cycle and Shame. Co-researchers shared experiences around the shame of having a menstrual cycle. KT and Barb shared specific experiences where men were derogatory towards them because they had a menstrual cycle at a male-dominated work site. Stef described her inability to even talk about "having a period". All the women spoke about the lengths they went to in order to hide evidence that indicated they even had a period (i.e. concealing and stashing feminine products so others would not see them). The jokes men made about having a menstrual cycle implied that their body and this process was 'grotesque' and dirty. Daniluk (1998) demonstrates the common concern for girls and women to cover up that they are menstruating. The above discussion of co-researcher experience emphasizes how sexuality may be construed as 'grotesque', or potentially 'not grotesque'. To deepen this understanding, co-researchers shared how these experiences and others around their sexuality were internalized, which contributed to their experience of the 'grotesque'.

Summary of experiences with grotesque sexuality. Overall, co-researchers described the influence of external messages on their being, how they felt about themselves as a result, and what they *felt* they were allowed to share with others about their sexuality. All co-researchers noted that their sexual exploration at some point did not align with "the box of feminine body/being" presented by peers, media, and religious expectation. Further, they received conflicting messages from education sources, and lived out many of these external sources' preferences through their relationships with others. Each of them described, in their own way, how they would question their value, feel shame about who they were, and fail to honour their authenticity, due to fear of not being accepted. Brown's (2010) work labels this very dynamic as shame, which is often felt by individuals when they do not feel good enough, are unable to be authentic due to fear, or have a sense that they are bad because who they are does not align with external and internalized expectations.

Fous (2018) considers this issue through a sexual authenticity lens; anytime individuals fail to align with their sexuality preferences, or explore their sexuality in secrecy, there is going to be a problem within their core sense of self, due to denying their own needs. Overall, the experiences shared by co-researchers demonstrate that the experience of female 'grotesque' sexuality is significantly impacted by a multitude of factors, including family of origin experiences, trauma, experiences in the education system, or messages from the media; further, the experience of sexuality that may be considered 'grotesque', is paradoxically defined by what it is *not*. These issues often become a barrier to integration, which has been argued to be the basis of well-being and health (Siegel, 2019).

Revisiting How Experiences with the 'Grotesque' Shape Sense of Self

> *As human beings we naturally want to be real, authentic, and truly ourselves. We might not all be consciously aware of this drive towards authenticity, but inherently we value being ourselves, especially when it is easy and effortless. Fulfillment comes from knowing what and who we are, and we seek security in this knowledge.*
>
> - A. H. Almaas, The Point of Existence… (2001)

This study set out to gain a deeper understanding of women's self-defined 'grotesque' sexual experiences and how their understandings within the realm of the 'grotesque' shaped their sense of self. Building on the female experience, all co-researchers discussed the expectations placed on them because they were female; these expectations resulted in experiences of barriers and difficulties as a consequence of their gender identity, and contributed to their experience of the 'grotesque' self.

Female Development

It is important to acknowledge that women's development of self may be profoundly different than men's in a number of areas; however, the following discussion will be limited to the key areas shared by the co-researchers. Remaining in true presence is often difficult and painful, particularly for those situated within a Western world view, as dark emotions may arise in the absence of support from others (Almaas, 2000, 2014; Greenspan, 2004; Siegel, 2019). The focus often becomes about the survival of identity, holding onto the individualized personal history (which may impede personal growth) while creating an existence of false representation (Almaas, 2000).

The development of self is a continuous process, and is often entangled with the development of identity and intersectional considerations associated with the phase of maturity and wider sociocultural influences (Almaas, 2000, Syzmanski et. al., 2016). In

considering this process, in the context of the gendered *moral* development of self, Gillian's (1982) foundational piece of work *In a Different Voice* outlines the different experience of this process for women. In this study, co-researchers focused on emotional, relational, sexual, and somatic aspects of self in existence that were impacted by the 'grotesque', which are often dimensions that inform the importance of self and identity in women (Almaas, 2000, 2014; Lysebeth, 2001; Surrey, 1991; P. Ogden et. al., 2006). For all individuals, these experiences have a lasting impact on who we are in the world, while also trying to honour the very essence of our Being (True Nature/Presence), which according to some paradigms, remains untouched regardless of how affirmative or adverse our experiences are (Almaas, 2000; Siegel, 2019; Tzu & Damgaard, 2015).

Echoes in the literature on sense of self. The development of women's sense of self and identity is often intertwined with patriarchal expectations and oriented towards others' expectations (Daniluk, 1998; G. Ogden, 2018). This "other-defined" orientation can create a problematic sense of self (Syzmanski et. al., 2016). Co-researchers shared how their self-understanding was shaped by central experiences in their life, and how the meanings made from these experiences were upheld throughout their lifespan. Research indicates relationships with others play a role in how women view themselves (Daniluk, 1998; Surrey, 1991). External pressures impact the formation of identity (Almaas, 2000; Shields, 2008), development of the "ego" (Almaas, 2000), and inform how women are supposed to be sexually engaged (Nagoski, 2015). Each definition of the 'grotesque' shared by the co-researchers was articulated in relation to acceptable female behaviour in society, patriarchal expectations based on men's needs, and the limited ways in which sexuality is allowed to be expressed based on these constructs.

The consequences of embodying these pressures include internalized oppression (Schippers, 2007; Syzmanski et. al., 2016), shame (Brown, 2010; G. Ogden, 2018), mental health issues (Almaas, 2000, 2014; G. Ogden, 2018), addictive pathways, (Kasl, 1991; Katehakis, 2016), not functioning from a divided self/false self-representation (Almaas, 2000; Syzmanski et. al., 2016) and questioning their own needs, based on external demands (Daniluk, 1998; G. Ogden, 2018; Lerner, 1988; Nagoski, 2015).

Shame, 'Grotesque', and Early Beginnings. The co-researchers all described experiencing the above negative consequences and the associated by-product of shame. We might understand this "split" in terms of a false representation or divided self (Almaas, 2000; Syzmanski et. al., 2016). 'Grotesque' experiences were naturally incorporated into the co-researcher's sense of self. Early life experiences in childhood and adolescence were integral to how co-researchers understood who they were supposed to be, their role in the world, and the internalization of the boundaries of the 'grotesque', which they would ultimately need to work through.

Surrey's (1991) work discussed that one of the basic tenets for girls' and women's sense of self is deeply entangled with maintaining relationships and affiliations with others. This basic assumption that self is relational for girls and women is often enacted through interactions in social systems, family systems, and peer relationships (Lerner, 1987; Orenstein, 2016; Surrey, 1991). The ways girls and women often learn to be in a relationship is through formative bonding experiences with their mother (McDaniels, 2012), which will be explored further in the context of Sarah and Barb's experiences. In support of what the co-researchers shared, Surrey's (1991) definition may be helpful, "… relationship [is] an experience of emotional and cognitive inter-

subjectivity: the ongoing, intrinsic inner awareness and responsiveness to the continuous existence of the other or others…" (p. 61). The words the co-researchers shared throughout the findings of this study (Chapter 4) support this understanding of relationship with self and others, although these concepts are often difficult to tease apart as singular and separate phenomena. However, the common themes co-researchers shared during interviews illustrate the impact of these formative relational experiences and the internalization of these experiences on their sense of self and enactment later in life, including: childhood and adolescent formative experiences; expectations of the female body; and the enactment of trauma through family and peer relationships, often having effects that carry into adulthood. Please see Appendix M for further examples.

Relational Roadmap into Adulthood. Relationships were important; all co-researchers described the significance of feeling a sense of belonging and the loss of trust which occurred when they were ostracized by friend or family systems. All co-researchers described some difficulty in their family systems, in terms of belonging. These difficulties ranged from surviving abuse to surviving shame. Stef shared what it was like growing up in a household of domestic violence at the hands of her mother and the impact this had on her ability to embrace feeling maternal. She also described the moment where she decided, "fuck women". The impact of this moment will be further explored later in this chapter. Stef was not the only co-researcher who experienced family violence; TC also shared her experience of enduring incest from her father. It was not until her late teens that she realized that it was not *common* for others to have sexual relations with their father. Due to some serious health concerns, her mother was unavailable during this time. These two descriptions highlight the complexity of family

systems and the impact of trauma in development of safe relationships with others and with self. Some of the compounding issues that result from these experiences include not feeling safe, not having trust in others, developing adaptive coping strategies in childhood (which usually become dysfunctional in adulthood), and creating deeper belief systems because no caretakers help the child make sense of the environment to avoid shouldering what is occurring by themselves (Daniluk, 1998; Fisher, 2017; P. Ogden et. al., 2006). Please see Appendix M for further discussion on family of origin's impact on the development of their sexual selves.

Lack of Pleasure-Informed Sexual Education. Co-researchers discussed the limited information they received in their household and school system about their bodies and the changes they would feel with age and puberty. Co-researchers noted belief systems that emerged due to a lack of sexual education, and the kind of sexual education they received. All their descriptions aligned with Nagoski's (2015) work about women's core cultural messages surrounding sexuality: their formal education was based on medical messages about sex, and reproductive currency of heteronormative sex. KT, Jax, and TC shared their struggles to make sense of their own bodily experiences, as it was not discussed in their household nor any of the sexual education they received.

TC focused particularly on receiving no sexual education at home, and not being allowed to obtain information at school due to her religious household. Further, the information she received from the church indirectly shamed her as she was no longer seen as pure due to the sexual trauma she was enduring. Other beliefs held and messages these women received included questioning themselves, or denying themselves when they were curious about exploring orientations outside of heteronormative expression.

The following examples shared by co-researchers include sexual elements they have re-visited to reclaim their true sexual nature.

Flexible and Fluid Orientation. For the co-researchers, the breakthrough of questioning themselves based on gendered messages received through inaccurate sexual education and patriarchy was painful. However, they decided to allow exploration of orientations outside heteronormative expression; while each of the co-researchers were dominantly monogamous and in relationships with men, they still identified as "hetero-flexible", "fluid", "on the spectrum", and described exploration with same sex and multiple partners as important to their sexuality. This supports Diamond's research indicating that many women experience fluidity in their sexuality (2008). The impact of not receiving well-rounded and accurate sexual education is often shame, as individuals frequently experience negative feelings when they are unable to receive education from an inclusive, non-judgmental atmosphere (Katehakis, 2016; G. Ogden, 2018).

Revisiting being a slut. Slut-shaming is the act of disparaging girls and women for alleged sexual behaviour (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong & Seeley, 2014). Women are equally involved in slut shaming as men; some researchers argue that women engage in slut shaming due to internalized oppression and therefore uphold male dominance in the sexual hierarchy of gender, maintaining women as passive and lower status (Armstrong et. al., 2014; Schippers, 2007). However, other researchers describe how girls and women who slut shame may have more to gain in terms of social advantages (Farvid et.al., 2014). This captures Stef's experience of being called slut due to her athletic ability to play alongside with the males in her class; once she was labelled, she was ostracized from the friends with whom she grew up and felt safe. Barb had a

similar experience, and both shared the profound loss they felt when this happened. For Sarah, Stef, Barb, and KT, when their gender orientation and expression did not fit the box through which femininity is expected, there were negative repercussions.

Loss of Basic Trust. Almaas (1987) describes the above dynamics as the loss of basic trust; "basic trust is experienced as an unquestioned sense of safety and security that is intrinsic to the way you act and live..." (p. 19). It is important to acknowledge that every human being will inevitably experience a loss of basic trust, which often results in developmental trauma or evolution of the "ego" (Almaas, 2000; Ogden & Fisher, 2015; P. Ogden et. al., 2006). These wounds and belief systems are not necessarily tied directly to being female; however, the devastating effects on girls and women can be more complex due to the intrinsic nature of relationships and feminine being (G. Ogden, 2018; Lysebeth, 2001; Lerner, 1987; Surrey, 1991). This perspective has implications for working around healthy development and sexuality by possibly offering more homeostasis in relationships and self, while developing awareness that this is a human issue that could be worked through in therapy (P. Ogden, 2006). If women do not naturally align with these external pressures, the internal struggle becomes trying to align with external demands on women, and the resulting inability to stay attuned to their own true nature and needs (G. Ogden, 2018). The women spoke about revisiting these wounds and belief systems; sometimes with less struggles, sometimes with more. The co-researchers shared learning to internally shift and transgress negative associations from 'grotesque' experiences.

Breaking Free. Each co-researcher described the negative consequences of being shamed and judged by others, resulting in coping strategies that took them away from

who they truly are. Stef and Barb described taking on labels or personas and behaviours that did not feel like them. Almaas (2001) would describe this as living through false self-representations. Some co-researchers self-medicated through substances and behaviours to cope with not connecting with others, and not connecting with themselves; an outcome commonly reported in trauma research (Fisher, 2017; P. Ogden, 2006) and common among girls and women as a way to cope with changing relationships, bullying, and judgment from others (G. Ogden, 2018; Orenstein, 2016). Each co-researcher described not feeling good about all of the above, and some were able to find a therapist to help work through their sense of grotesque. For some, it was by experimenting that they were able to break free from the barriers placed on their existence. For these women, it was important to come back to 'who they were' and take a risk, to break through the binds placed on them through patriarchy. Through therapy, physically moving far away from family, and a willingness to explore their sexuality in ways that were deemed 'grotesque', each researcher broke through the barriers, and made discoveries about themselves, their sexuality, and developed a deeper sense of intimacy of what other women may experience. The following describes the transformation of their sense of self in life, and how this part of their journey is fundamentally Tantric (Lysebeth, 2001).

Tantric Views of Self with Sexuality

I see some parallels between a Tantric orientation and that of the interpretive work of Hermeneutic Phenomenology. An Eastern Tantric nondual orientation is simply a way to keep transgressing the Western understanding of the "ego," constraints of social constructions, while allowing room for the flexibility to explore all levels of sexuality (G. Ogden, 2018; Lysebeth, 2001). The key addition that Tantra seems to offer is that it

recognizes the cyclical nature of this practice. Rather than a linear path in which one immediately lets go of all labels, of the self, of the ego, it is a process of exploring the tentative and fluid nature of these artificial boundaries, which gives new insight and perspectives, thereby leading to the recognition of non-dual reality (Lysebeth, 2001; Osho, 2009). Much like Hermeneutic work, Tanta is open to the plurality of meanings, experiences and the openness that anything could be discovered, which could be understood as novel (Moules, et. al., 2015). Further, the hermeneutic circle or spiral of understanding (Packer & Addison, 1989) fits well with exploration being a non-linear process in Tantra.

Experiences that create an individual's sense of identity may be as valuable as experiences of the non-dual (Almaas, 2000, 2014; Lysebeth, 2001). Tantric Non-dual experiences may manifest through connecting in nature, recognizing something larger than ourselves, connecting in community, embracing authenticity, and especially letting go of artificial boundaries that may impair connectedness to self and others, by embracing experiences that may be positioned as 'grotesque' (Almaas, 2000, 2014; Tzu & Damgaard, 2015; Siegel, 2019; Wade, 2013). Sometimes this journey is purposeful (e.g. seeking to transgress gender and sexual boundaries to fight these oppressive structures), and sometimes these barriers are transgressed by mistake (e.g. others may have transgressed these boundaries less purposefully via sexual means). However, Tantra is not concerned about the intention that motivated the transgression, since regardless of reasons motivating it, the journey still serves to give these women greater insight into the infinite possibilities for themselves and for women as a whole (Lysebeth, 2001). This further aligns with Hermeneutic work as it allows for what is significant to each woman

to come forward, and for the possibility of it having an "overlapping meaning of experience" for other women who come in contact with the material shared (Moules, et. al., 2015).

Tantra argues that any level of exploration is about empowerment as there is an internal process of self-discovery; meaning every stage and level is paradoxical as there is no end or goal (Lysebeth, 2001). In Hindu Tantra, all reality is regarded as Consciousness. So human beings are microcosmic expressions of Supreme Consciousness. Supreme Consciousness is at play, and loses itself in individuation (e.g., human beings) in order to experience itself as being lost or separate (duality), or being found or reunited in nonduality (Lysebeth, 2001).

The following examples shared by co-researchers include certain sexual elements they have re-visited to reclaim their true sexual nature and their sense of self and which transformed their life, then a discussion of the fundamentally Tantric nature of this journey (Lysebeth, 2001). The Hermeneutic meanings shared by the co-researchers through conversation aligned with the orientation of Tantra. What the last few sub-themes also capture from co-researchers, is what Gadamer described as the "finitude, or incompleteness of understanding" and is one of the "compositional principles of hermeneutic work" (Moules, et. al., 2015, p. 35-36). This incompleteness speaks to the co-researchers' process as they described their sense of empowered self-exploration and transcending the grotesque as ongoing. In this developing awareness, these women shared about their realizations of how self-awareness has helped shaped their meanings historically to the present moment, but also challenged them regularly with a reminder

that this process is never finished, there are always new learnings and blind spots that lay ahead to explore.

'Anything Goes' in Erotic Exploration. Each woman described the significance of "breaking through" imposed social barriers, including feeling more comfortable with their own sexual needs and explorations, more acceptance for who they are, belonging to a nonjudgmental group of people, having awareness that much of what they are working through is cyclical, and that they have internal and external supports on which they can count. This acceptance of self and others is directly related to the transformational aspect of the Tantric nondual orientation (Lysebeth, 2001). The alchemy of transformation was significant for these co-researchers in the sense that it shifted their relationship with self and others. These women experienced a powerful shift in awareness of their relationship with the 'grotesque'; this happened in a variety of ways for each of the women and the meanings they made from these experiences.

Shakti Informed. In Tantra, there are male and female principles at play in every experience. Shakti, the feminine, is the dynamic principle of an energetic force through which manifestation occurs; Shiva, the male principle, is passive (Lysebeth, 2001). This is opposite to Western culture as the feminine is often deemed as passive (G. Ogden, 2018). All co-researchers described how they became empowered with their sexuality. Specifically, KT, Stef, TC, and Barb shared ways in which they were "no longer passive" in their sexual journey. I believe this to be especially relevant with the current socio-political climate of 2019 where women no longer feel they need to be passive in order to have their needs met or be safe. As women must continue to fight for their right to make decisions about their bodies and sexuality in numerous ways, they are accessing

previously unavailable means to connect and support each other such as social media and new empowerment strategies.

Left and Right Tantra. Jax, KT, Barb, and TC each expressed their experiences with casual sex as instrumental in helping them understand their own sexual needs, and for everyone but TC, it was framed as positive in helping them understand themselves. Vrangalova's (2018) sex positivity research supports that women can experience a lot of positive sexual awareness from casual hookups with others, and also give them insight into others' insecurities, as well as preferences. These experiences support Vrangalova's (2018) research that hookups can help individuals have more acceptance for their sexual preferences. TC recognized through hooking up that casual sex was not how she wanted to meet her sexual needs, and has not engaged in that behaviour since.

For KT, Barb, and Sarah in particular, being a part of the BDSM community and the acceptance they received from this community helped expand their sexual awareness. For each of these co-researchers, the foundational agreement to be honoured during these experiences is that they are "safe, sane, and consensual"; this aligns with some of the research on alternative lifestyles, and the importance of having a safe, sane, and consensual agreement in place, before diving into the agreed experience (Barker, 2013). Experience in the BDSM community helped them discover what they find erotic and what they do not find erotic. While Barb and KT are no longer in the community, they hold no judgment over others' decision to explore in this arena, so long as they have the above agreement in place. These tie directly into Left and Right Tantra, as each woman described what they enjoy sexually, and what they are personally not into, but support others' sexual exploration (Lysebeth, 2001).

Developing Self Awareness. The development of deeper self-awareness is inherently Tantric (Lysebeth, 2001). One of the most powerful shifts in these women's awareness was that labels cannot encompass the essence of an individual. Based on patriarchal definitions, no body is right/classical/pure/ virginal/clean so paradoxically, every female body is grotesque. As KT said, it's about "outing the grotesque back on" the person judging or society's limiting box of what is deemed to be attractive for women. These women were able to transform the experience of 'grotesque' sexuality from internalized, judgmental, pressuring patriarchal forces to an empowered transcendent integration that created a new meaning and understanding that allowed them to integrate their own seemingly 'grotesque' self. In other words, 'grotesque' became part of their erotic exploration and experience. For example, through sexual transgressions (e.g., casual sex), safety, and trust in self and relationship, these women were able to accept what they needed, and sought it out with others and themselves, in a non-harming capacity. These new understandings do not illuminate falling back into patterns that have been engrained, taught, or lived, but they allow for the expansion of learning through both dual and non-dual experiences.

The Path Forward. Language is important when exploring sexuality, and what is judged as 'grotesque'. Sharing the articulated themes that emerged during interviews was important since co-researchers' contributions make this research valuable and important. The understanding that co-researchers shared is exactly what Gadamer describes as "Finitude": that we are always experiencing the world and that new meanings and experiences are occurring all of the time and interpreting continues (Moules, et. al., 2015). Other ways these revelations impacted the co-researchers

included unveiling a more supportable and expressive continuum of sexuality which included both dual and transcendent sexual manifestations and aligned with Tantric Non-Dual perspectives. Co-researchers, whether they were practicing Tantra or not, revealed some powerful insights about how they were able to essentially live from an orientation of awareness and regulation. The awareness shared by co-researchers, who were not on a "journey," included parallel valuable insights, which were powerful in the meaning of their existence. This is impactful, since part of the intention of this research was to explore the experience of ordinary women, whether they were on the journey or not.

Revisiting Cycles. Indeed, the very restraints, pains, and 'grotesque' experiences outlined above became the catalyst through which these women discovered what was actually 'grotesque' and not 'grotesque' in their individual self-defined ways. Like many other women, co-researchers had an inner drive to be unburdened by societal norms, a divided sense of self, and egoic false representations, which ultimately did not feel good or true to them (Almaas, 2000; Syzmanski et. al., 2016). They spoke about how these understandings provided the catalyst for creating alternate meanings for their experiences. We might understand their experiences through a Tantric nondual lens, which provides an ideal way to unpack their journey to self, and relationships with others (Lysebeth, 2001). Women may obtain benefits by embracing this perspective in the exploration of their Being and sexuality (G. Ogden, 2018), which could be used in an Integrative framework of counselling.

Transformations. Transforming the experience of 'grotesque' sexuality from one framed by internalized, judgmental, pressuring patriarchal constructs and shame-based experience to an empowered, meaningful, self-defined transcendent, were important

aspects of these women's experience, and this process is fundamentally Tantric in nature. From a Tantric nondual perspective, there is love and appreciation in all manifestations of existence; the way in which humans experience the world – especially their sexuality – ebbs and flows, shifts with context, and is fluid in nature (G. Ogden, 2018; Diamond, 2018). A Tantric nondual model allows for the fluidity, flexibility, and ability to encompass a broad spectrum of what sexuality means to these co-researchers. It also offers the realization that everything is workable and often 'the good or bad' does not last, while also decreasing the grasping pre-occupation and shameful association with sex, which offers less 'addictive' association with sex (Katehakis, 2016; Lysebeth, 2001).

The co-researchers' fundamentally tantric approach to exploration and understanding of self, including acceptance of self as their life unfolded, was a crucial process of liberation from the restrictive and traumatic experiences that shaped their lives (Lysebeth, 2001; P. Ogden et. al., 2006). It is important to acknowledge from a Tantric perspective that much of what was deemed 'grotesque' from a Western perspective, is of no less value than the non-grotesque. Experiencing self-acceptance requires a welcoming back of basic trust (Almaas, 1987), along with a deep underlying trust (almost a spiritual realization in one's unique position in existence), which may have common threads with others' experiences.

At the core, I suppose that the Tantric Nonduality, perspective enables women to embrace the totality of themselves and their experiences. It not only enables them to move beyond their self-alienation and perceptions of 'grotesque' sexuality to self-acceptance and transformation, but also see that the states of alienation, fear, doubt, isolation, and so on, are seamlessly connected to their counterparts. Tantric holism

empowers one to accept the fragmentation of ones "lost" self as well as the integrated, "bound" self. Through the relationship with self, and even during times of not being totally connected, these areas of dual and nondual manifestation hold similar value in the pathway of a Tantric Nondual orientation; they also align with models of feminist practice, framing these experiences as opportunities of enlightenment and exploration. Essentially, from this perspective, exploring the 'grotesque' in female sexuality offered an opportunity to learn through life's experiences and revelations. Hermeneutics aligns with Tantra in that it suggests that finitude of experience continually is visited and by understanding the hermeneutic circle that parts become referenced as part of the whole, (Moules, et. al., 2015) which is what these women described in their interviews. These very pathways are illustrated in the diagrams of Appendix B and C.

Strengths and Limitations of this Study

It is important to acknowledge that this study possesses both strengths and limitations. Mertens (2009) suggests that the ideal sample size for a phenomenological study is about six to eight participants. One of the strengths of the sampling approach in the current study is that women were selected because they are women who "… have lived experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience" (Laverty, 2003, p. 29). However, one important consideration when working with women's issues is placing an emphasis on "…the range of differences among those [studied] in regard to race, class and sexual orientation" (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 78), which is an intersectional consideration for identity (Shields, 2008). In this light, the study would have benefitted from more

diversity, and the relative homogeneity of the final sample may be due to the size of the city in which the study was conducted, as well as challenges associated with recruiting a sample of co-researchers for a topic that may provoke feelings of vulnerability and discomfort, since women are often socialized to deny their sexuality in heteronormative patriarchal society.

A potential weakness in the current sample is that it may be too small to make a generalization about women's experiences, especially given the relative homogeneity of the final sample. One ethical consideration as I embarked on this study was to "…reveal the subjugated voices of women with an emphasis on tending to the range of differences among [them; therefore, it was important to] … avoid holding Western women as an implicit norm for all women" (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 78-79). While I had initially hoped for more intersectional diversity in the sample of women, the diverse, rich experiences shared by co-researchers remain a strength in these data. Part of the process of inquiry was to recognize that context, and previous experiences, impact how individuals experience and create understanding of their world. Due to the limited number of participants willing to participate in this research, and the nature of the topic, finding a truly diverse sample proved to be difficult. This is a common challenge associated with snowball sampling, as people tend to have social contact with others of a similar background (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In the current sample over half the co-researchers were primarily partnered with men, the sample lacked women of color, and the co-researchers were collectively well-educated and socio-economically secure. Even though there may be some common experiences among women across social locations, some women's experiences may be very different due to unique factors associated with

their intersectional social location. For example, women of color may conceptualize and experience the 'grotesque' in a different way than white women due to their racialized experience. Another limitation is that this sample was comprised of women comfortable with discussing their sexual behaviors; therefore, they may not be representative of all aspects of the phenomenon of female sexuality and experiences of 'grotesque' sexuality.

Another limitation is the length of time taken writing the results of these interviews. Co-researchers were interviewed in mid-2015, but despite multiple reviews, the majority of results were written in the latter part of 2018, due to major health concerns that arose for the researcher. The researcher had to rely solely on the transcripts, as the recordings were deleted immediately after transcription.

The final limitation is that for much of this research project, males have been supervisors of this project. While the researcher is thankful for a female committee member joining at a later date, it remains important to acknowledge the gender imbalance of the scholars supporting my exploration of women's sexuality. It is worth noting that male committee members are highly educated in gender concerns, and were incredibly open during conversations around this topic. Nonetheless, this is an important constraint to acknowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

Despite these limitations, as a hermeneutic phenomenological study the ultimate goal was not to acquire a generalizable sample, but to achieve perspectival understanding of women's experience of 'grotesque' sexuality. These findings remain valuable, and can inform future explorations of this area with other and potentially more diverse samples. Indeed, sharing these findings may facilitate further research by contributing to a reduction in stigma of women sharing their sexual experiences openly. Future research

avenues will be discussed later in the chapter.

The interviews provided an opportunity to add to the body of research currently informing the understanding of female sexuality, which often draws on male-centered positivist perspectives and goal-oriented conceptualizations of sexuality. This study contributes to the growing body of phenomenological qualitative inquiry in this area. By embracing this approach, the topic of female sexuality may be explored in greater depth, and co-researchers may better understand the sexual paradigms applied to them.

Implications for Clinicians Working with Women and Sexuality

> *Women are embracing their sexuality in ways that haven't been acceptable in the public eye in a long time, if ever. And they are embracing it, and they are owning it, and they are not afraid of it, they are not ashamed - and that is really cool.*
>
> - Dr. Jocelyn Wetland, *CBC Doc: The Truth About Female Desire* (2017)

The vast majority of scholarly work pertaining to women's sexuality is quantitative and focusses on gender-loaded norms and heterosexist constructs that do not acknowledge women's lived experiences. Additionally, much existing research includes white middle-class individuals possessing limited first-hand experience with disability or marginalization (Daniluk, 1998; G Ogden, 2018). Previous research highlights the patriarchal goal-oriented standard of orgasm as a measure of sexual satisfaction, rather than a pleasure-oriented approach (Nagoski, 2015; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018), and is the construct used to diagnose a sexual disorder (DSM-V, 2013). There is very limited scholarly research that embraces phenomenological inquiry as a methodological approach to explore girls' or women's sexual experience, issues, and questions (Frost et. al., 2014).

Despite the above, there is a growing body of current research embracing a qualitative and experiential approach to understanding how to work with clients

experiencing the impact of trauma and stress on their sexuality, and sexual disorders (Brotto, 2018; Nagoski, 2015; G. Ogden, 2018; P. Ogden et. al., 2006; Wade, 2013). A phenomenological lens is beneficial for this work as it confirms previous research that demonstrates the importance of *making meaning* from experiences (Frost et. al., 2014).

While acknowledging the limited scope of existing research in this area, I believe that this thesis explores new ground through use of a Hermeneutic Phenomenological and Feminist-based approach. These methodologies intend to allow the opportunity for women to vocalize their sexual experiences, and gain awareness by recognizing that they do not have to fit into the constraints pushed on them. Because they have been oppressed by patriarchal power, it is important for women to articulate their experience of sexuality in their own words, free of censorship, oppression, and expectations of positivist frameworks, which ultimately perpetuate heterosexist and patriarchal constructed societal norms (G. Ogden, 2013, 2018; Schaef, 1992).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology specifically challenges clinicians to know that there are blind spots in their own view of the world; Siegel also talks about how not everything is in consciousness, "subjective experience of knowing something and being aware", we are not aware of much that goes on. He argues that many physiological processes occur for human beings outside of consciousness (2019). Gadamer would agree that each of us have regular experiences of what he describes as the "Hermeneutic Circle" which is

> understanding is always a movement in this kind of circle, which is why the repeated return from the whole to the parts, and vice versa is essential. Moreover, this circle is constantly expanding, since the concept of the whole is relative and being integrated in ever larger contexts always affects the understanding of the individual part (Gadamer cited in Moules, et. al., 2015, p. 44).

One of the most pertinent findings from this inquiry is the need for clinicians to consider how institutionalized forces push down and box in the acceptable expression and exploration of women's sexuality. Further, the findings show how, for the co-researchers, limiting one's sexual expression to that deemed 'non-grotesque' has many negative consequences.

Daniluk (1993) argued that reducing women to physiological discussion of their orgasmic experiences marginalizes women because this limitation intensifies the stress around female sexuality. Exploration of women's lived experiences helps broaden women's understanding of female sexuality, including pleasure, especially in instances of women who have been unable to enjoy their own sexual experiences as a result of trauma, lack of integration, or internalized patriarchal rhetoric. Furthermore, focus on, exploration, and acknowledgment of lived experiences has the potential to impact other women who have similar experiences. This work aims to broaden understanding of female sexual experience, meanings that have been ascribed to sexual experience, and disrupt discourse marginalizing female sexuality into a mere byproduct of male experience. There is limited phenomenological, qualitative research that includes a spiritual component; therefore, this work is particularly important for adding to this area of scholarship (Daniluk, 1993; Long 2013; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018; Wade, 2004, 2013).

A Tantric Non-Dual model may provide a way to address this dilemma, to support women through exploration of these forces on their sexuality, and encourage them to work within, and beyond, the tightening of the egoic strings, as they repeatedly seek to break through these constraints (Almaas, 2000; Lysebeth, 2001). Tantra provides an ideal philosophical framework to explore the interweaving and intersecting forces during

women's exploration of their sexuality, while concurrently presenting a philosophy of 'no judgement' regardless of what is being considered, attempted, and embraced (G. Ogden, 2018; Lysebeth, 2001). A Tantric model could be beneficial and may even be more welcomed due to the current political climate women are embracing, and the potential to explore what was once considered taboo and unavailable to them; especially through the power of meaning making (G. Ogden, 2018; Lysebeth, 2001).

Clinicians could explore a Tantric model of working with women, however, it is unclear if there are specific 'interventions' that clinicians could adopt, other than completing their own inner work in order to be clear about their orientation and limitations in regards to sexuality. This work could engage in further learning of healthy sexuality, and explore women's own belief systems regarding female sexuality. I would encourage researchers and clinicians to move beyond the dominant bio-psycho-social approach used to work with women's sexuality, and utilize an integrative framework (discussed in detail in the next section), where women's exploration is embraced. Taking such an approach could decrease, and potentially eliminate, the shame experienced by women, and reduce prevalence of mental health and addiction issues (G. Ogden, 2018).

Moving from a Bio-Psycho-Social Approach to an Integrative Framework

> *Nature remembers what we humans have forgotten:*
> *Every cycle must return to stillness, silence, the dark;*
> *Every out breath requires and in breath;*
> *Every outer endeavour turns back inwards, to its origin, its centre and begins again;*
> *From death comes new life, and from the darkest night, the new dawn is born.*
>
> - Karen Clark, The Path of She Book of Sabbats: A Journey of Soul Across the Seasons (2015)

Current treatment approaches regarding women's sexuality often conceptualize and work with issues through a bio-psycho-social approach. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into all treatment approaches and ways of working with women's sexual issues; however, some of the most dominant treatment models for working with women's sexual issues include pharmaceutical interventions and behavioural modifications. Feminists have long argued that working with women's sexual issues through this lens continues to perpetuate the patriarchal perspective, by taking women away from their own needs, and forcing them to conform to male, heteronormative, and wider patriarchal expectations (Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018). This often adds unneeded stress as the treatment targets a performance-goal oriented expectation such as orgasm (G. Ogden, 2013, 2018). Other models used in treatment, such as Masters and Johnson (1966) sexual response cycle and Helen Kaplan's (1979) model of desire disorders, are heavily focused on physiology and orgasm. Other models, such as Rosemary Basson's (2000) model of female sexual intimacy bypass the mental and spiritual components by focusing on the emotional aspect. G. Ogden's (2018) research is considered groundbreaking as her integrative model moves beyond pathologizing. Ogden identifies pathologizing as "prejudging clients' level of desire and satisfaction according to academic standards of normality" (p. 106). Her model does not focus on performance-based ways of satisfaction (G. Ogden, 2013, 2018), and expands on other models of treatment.

Mindful approaches. Mindfulness and meditation approaches may be helpful for working with women and their sexuality. Mindfulness, or "non-judgmental, present-moment awareness" (Brotto et al., 2008, p. 2742), is being incorporated as a treatment for mental health and addiction issues more frequently (McCarthy & Wald, 2013).

Sexologists are also applying this technique to women with sexual disorders and sexual dysfunction (Brotto et al., 2008; McCarthy & Wald, 2013; Rosenbaum, 2013). Rosenbaum (2013) critiques the bio-psycho-social model and classical approaches more commonly used in sex therapy. Rosenbaum has found that using an 'Eastern approach' (i.e. Mindfulness) has been more beneficial and expansive for women, possibly because "mindfulness incorporates personal responsibility for oneself regarding desire, pleasure and function" (McCarthy & Wald, 2013, p. 40). Rosenbaum (2013) found that female clients who move past judgements about their body and sexuality, felt more at peace and gained more pleasure from their sexual experiences. McCarthy and Wald (2013), using a case study of a couple, were able to demonstrate that mindfulness invited individuals to not focus on sexual performance, but on the process of sexual pleasure through acceptance of psychological and physical relaxation.

A specific challenge women face in pursuing mindfulness is the ability to undertake responsibility for their own sexuality. "The key to healthy female sexuality is the awareness of one's own sexual story, feelings, preferences, and freedom to express desire, pleasure, eroticism, and satisfaction" (McCarthy & Wald, 2013, p. 45). By teaching women the technique of mindfulness and their subsequent gaining of awareness, women are able to develop a connection between mind and body while moving beyond sexual social constructions, judgements, and detaching from the other (Brotto, 2018). Gadamer describes this as the cultivation of becoming, and reveals numerous possibilities, revelations, and knowledge of history; and present will continue to evolve and transform us, so long as we stay open and in awareness (Moules et. al., 2015).

Ogden reminds us that the bio-psycho-social models fail to include aspects of the spiritual realm, and thus mindfulness may help (G. Ogden, 2013, 2018). Clinicians could keep in mind that women's discoveries of themselves, including their sexuality, are not able to be measured through remote control trials or performance-based outcomes (G. Ogden, 2018; Rowan, 2005; Wade, 2013). Gadamer shares that a benefit of conversation, from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, is that conversation and interviewing requires two roles of us, one as an active listener, and the internal, curious questioning of ourselves through the dialogue. These are the ways in which clinicians attend to another human being (Finlay, 2011; Moules et. al., 2015)

Often clients have "… questions about feelings and meanings – to which there are no right or wrong answers, and certainly no answers that can be proven by evidence-based methods…" (G. Ogden, 2018), p. 279). Ogden (2018) argues all clients are short changed if these are not included in treatment; hence the power of an Integrative framework, and the necessity of integrating an approach with a 'spiritual component' if clients consent to exploring this in therapy. Transpersonal considerations and Tantric revelations may break through the duality and transcend into moments of non-dual consciousness; This is also known as Awakening, connection to the Divine, Presence, The Heart of Being Human, or the Absolute (Feurstein, 1998; G. Ogden, 2018; Lysebeth, 2001; Siegel, 2016; Tzu, 2014a, 2014b; Tzu & Damgaard, 2015). Clinicians could incorporate this approach by completing their own psychological/spiritual work and discovering what their biases are in terms of women's healthy sexuality. Clinicians may also benefit from more training that is inclusive of the elements of sexuality, as many clinicians have not received specific training to sexuality issues.

Important Elements for an Integrative Framework for Women's Sexuality

> *It's important to have realistic ideas about what a healthy sex life is. If you accept there's no right or wrong way to be sexual, and you and your partner are open with each other about when you're feeling it and when you aren't, then you will have a healthy sex life.*
>
> - Kristin Zeising Cited in Alex Katehakis and Tom Bliss, Mirror of Intimacy: Daily Reflections on Emotional and Erotic Intelligence (December 26, 2018)

Each clinician's therapeutic framework will align with the preferences and orientation of the clinician. However, Integrative frameworks align nicely with the WHO definition of sexuality and sexual health. According to Gilbert and Orlans (2011), "Integrative therapy is a unifying approach that brings together physiological, affective, cognitive, contextual, and behavioral systems, creating a multi-dimensional relational framework that can be created anew with each case" (back cover), and there are four definitions of integration, along with some basic ingredients in order to facilitate healing.

Siegel's work argues that integration is the core of well-being and is necessary for individuals to feel more whole; integration requires the linking of separated parts of self and processes through the relationships they build while working with clinicians, which offers planes of possibility (2016, 2019). Siegel argues that the "plane of possibility" could be the origin of consciousness, which helps link science and spirituality traditions by offering a sense of choice in awareness; love and empathy arise for self and others; the plane of possibility is where humans can find common ground in connection; and finally, in the state of potential, there is no sense of time (2019).

By understanding individuals from a Holistic perspective – understanding people as a whole – integrative therapists are not just one layer or domain of being a human, but

are interested in individuals and their multi-faceted experience in the world. Integration of theory and techniques is crucial as individuals rarely fit into a prescriptive model. This is especially applicable to women and sexuality, since previous literature suggests that women are attempting to break through prescriptive ways of being sexually. Therapists must integrate the personal and professional self. As a therapist, I do not believe we can bracket out our own beliefs and orientation; however, we can be in awareness of our limits and how therapy may activate our personal history, and when this is an indication for referring out. Finally, integration of research and ethical practice is necessary to support therapeutic work through evidence-based practice.

As an integrative therapist, understanding how the client connects intrapersonally, interpersonally, intrapsychically, and interculturally (Gilbert & Orlans, 2011) is an indicator of relational impairments experienced through their lifespan, especially in their family of origin and through societal conditioning. Often these relational patterns are relived in adulthood and acted out in the therapy room. This is especially important as women's identity is often rooted in relation to others (Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2013, 2018; Surrey, 1991), and in sexuality, as it is a complex area to navigate.

These important elements of an Integrative framework for women's sexuality are accompanied by the recognition of trauma experienced in everyday living, especially during the current political and sexually aware climate we are living in. It is important to recognize that women and girls are statistically more likely to be survivors of sexual trauma, which also lends support to the potential benefit of utilizing an Integrative framework.

While Gilbert & Orlans (2011) and Cortright (1991) have both offered critiques of Integrative therapeutic frameworks, and the Integrative model of Transpersonal Psychology in particular, Siegel (2016) reports that recent neurobiological exploration of the Limbic Brain system while individuals report consciousness expanding experiences suggests there can be multiple truths. Siegel argues that living a "meaningful inter-connected life… accessing the hub of the planes of possibility [individuals] liberate the capacity of integration to arise. And integration made visible is love, kindness and compassion" (2019). The latter represents an opportunity to explore the uniqueness of the experiences, while connecting to the commonality of humans and their experiences. With these limitations in awareness, the next section discusses a Contemporary Therapeutic Model for exploring women's sexuality and explores G. Ogden's (2013, 2018) Integrative model for sexuality.

Contemporary Therapeutic Model for Exploring Women's Sexuality

> *The awareness that there is an infinitely broad variety of sexual possibilities is often enough to free clients to explore their issues wholeheartedly instead of sinking into denial or succumbing to guilt, shame and other limiting judgements.*
>
> - Dr. Gina Ogden, Expanding the Practice of Sex Therapy: The Neuro-Update Edition – An Integrative Approach for Exploring Desire and Intimacy (2018)

Previous literature supports the reality that women's sexuality is suffering internally and collectively due to socially constructed patriarchal pressures. Nagoski (2015) discusses three core cultural messages that women grapple with:

1) the moral message of being evil if women want to have sex;

2) the medical message about being diseased or focusing on reproductive currency of heteronormative sex;

3) the consistent media message of being inadequate sexually.

G. Ogden's (2013, 2018) model encourages exploring all these messages through a non-prescriptive lens and allows women to map and process past and current experiences, while creating awareness for what they may need and want for future sexual experiences.

Ogden's Integrative Model for Working with Women's Sexuality

> *As clients experience their sexual journeys in the contexts of their whole lives, the paths are likely to twist, turn, detour, bump, even come to dead ends.*
>
> - G Ogden, Expanding the Practice of Sex Therapy (2018)

G. Ogden's (2013) book *Expanding the Practice of Sex Therapy: An Integrative Model for Exploring Desire and Intimacy* presents an Integrative model which has been considered ground breaking in terms of sexual therapeutic work for women, as it looks beyond performance-based ways of satisfaction and includes an exploration of the spiritual domain. Ogden released a revised version in 2018, which includes up-to-date neuro-biological support for her model, as science and neuroscience still dominate when validating research applied to Psychology. Ogden's (2013) 4D Dimensional Wheel of Sexual Experience is a template to help individuals walk through their experience and create their own understanding, from each domain. Clients can explore their sexuality depending on the quadrant they are pulled towards (G. Ogden, 2013, 2018).

Please see Appendix P for Ogden's (2013, 2018) complete description of each quadrant, the light and dark aspects of each, and what is explored in each domain. I now provide a brief explanation of each domain and include Ogden's description of some of the lighter and darker or 'grotesque' areas of exploration under the graph that demonstrates the 4D Wheel of Experience. The **Physical Path** explores the full range of

experience through the senses – smell, touch, sight, hearing, and taste. Often, individuals focus most on this quadrant: the performance, dysfunction, and sensation of sexuality through the body. The **Emotional Path** explores the emotions attached with sexual experience, such as passion or numbness, along with any darker emotions that are left in the system from traumatic or 'grotesque' experiences. The **Mental Path** is the cognitive pathway to exploring the analytic self, judgements, and discernments, in sexual experience. The **Spiritual Path** considers awareness of the split that is created in Western culture around sexuality and spirit – for example, sex is seen as dirty, spirituality is seen as pure (G. Ogden, 2018) – reconciling the binaries placed on individuals through the path of connection or disconnection. The middle, known as Centre & Integration, is the opportunity for all the quadrants to be integrated, experienced, and transformed. This is often the most difficult piece of work to validate as there is no quantitative way to measure this in clients (G. Ogden, 2018). A contemporary integrative model could decrease and ultimately address the shame experienced by women, and reduce the amount of mental health and addiction issues.

Implications for Mental Health & the Addictions Counselling Field

> *Knowing oneself comes from attending with compassionate curiosity to what is happening within*.
>
> – Dr. Gabor Mate, In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction (2009)

This study has relevance for mental health and addiction clinicians. Some researchers argue that healthy sexuality can exert a positive impact on well-being, life satisfaction, satisfaction with self and others, and meaningful relationships (G. Ogden, 2018; Siegel, 2019). Yet, as outlined by participants in this research, women often have

difficulty being aware of their sexual fears, describing their sexual experiences, and breaking through the social constructs of female sexuality in order to articulate their sexual needs (Daniluk, 1993; Gilliard, 2009; G. Ogden, 2013).

Implications for counselling professionals. The findings of this thesis have implications for those working in the fields of mental health and addictions, as sexual desire is one of the most common problems reported in therapy (G. Ogden, 2013). It may also be important to acknowledge that the current edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) is considering the inclusion of a diagnosis of "Compulsive Sexual Behaviour Disorder" (Weiss, 2018), which suggests that sexuality could have a habitual and destructive component for certain individuals, including women (Kasl, 1991), when their sexuality is not healthily integrated and is instead dominated by shame (Katehakis, 2016; G. Ogden, 2018). Based on concerns women present in therapy, Ogden (2013) reminds us: "importantly, a relational perspective broadens the concept of sexual satisfaction to fit our clients' experiences, rather than having our clients feel they have to fit their experiences into already prescribed definitions" (p. 13). The therapeutic alliance and relationship is the most powerful determinant of success in the therapeutic process (Gilbert & Orlans, 2011; G. Ogden, 2018; P. Ogden et. al, 2006); therefore, in order for therapy to be successful, clinicians must be well informed, as well as open to working with women around these sensitive issues (Daniluk, 1998; G. Ogden, 2018). As mentioned throughout this thesis, clients benefit from clinician's awareness of their own biases, belief systems, and understanding of sexuality, in order to recognize what areas they are able to work in, versus when they need to refer out.

Gadamer described that no human ever has a blank slate, regardless of their effort of bracketing. As cited in Moules et. al., 2015, "Gadamer believes that prejudice was so important that, "[t]he recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutic problem its real thrust" (43). I believe this to be true regardless of the amount of meditation and mindfulness practice; humans carry their historical context in each moment, and the benefits of these practices could aid in revealing clinicians' existing understandings and how they are applied to their clients sharing and even the clinicians being in the world (Moules et. al., 2015). This attends to the therapeutic alliance by clinicians having a sex positive orientation, versus sex negative (which shames the client) and recognizing what sexual diversity they are able to work with (Katehakis, 2016; Kleinplatz & Diamond, 2014). I believe this is a major issue in the clinical field as most professionals receive little to no training in the areas of sexuality, sexual diversity and erotic orientation (G. Ogden, 2018) or recognize the importance of healthy sexuality on well-being (Byers & Rehman, 2014; Vrangalova, 2018). For some therapists, there is a pathologizing of certain sexual behaviours because the therapist projects what is appropriate sexually, which is known as counter-transference (Katehakis, 2016).

Integrating treatment approaches offers a new strategy for advancement into the possibilities of expanding women's sexual eroticism and healthy sexuality. This affects their capability of becoming autonomous in their sexual decisions while allowing deeper connection and vulnerability. It also enables them to trust in themselves enough to create meanings from their self-empowering sexual experiences (Brotto, 2018; Daniluk, 1993; G. Ogden, 2018). Creating meaning out of sexual experiences encourages a total

embracing of sexual empowerment (Daniluk, 1993; Gilliard, 2009; G. Ogden, 2018). Daniluk (1993) discusses that women felt it was essential to experience the integration and wholeness of their sexuality in order to feel and identify that they were functioning in a healthy way sexually. Therefore, sexual acceptance and sexual empowerment are vital parts of one's self care within health and wholeness, so these topics need be available for clients to work through with their therapists. Studies completed by Brotto (2018); G. Ogden (2018), and P. Ogden et. al. (2006), all outline the benefits of incorporating an approach beyond the bio-psycho-social model.

This Hermeneutic Phenomenological approach, which is supported through feminist, Tantric underpinnings has attempted to capture the parallels of all three of the models and the possibility of creating the opportunity for more women to share experiences impacting their ability to embrace their sexuality. It also provides mental health and addiction practitioners with information about the sensitivity and effects of these sexual experiences on their female clients, and the population at large. More often than not, the inability to express sexual discontent, or the frustration of feeling silenced by others in terms of sexual experiences and wholeness, causes devastating addictive and mental health effects for women.

This research may challenge clinicians to be aware of their own internalized perception of the constructions of female sexuality, and how those attitudes differ from the reality of women's experiences. G. Ogden (2013) states: "seasoned therapists will recognize that the issues that disturb them are their own, not just something that clients need to face up to… it can trigger a whole raft of feelings, including fear, anger, self-doubt and even shame" (p. 186). This research could also remind therapists about the

importance of completing their own self-inquiry around the sensitive topic of sexuality, and how counter-transference issues may be harming the client more than serving their needs. Gadamer's reminder of finitude, hermeneutic circle of understanding and the power of conversation with curiosity of how one's experience overlaps with another person's when sharing conversation with attuned listening and reflection (Moules et. al., 2015), is laterally supportive to Tantric philosophy, which is woman centered for female sexuality, which has been argued for in this chapter. Furthermore, Finlay (2011) notes that phenomenological writing has the potential to offer therapists a "window into a new realm… which [they] have not [themselves] experienced" (p.25). It is incredibly important for clinicians to have a reflective practice when working with women. However, this is particularly the case with women with trauma backgrounds, mental health disorders, or addictions (Katehakis, 2016). There is hope that clinicians become aware of the possibility of working with these issues from a relatable perspective, learn what is 'grotesque' in them, and work within their system of why that is.

Revisiting the Implicated and Reflexive Researcher

Today I asked my body what she needed,
Which is a big deal
Considering my journey of
Not Really Asking That Much

I thought she might need more water
Or protein.
Or greens.
Or yoga.
Or supplements.
Or movement.

But I stood in the shower
Reflecting on her stretch marks,
Her roundness where I would like flatness,

Her softness where I would like firmness,
All of those conditioned wishes
That form a bundle of
Never-Quite-Right-Ness,
She whispered very gently:

Could you just love me like this?

- Hollie Holden, Notes on Living & Loving Facebook Page (June, 2016)

Engaging in this research study and writing this thesis has been truly personally impactful for me. I found the process to be one of deconstruction, co-construction, and transformation, through many iterative cycles of personal meaning-making. Significant growth and awareness has occurred through reflection on my own process within sexuality, revelation of healing, recognizing my own counter-transference with this arena and where those biases come from, and how to recognize my limitations personally and clinically. Clinically, it has expanded my knowledge of some of the gaps in research, underlined how truly biased this area of research remains, and how institutionalized constructs inform many of the treatment modalities, and clinical labels. It has also ignited a deeper passion of searching for richer sexual education and training, in hopes of working alongside women who want to explore what is sexually healthy for them.

Working from a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry required me, as the researcher, to stay curious with my own process outside of this work, and inside of this work. If I am honest, I was humbled and upset many times by the surprises that appeared, and my own rejection of *what is* and what that meant for me as a human being, my own sexuality, and for the relationships in my life. On a deeper level, the power of meaning making, and being curious about how that meaning was formed, continued to be a big piece of my personal work. It is this very progression that intrigues me about

Tantra: the power of dual and non-dual experiences, no matter how big or small. It is important to acknowledge the amount of transformation that occurred for me, through exploration of my own definition of 'grotesque', and what informed this description.

Hermeneutic processing was also a way to work with interpreting the interviews, keeping a personal journal of what arose for me, and revisiting the literature, repeatedly over the past three years (Moules et. al., 2015). I worked through feelings that came up throughout this work, which has changed how I view the world; this has drastically changed how I work with individuals clinically, and has helped me empathize at a deeper level surrounding the meaning of vulnerability when one makes the brave decision to go inside and have a relationship with self, experience and make meaning, while also remaining open to what is. It has opened my Being to curiosity about slowing down, leaning in, and exploring the transcendent possibilities that a Tantric nondual orientation in this world offers. I am learning to be open to this. I have been inspired by the co-researchers involved in this project, and the many others in the world who are vulnerably leaning into the invitation to healing; we are collectively breaking through barriers, while being open to change and transitions during this process. I am honoured to have had this opportunity, to learn to love myself and others in a way that is absolute, authentic, and embodied.

While my orientation clinically has shifted over the past four years, during the writing of this work to more of a neuro-biological focus and understanding states of consciousness, I continue to be inspired by this research. My current training supports the power of a hermeneutic phenomenological orientation, and the transformation, along with healing, through which meaning-making can occur through all domains in the dual realm

(cognitive, neuro-biological, psychological, somatic, and relational) and the Tantric non-dual realm (dual and nondual realms, including spiritual and beyond self). All of this is valuable in understanding a connection to ourselves, others, and beyond. I think what this also taught me was to trust that the client knows what is best for them in them, and that the conversation and interpretations made together or by themselves will reveal their pathway forward and what is meaningful for them (Ogden & Fisher, 2015). Below is a quote that found me as I was finalizing my write up, and felt important to include, especially with the current socio-political climate of 2019.

Please, don't talk to me about 'Pure Awareness' or 'Dwelling in the Absolute'.
I want to see how you treat your partner,
your kids, your parents, your precious body.

Please, don't lecture me about 'the illusion of the separate self' or how you achieved permanent bliss in just 7 days.
I want to feel a genuine warmth radiating from your heart.
I want to hear how well you listen,
take in information that doesn't fit your personal philosophy.
I want to see how you deal with people who disagree with you.

Don't tell me how awakened you are, how free you are from ego.
I want to know you beneath the words.
I want to know what you're like when troubles befall you.
If you can fully allow your pain and not pretend to be invulnerable.
If you can feel your anger yet not step into violence.
If you can grant safe passage to your sorrow yet not be its slave.

If you can feel your shame and not shame others:
If you can fuck up, and admit it.
If you can say 'sorry', and really mean it.
If you can be fully human in your glorious divinity.

Don't talk to me about your spirituality, friend.
I'm really not that interested.

I only want to meet YOU.
Know your precious heart.
Know the beautiful human struggling for the light.

Before 'the spiritual one'.
Before all the clever words."

- Jeff Foster, Jeff Foster Facebook (2019)

Suggestions for Future Research

If only our eyes saw souls instead of bodies how different our ideals of beauty would be.

- X. W. Ng, Because I Care: A Collection of Thoughts (2017)

Future research on this topic could take many paths; completing research from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, including applying a Tantric Non-Dual perspective, may be further enriched by acquiring a more diverse sample. Interviewing women with a variety of intersectional considerations would be of benefit, as it could illuminate the diversity of ways in which women make meanings. While the intent of this research was to interview 'ordinary' women, not necessarily women who are on this 'journey', exploring a more diverse description of 'grotesque' sexual experiences may better illuminate how women experience the world.

Tantra presents an interesting perspective in this area of counselling, and it would be valuable to look at the effectiveness of a Tantric approach to counselling, and evaluate the effectiveness of an integrative perspective, within individual and group settings. A group component could add a rich layer to this process as Daniluk's (1993) study was deepened because of these regular meetings with other women. There is something inherently powerful in hearing others' narratives of their experience, relating to the similarities, and being curious about the differences. Building research from women's own experiences could benefit not only therapists by encouraging them to be more open and reflective when working with women's sexuality, but could also offer the opportunity

to aid women embracing their own truth, reality, and exploration. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that research is an on-going process, and that this work adds another brick to the formation of knowledge and understandings in women's sexuality and exploration.

Conclusion

> *If we are really going to be sexually liberated, we need to make room for a range of options as wide as the variety of human desire*
>
> - Ariel Levy, Female Chauvinistic Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture (2005)

This thesis has been a hermeneutic phenomenological feminist exploration of the experience of five co-researchers, who courageously shared their narrative around 'grotesque' sexual experiences, and the barriers they moved though in order to transgress these negative labels and experiences. Hermeneutically, I shared in a conversation with these women, listening intently and engaging with whatever arose for me during the interview and after. The power of revisiting their words, the research, and my own experience highlighted the overlapping meanings in experience, along with the bite size pieces of processing, integrating, and transforming (Moules et. al., 2015; Ogden & Fisher, 2015).

From a Tantric lens, when these women experienced liberation from what felt 'grotesque' to them, they were able to break through the power of the Ego and into their True Nature of expression, exploration, and day-to-day being. While the tensions between what is considered 'grotesque' versus 'non-grotesque' are what created much of the suffering in the women's stories; they also showed how exploring these barriers and tensions created momentum to get in touch with something deeper, and more meaningful

for them. In looking at their stories, I found embracing a non-dual tantric model allowed me to understand their fluidity, flexibility, and ability to encompass the broad spectrum of what sexuality means to them. It was inspiring to see how their unique individual expression as well as common themes were manifested in their descriptions.

This thesis has been a process and journey for me; exploring co-researchers' 'grotesque' experiences, the consequences, and the breakthroughs forced me to stay in my vulnerability, or reveal undeniably to me, when I was not. I feel gratitude for this process and the transformational experiences that occurred during this work; sharing and exchanging narratives has been an honour. I hope the co-researchers' experience and meanings, which were important to them, have been captured and conveyed.

REFERENCES

Almaas, A. H. (1987). *Elements of the real in man*. Cockeysville, MD: Diamond Books.

Almaas, A. H. (2000). *The point of existence: Transformations of narcissism in self-realization*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala.

Almaas, A. H. (2014). *Runaway realization*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House.

Bahtkin, M. M. (Ed.) (1984). *Rabelius and his world*. Bloominton, IN: Indiana University Press.

Barker, M. (2013). Consent is a grey area? A comparison of understandings of consent in Fifty Shades of Grey and on the BDSM blogosphere. *Sexualities, 16*(8), 896-914. doi:10.1177/1363460713508881

Bergner, D. (2013). *What do women want?: Adventures in the science of female desire.* New York, NY: Ecco - Harper Collins.

Blumberg, E. S. (2003). The Lives and Voices of Highly Sexual Women. *The Journal of Sex Research, 40*(2), 146-157.

Brooks, C., Ford, K., & Huffman, A. (2013). Feminist and cultural contributions to transpersonal psychology. In H. L. Friedman & G. Hartelius (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbok of Transpersonal Psychology*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Brooks, G. (1995). *The centerfold syndrome: How men can overcome objectification and achieve intimacy with women*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass Inc.

Brotto, L. A. (2018). *Better sex through mindfulness: How women can cultivate desire.* Vancouver, B.C., Canada: Greystone Books.

Brotto, L. A., Krychman, M., & Jacobson, P. (2008). Eastern Approaches for Enhancing Women's Sexuality: Mindfulness, Acupuncture, and Yoga (CME). *The Journal of Sexual Medicine, 5*(12), 2741-2748. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-6109.2008.01071.x

Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think your are supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing.

Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal, 40*(4), 519.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Byers, S., & Rehman, U. S. (2014). Sexual well-being. In D. L. Tolman & L. M. Diamond (Eds.), *APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Chang, S. C. H., Klein, C., & Gorzalka, B. B. (2013). Perceived Prevalence and Definitions of Sexual Dysfunction as Predictors of Sexual Function and Satisfaction. *The Journal of Sex Research, 50*(5), 502-512. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.661488

Conley, T. D., Ziegler, A., & Moors, A. C. (2012). Backlash From the Bedroom: Stigma Mediates Gender Differences in Acceptance of Casual Sex Offers. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 37*(3), 392-407. doi:10.1177/0361684312467169

Connell, R. W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press Berkley.

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender & Society, 19*(6), 829-859. doi:10.1177/0891243205278639

Cortright, B. (1997). *Psychotherapy and spirit: Theory and practice in transpersonal psychotherapy (SUNY series in the philosophy of psychology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

CovenantEyes. (2018). *Pornography statistics.* Retrieved from https://www.covenanteyes.com/e-books/

Daniels, M. (2005). *Shadow, self, spirit: Essays in transpersonal psychology*. Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic Philosophy Documentation Center.

Daniels, M. (2013). Traditional roots: History and evolution of the transpersonal perspective. In H. L. Friedman & G. Hartelius (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology* (pp. 23-43). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

Daniluk, J. C. (1993). The meaning and experience of female sexuality: A phenomenological analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 17*(1), 53-69. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1993.tb00676.x

Daniluk, J. C. (1998). *Women's sexuality across the life span: Challenging myths, creating meanings*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Daniluk, J. C., & Browne, N. (2008). Traditional Religious Doctrine and Women's Sexuality. *Women & Therapy, 31*(1), 129-142. doi:10.1300/02703140802145284

Diamond, L. M. (2008). *Sexual fluidity: Understanding women's love and desire.* In. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dines, G. (2010). *Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Farvid, P., Braun, V., & Rowney, C. (2017). 'No girl wants to be called a slut!': women, heterosexual casual sex and the sexual double standard. *Journal of Gender Studies, 26*(5), 544-560. doi:10.1080/09589236.2016.1150818

Firman, J., & Gila, A. (1997). *The primal wound: A transpersonal view of trauma, addiction, and growth*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Gadamer, H. G. (1989). *Truth and method* (2nd rev. ed.) New York, NY: Crossroad Books

G. Fous (Producer). (2018, August 7). *Sexual honesty, authenticity and kink: Day #9. The New Rules of Sex Summit: Sexual Education to Supercharge Your Health & Lovelife* [Retrieved from http://thenewrulesofsex.com/event/

Garcia, J. R., Reiber, C., Massey, S. G., & Merriwether, A. M. (2012). Sexual Hookup Culture: A Review. *Review of general psychology : journal of Division 1, of the American Psychological Association, 16*(2), 161-176. doi:10.1037/a0027911

Gilbert, M., & Orlans, V. (2011). *Integrative therapy: 100 key points and techniques*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Gilliard, A. L. (2009). Women's experiences of female ejaculation. *Sexuality & Culture, 12*, 121-134. doi:10.1007/s12119-009-9049-y

Greenspan, M. (2004). *Healing through the dark emotions: The wisdom of grief, fear, and despair*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala.

Hartelius, G., Caplan, M., & Rardin, M. A. (2007). Transpersonal psychology: Defining the past, divining the future. *Humanistic Psychologist, 35*(2), 135-160.

Hartelius, G., Rothe, G., & Roy, P. J. (2013). A brand from the burning: Defining transpersonal psychology. In H. L. Friedman & G. Hartelius (Eds.), *The Wiley*

Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology (pp. 1-22). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Herbenick, D., Schick, V., Reece, M., Sanders, S., Dodge, B., & Fortenberry, J. D. (2011). The Female Genital Self-Image Scale (FGSIS): Results from a Nationally Representative Probability Sample of Women in the United States. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine, 8*(1), 158-166. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-6109.2010.02071.x

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. New York, NY: Harper & Row

Herlihy, B., & Corey, G. (2015). *ACA ethical standards casebook* (7th ed.). Alexandria, VA: American Counselling Association.

Impett, E. A., Muise, A., & Peregrine, D. (2014). Sexuality in the context of relationships. In D. L. Tolman & L. M. Diamond (Eds.), *APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Kaplan, H. S. (1979). *Disorders of sexual desire and other new concepts and techniques in sex therapy*. New Yok, NY: Burnner/Mazel.

Kasl, C. (1990). *Women, sex, and addiction*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers.

Katz-Wise, S. L., & Hyde, J. S. (2014). Sexuality and gender: The interplay. In D. L. Tolman & L. M. Diamond (Eds.), *APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

King, R., Belsky, J., Mah, K., & Binik, Y. (2011). Are There Different Types of Female Orgasm? *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 40*(5), 865-875. doi:10.1007/s10508-010-9639-7

Kleinplatz, P. J. (2010). "Desire disorders" or opportunities for optimal erotic intimacy? In S. R. Leiblum (Ed.), *Treating sexual desire disorders: A clinical casebook*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Lerner, H. G. (1988). *Women in therapy*. New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers.

Liberman, R. (2015). 'It's a really great tool': feminist pornography and the promotion of sexual subjectivity. *Porn Studies, 2*(2-3), 174-191. doi:10.1080/23268743.2015.1051913

Long, T. (2013). *Integral and transpersonal sexology*. Alphen aan den Rijn, NL: The Connection.

Luft, T.M. (2002). *An interpretive inquiry into the meaning of mentoring in the lives of adolescent girls*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada.

Maslow, A. H. (2012). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York, NY: Start Publishing.

Masters, W. H., & Johnson, V. E. (1966). *Human sexual response*. New York, NY: Little Brown.

McCarthy, B., & Wald, L. M. (2013). Mindfulness and Good Enough Sex. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 28*(1-2), 39-47. doi:10.1080/14681994.2013.770829

McElroy, W. (1997). A Feminist Defense Of Pornography. *Free Inquiry, 17*(4), 12-16.

Mertens, D. M. (2009). *Education and Psychology: Integrating diversity with quanitative, qualitative and mixed methods.* (3rd edition) New York, NY: Sage Publications

Moules, N. J., McCaffrey, G., Field, J. C., & Laing, C. M. (2015). *Conducting hermeneutic research: From philosophy to practice.* New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing

Muise, A., Impett, E. A., & Desmarais, S. (2013). Getting it on versus getting it over with. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 39*(10), 1320-1332. doi:10.1177/0146167213490963

Nagoski, E. (2015). *Come as you are: The surprising new sciences that will transform your sex life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Namaste, V. K. (2005). *Sex change social change: Reflections on identity, institutions, and imperialism*. Toronto, ON: Women's Press.

Nobre, P. J., Pinto-Gouveia, J., & xe. (2006). Dysfunctional Sexual Beliefs as Vulnerability Factors for Sexual Dysfunction. *The Journal of Sex Research, 43*(1), 68-75.

Ogden, G. (2007). *Women who love sex: Ordinary women describe their paths to pleasure, intimacy, and ecstasy*. Boston, MA: Trumpeter.

Ogden, G. (2008). It's Not Just a Headache, Dear. *Women & Therapy, 31*(1), 107-127. doi:10.1300/02703140802145268

Ogden, G. (2013). *Expanding the practice of sex therapy: An integrative model for exploring desire and intimacy*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ogden, G. (2018). *Expanding the practice of sex therapy:The neuro update edition - an integrative approach for exploring desire and intimacy* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Ogden, P., & Fisher, J. (2015). *Sensorimotor psychotherapy: Interventions for trauma and attachment*. New York, NY: WW Norton.

Ogden, P., Minton, K., & Pain, C. (2006). *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy*. New York, NY: WW Norton.

Orenstein, P. (2016). *Girls and sex: Navigating the complicated new landscape*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Packer, M. J., & Addison, R. B. (Eds.) (1989). *Entering the circle: Hermeneutic investigation in psychology*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Petzanova, I. (2010). *Post-secondary women's positive experiences with pornography: A grounded theory explanation of intial exposure and subsequent use of sexually explicit materials.* (Master of Education), University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, AB.

Real, T. (2018). *Fierce intimacy*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True.

Richards, C. & Barker, M. (2013). *Sexuality and gender for mental health professsionals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rosenbaum, T. Y. (2013). An integrated mindfulness-based approach to the treatment of women with sexual pain and anxiety: Promoting autonomy and mind/body connection. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 28*(1-2), 20-28. doi:10.1080/14681994.2013.764981

Rosin, H. (2012). *The end of men: And the rise of women*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

Rowan, J. (2005). *A guide to humanistic Psychology* (3rd ed.). London, UK: UK Association of Humanistic Psychology Practictioners.

Schaef, A. W. (1992). *Meditations for women who do too much*. New York, NY: Harpercollins.

Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the feminine other: masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony. *Theory and Society, 36*(1), 85-102. doi:10.1007/s11186-007-9022-4

Schooler, D., Ward, L. M., Merriwether, A., & Caruthers, A. S. (2005). Cycles of Shame: Menstrual Shame, Body Shame, and Sexual Decision-Making. *The Journal of Sex Research, 42*(4), 324-334.

Senn, C. Y. (1993). Women's multiple perspectives and experiences with pornography. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 17*(3), 319-341. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1993.tb00490.x

Shields, S. A. (2008). Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective. *Sex Roles, 59*(5), 301-311. doi:10.1007/s11199-008-9501-8

Sholty, M. J., Ephross, P. H., Plaut, S. M., Fischman, S. H., Charnas, J. F., & Cody, C. A. (1984). Female orgasmic experience: A subjective study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 13*(2), 155-164. doi:10.1007/BF01542149

Siegel, D. J. (2014). *Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Siegel, D. J. (2016). *Mind: A Journey to the heart of being human*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Siegel, D. J. (2019). *What is a healthy mind?* Science and Nonduality Conference: The Mystery of Being.

https://www.scienceandnonduality.com/video/what-is-a-healthy-mind-daniel-siegel

Snape, T. D. (2010). *"Girls don't watch porn": A narrative analysis of women's negotiations in problematic spaces.* (Master of Arts), University of British Columbia, Kelowna, BC.

Surrey, J. (1991). The “self-in-relation”: A theory of women’s development. In J. V. Jordan, A. G. Kaplan, J. B. Miller, I. P. Stiver, & J. L. Surrey (Eds.), *Women’s Growth in connection: Writings from the stone center* (pp. 51-68). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Tzu, G. (2014a). *Beyond addiction to awakening*. Seattle, WA: Creative Space.

Tzu, G. (2014b). *Awakening the paradox of darkness*. Victoria, BC: Friesen Press.

Tzu, G., & Damgaard, L. M. (2015). Diving into the Being of Resiliency from Addiction: A Nondual Approach. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, 13*(2), 155-172. doi:10.1007/s11469-014-9517-y

van Lyebeth, A. (2001). *Tantra: Cult of the feminine* (A. V. Lysebeth & L. Dobler, Trans.). Boston, MA: Red Wheel.

Z. Vrangalova (Producer). (2018, August 4). *Casual sex and the benefits of sexual positivity: Day #6. The New Rules of Sex Summit: Sexual Education to Supercharge Your Health & Lovelife* [Retrieved from http://thenewrulesofsex.com/event/

Wade, J. (2004). *Transcendent sex: When lovemaking opens the veil*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.

Wade, J. (2013). Transpersonal sexual experiences. In H. L. Friedman & G. Hartelius (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of transpersonal psychology* (1st ed., pp. 382-397). Indianapolis, IN: Wiley-Blackwell.

Weaver, A., D., & Byers, E. S. (2006). The relationships among body image, body mass index, exercise, and sexual functioning in heterosexual women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 30*(4), 333-339. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.2006.00308.x

Wentland, J. J., & Reissing, E. (2014). Casual sexual relationships: Identifying definitions for one night stands, booty calls, fuck buddies, and friends with benefits. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality, 23*(3), 167-177. doi:10.3138/cjhs.2744

Wiederman, M. W. (2001). "Don't Look Now": The Role of Self-Focus in Sexual Dysfunction. *The Family Journal, 9*(2), 210-214. doi:10.1177/1066480701092020

Williams, D. J., Thomas, J. N., Prior, E. E., & Christensen, M. C. (2014). From "SSC" and "RACK" to the "4Cs": Introducing a new Framework for Negotiating BDSM Participation. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality, 17*, 1-10.

Wiseman, J. (1996). *SM 101: A realistic introduction*. Emeryville, CA: Greenery Press.

Woertman, L., & van den Brink, F. (2012). Body Image and Female Sexual Functioning and Behavior: A Review. *The Journal of Sex Research, 49*(2-3), 184-211. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.658586

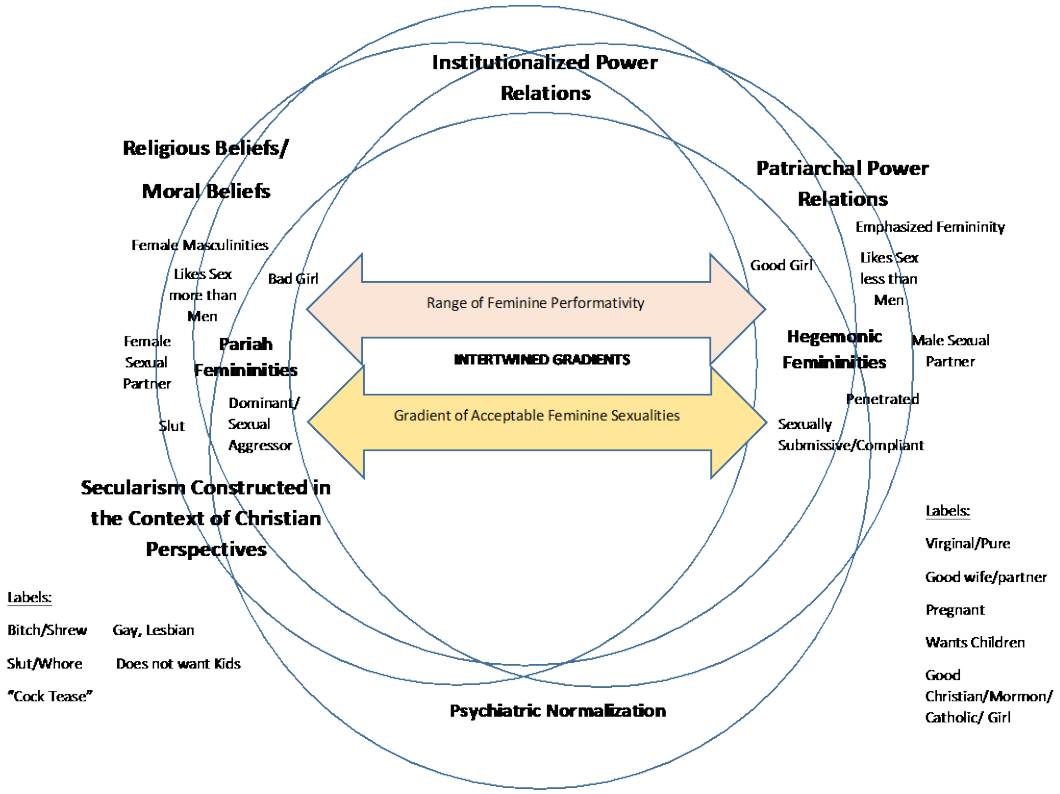
World Health Organization. (2018). *Defining sexual health.* Retrieved from http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/

Wright , P. A. (1995). Bringing women's voices to transpersonal theory. *ReVision, 17*(3), 3-10.

APPENDICES

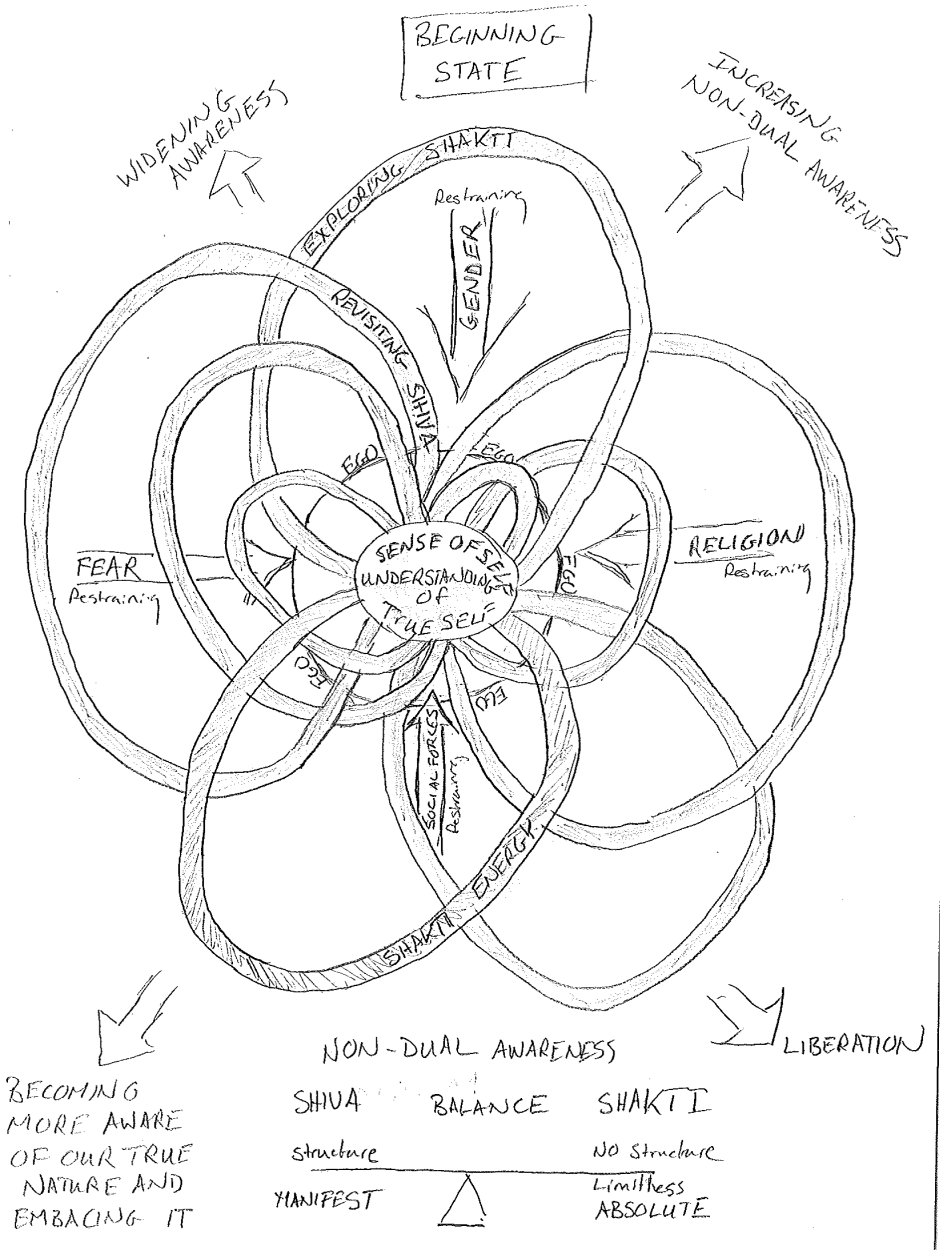
A: Institutionalized Social Forces Influencing Femininity And Sexuality

Gender power relations intertwined with women's sexuality, and what is classified as female 'grotesque' sexual experiences.

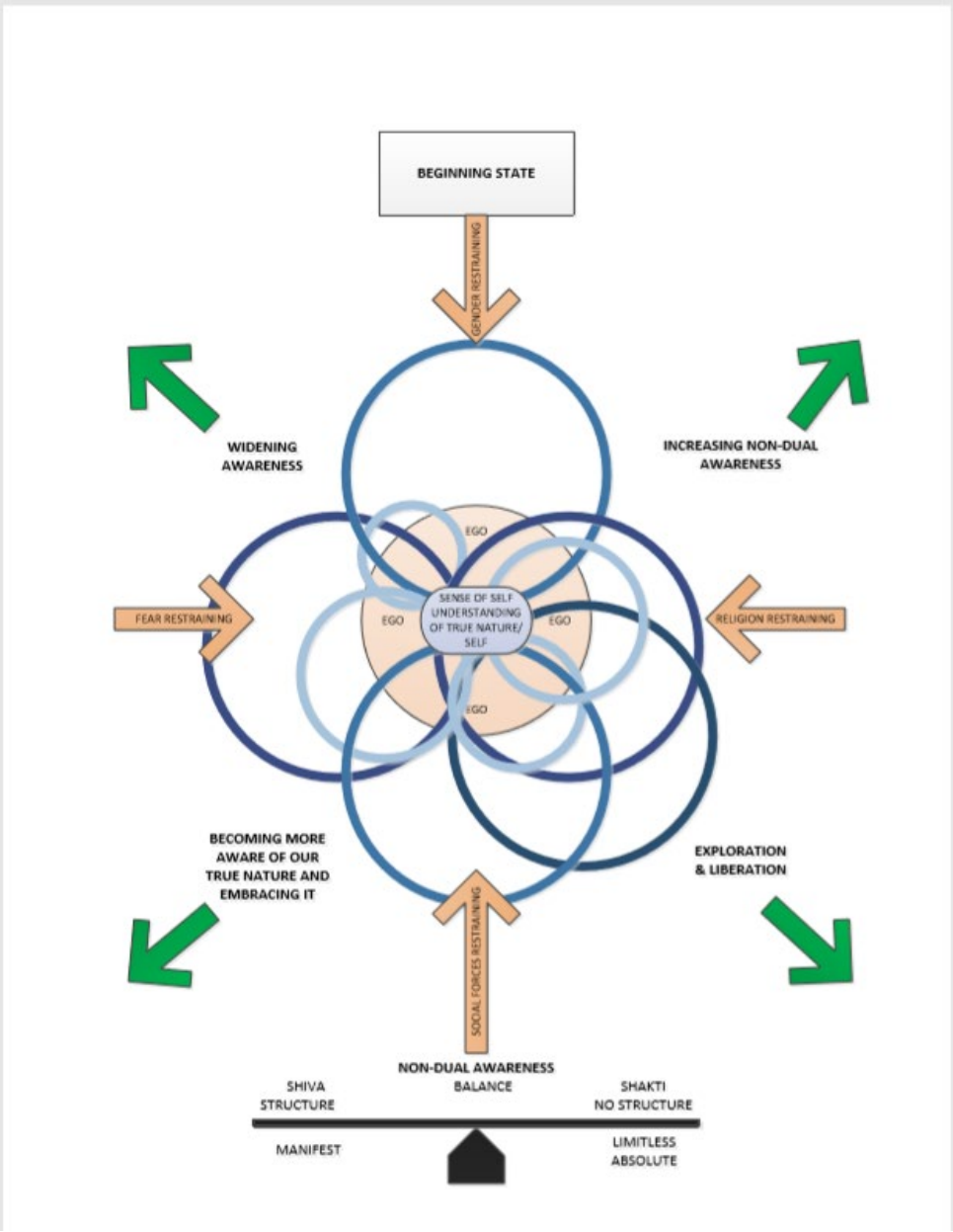


Drawing on Schipper's model (2007), Butler (1990), and Connell (1995).

B: Figure 2: Hand Drawn Tantric Exploration Of The 'Grotesque' For Learning & Transcendence



C: Figure 2: Computer Generated Tantric Exploration Of The 'Grotesque' For Learning & Transcendence



D: Recruitment Poster

THE EUPHORIC TRANSENDENCE OF THE 'GROTESQUE' ILLUMINATION THROUGH FEMALE SEXUAL EXPERIENCE

The purpose of the phenomenological study is to explore the co-researcher's definition of female sexual 'grotesque' (FSG) experiences; Furthermore, co-researchers, will be asked to describe the process of the learnings and integration of these experiences.

ARE YOU (OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW) AN INDIVIDUAL WHO…

1. Self-identifies as a female who is 18 years or older
2. Is open to sharing 'grotesque' sexual experiences and describing the process by which you integrated these experiences and carry this integration into your day-to-day living.
3. Can identify and articulate your experience(s) in an interview setting.

The significance of this study is that concepts surrounding female sexuality have been generated and understood through, and dominated by, patriarchal constructions. Furthermore, dominant discourses often fail to adequately describe and incorporate women's lived experiences of sexual practices and understandings. As a result, many women believe that something is wrong with them and how they express, suppress, and enact their sexuality. The qualitative method of this research will attempt to fill a research gap by giving women the opportunity to articulate the experiences which have impacted their ability to be sexually whole, and will allow women to impact the paradigms that are applied to female sexuality.

L. Marie Damgaard is a graduate student completing her Master's degree in Counselling Psychology. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Gary Tzu, and you may contact him at 403-329-2644 if you have any further questions.
Please email me at LM.DAMGAARD@ULETH.CA if you're interested sharing your experience through an *anonymous* 2.0 hour interview. The interview will include questions which will relate to your experience of the 'grotesque' as it applies to female sexuality, the process of integrating these experiences into day to day living, and the extent to which, and in what ways, such integration has affected your life in general.

E: Consent Form

PARTICIPANT (ADULT) CONSENT FORM

The Euphoric Transcendence of the 'Grotesque' Illumination Through Female Sexual Experience

You are being asked to participate in this study titled **The Euphoric Transcendence of the 'Grotesque' Illumination Through Female Sexual Experience.** This research is being conducted by L. Marie Damgaard, a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. You can contact her if you have further questions about this document via phone at 403-359-3318.

As a graduate student, I (L. Marie Damgaard) am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Gary Tzu, and you may contact him at 403-329-2644 if you have any further questions.

The purpose of the phenomenological study is to explore the co-researcher's definition of female sexual 'grotesque' (FSG) experiences; Furthermore, co-researchers, will be asked to describe the process of the learnings and integration of these experiences.

The significance of this study is that concepts surrounding female sexuality have been generated and understood through, and dominated by, patriarchal constructions. Furthermore, dominant discourses often fail to adequately describe and incorporate women's lived experiences of sexual practices and understandings. As a result, many women believe that something is wrong with them and how they express, suppress, and enact their sexuality. The qualitative method of this research will attempt to fill a research gap by giving women the opportunity to articulate the experiences which have impacted their ability to be sexually whole, and will allow women to impact the paradigms that are applied to female sexuality. Research of this type is also important because it will have significant implications for professionals who counsel individuals, as sexual desire and authenticity is one of the most reported issues in therapy.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an individual who:

4. Self-identifies as a female who is 18 years or older
5. Can describe 'grotesque' sexual experiences and describe the process by which you integrated these experiences and moved beyond them.
6. Can identify and articulate your experience(s) in an interview setting.

Procedure
If you agree to be a participant (co-navigator) in this study, a maximum of 2.0 hours of your time will be required to complete the interview. Interviews will be conducted in pre-reserved rooms at the library in the University of Lethbridge, or in the comfort of the co-navigator's home. Otherwise, Skype meetings may also be arranged. The interview will include questions which will relate to your experience of the 'grotesque' as it applies to female sexuality, the process of integrating these experiences, and the extent to which, and in what ways, such integration has affected your life in general. The transcripts will be divided into manageable and meaningful clusters of statements from which themes will be identified. Further communication may be necessary to clarify the data and to ensure transcription accuracy. After the interview, you will be asked whether or not you agree to completion of a follow-up phone call.

Voluntary
Your participation is absolutely voluntary. At any point during the interview you may ask to stop the audio recording, or to stop the interview session entirely. No questions will be asked. Additionally, you may ask to have your data removed from the themes and destroyed within one month after the date of your scheduled interview.

Risks of Participation
There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and these include emotional and psychological risks. Emotional content of a co-navigator's lived experience may arise during the semi-structured interview. You will not be pressed to provide any details that you're unwilling or unprepared to share. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken: During the consent process attention will be paid to the discussion of your lived experience as emotional and psychological triggers may arise from a natural retelling of the participant's story. If you become distressed, you will be debriefed and given the space and time needed to process. Also, while the researcher has been trained as a counselor, it is important that if the co-navigator discloses any distress during or after the interview that they contact other appropriate counseling services. Here is a list of possible counseling resources:
Awakening Heart Psychotherapy and Consulting - (403) 328-2224
Lethbridge Family Services – (403) 327-5724
Associates Counseling Services – (403) 381-6100

Confidentiality and Anonymity
Interviews will be audio recorded, and transcribed. Anonymity will be maintained through the use of a pseudonym of your choosing. Identifying information such as gender and age might not be removed from the quoted material if deemed relevant to the study. You will have an opportunity to remove any identifying information from the quoted

material after the interview. As I am a graduate student, two people are required to view the transcripts: my thesis supervisor, and myself. To ensure confidentiality I, the researcher, will transcribe all interviews. Confidentiality of the data will be protected through password-protected computer storage. Data will be reported in the form of a thesis and may be presented in the form of a published article(s) and/or conference presentation(s). Files will be stored on a digital audio recorder, a USB external storage drive, and a desktop computer, all of which will be password protected. The function 'secure delete' will be applied to guarantee full destruction of the data. Print copies of the data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office at the University of Lethbridge. Electronic and hard copy data will be deleted after five years.

Contact information

If you have any questions or comments, you are invited to contact me at:
lm.damgaard@uleth.ca
(403) 524-2504
Gary Tzu, my supervisor, is also available for questions at the following:
gary.tzu@uleth.ca
(403) 329-2644

You are welcome to verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you feel that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Co-Researcher	*Signature*	*Date*

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	*Signature*	*Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

F: Interview Questions

University of Lethbridge
FIAT LUX
Faculty of Education

Interview Questions

---

1) **What are some of the experiences that have impacted your understanding of Female Sexual 'Grotesque' Experiences?**
2) **Reflecting upon these experiences, what stands out to you? Is there anything else you'd like to share to give me the complete picture?**
3) **Reflecting upon these experiences, did they impact your ability to feel sexually whole?**
4) **How were you able to integrate these experiences? If you were unable to, what are some of the barriers you are aware of to integrate your experience?**
5) **Have any mental health or addiction issues surfaced throughout your journey from 'grotesque' sexual experiences?**
6) **From your perspective, are there any themes that have arose out of our interview today?**
7) **Is there anything you'd like to add or do you have any questions for me?**

G: Understanding The 'Grotesque' [Co-Researchers' Definitions Of The Grotesque]

The interviewer deliberately did not provide co-researchers with a definition of what constituted a 'grotesque' sexual experience. Instead, co-researchers were able to provide their own self-defined understanding of what "female sexual grotesque experience" meant to them and to illustrate this through the examples they chose to discuss in their interviews. Each description was similar in the sense that their definitions of 'grotesque' sexual experiences were highly informed by the constraints of social norms and patriarchal expectations. Jax described 'grotesque' as:

> … doing something that's against [pause] what society views as normal sexuality…I've been with multiple partners, both men and women [pause] not necessarily for relationships. Could have been, one-night-stands, fuck buddies, or friends with benefits situations [pause] just things that proper women shouldn't do…

Jax's definition highlights the challenges women face when they engage in sexuality that does not align with heteronormative expectations, and when they choose not to be involved in a monogamous relationship. Her exploration of her sexuality outside of marriage is often deemed by others as 'grotesque', as for her, women's sexual exploration is usually expected to be in association with committed relationships with men (and not with women).

Jax then described an image, based on female bodily features and functions, which popped into her head when she heard the word 'grotesque', and elaborated on the notion of a "*sideshow freak*":

> It's like [pause] rings through [the] clitoris or something, [and] it's really weird. That's the first thing, because grotesque is such a strong word and it has a strong image that goes with it. The image in my head when I say "female grotesqueness" is [pause] I think of like, a black and white photo of a sideshow woman, with her

> breasts out and [pause] hair everywhere and [pause] like porn where women fit really big things in their vagina. It's like this old, 1920s sideshow woman who used to like, fit oranges in her woohoo. Like something that's like, really far gone.

KT also discussed within her definition of female sexual 'grotesque' about a female sexual image:

> …female sexual grotesqueness is anything that's really affected you negatively and anything around like, female sexuality, especially female sexual images. A female sexual image is a society made thing because [pause] society projects this very square image and if you don't fit inside this image then that makes you feel uncomfortable, and anything that makes you feel uncomfortable could be [pause] considered grotesque. It's like, this little square, perfect box that's being marketed, anything that comes up against that and doesn't match, like, self-esteem, sexuality, or desirability, can all be considered grotesque.

Women's conditioned orientation in the world is to focus not on themselves, but rather on avoiding what the 'other' (e.g. men, patriarchy, their partner, or society) deems as 'grotesque'. The female body becomes a commodity, forced into a box, and expected to enact a certain look in order to not be considered freaky, uncomfortable, or weird.

KT's definition was as follows:

> … any feeling of negativity around a sexual experience and [pause] where does that feeling of negativity come from, if the feelings are new, where then have I already been imprinted on 'this is a bad feeling'? I guess female, anything, any experience that reflects poorly on the female image, or any female self-esteem issue. It can be whether it comes from outside influence or inside influence like, whatever experience I feel negative towards or impacts me [pause] could just be a very general definition of 'grotesqueness'. Like, anything that makes me feel poorly as a reflection upon myself.

Sarah's definition also discussed the negative implications of 'grotesque':

> Grotesque has a connotation of [pause] undesirable, and that feels like a very male point of view. Or somebody attracted to females point of view, as opposed to the woman herself. Because it makes it feel like their view of me and my sexuality determines my worth in correlation to my sexuality, and in correlation to me being a human being [pause] it gets really ugly for me when I live from this space…

KT and Sarah both discuss the negativity that comes with not being able to measure up to what society deems as desirable. Women's worth and esteem often fall short due to attempted alignment with unattainable societal norms and the internal feelings that come from not meeting external standards (Nagoski, 2015).

Stef had a similar definition, and included examples of what may be considered inappropriate or 'grotesque' in terms of female sexuality:

> What I see at this point in my life as female grotesque sexuality issues are things that are not of the dominant discourse of [pause] accepted behavior for women, sexually. I look at it like this shadow side of female sexuality, and so to the public and dominant discourse, like patriarchal society, that would-be things like [pause] masturbation, overt sexual expression, expression of actions that are outside of the heterosexuality expression…

Stef's definition concentrated on the dominant discourse of women's sexuality and the problematic nature of an expression of sexuality, which does not align with expectations of what a woman is supposed to enact. Some of the acts that women ought not engage in included masturbation and any exploration out of the heteronormative manifestation. The resulting shadow that emerges for women, when they do not stay within these expectations, speaks volumes about how these societal constructs impact women's lives.

Barb also brought to focus the shadow side of female sexuality through the shame that emerges through patriarchy and the consequential impact on herself and women as a whole:

> I think that female sexual grotesque is anything that brings a sense of shame [pause] it's like a black branch-like consciousness which permeates every area of being a woman. It makes me think of the impact of patriarchal pressures on the expectation of what is expected when you're a woman, and on all women. [pause] I also think of a split, like whore/virgin complex; genital and body shame; orgasm pressures and how every message any woman receives about sex is, "you need to be everything and more, but don't be too much." I have had a lot of experiences which have made me feel this way, whether it's casual sex, certain sexual

> behaviors or even what I look like, it's never right or good enough. Patriarchy fucking sucks…

Barb brought to focus the split in which each woman is attempting to get the enactment and exploration of sexuality 'right'. Barb had the courage to speak so clearly about the vulnerability she and other women feel as they attempt to navigate what 'grotesque' is. Her bravery shone through as she discussed her experience of, "… never right or good enough"; this is an important quote to honour as it is common for women to feel this way, but difficult to articulate. TC's definition also focused on patriarchy, how feminism is the opposite of patriarchy, and how, if the female body does not align with the patriarchal definition of what a woman is supposed to be, it is deemed as 'grotesque'. She used many examples about body size and body hair, from religion and media, and expectations of some of her casual hookups to support this perspective.

The co-researchers described their experiences and the understandings which established their definitions of 'grotesque' for themselves and discussed women as a whole in these definitions. It is difficult to condense and integrate each definition into one that would fit for all of them, or even women as a whole. Instead, it may be easier to focus on the unities of what 'grotesque' *is not.* Each of these women referenced the power and pressures of patriarchy and the impact on them personally, and each spoke to the impact on women collectively. For the co-researchers, these patriarchal pressures often push a 'one-size-fits-all' agenda, via marriage, heteronormative engagement, and the commercialization of the female body to be sexual in a certain way.

From the definitions shared, it is clear that these women know and experience the 'grotesque' in a way that is learned, and there are many components of experience that

inform that learning. Each talked about the social context of patriarchy and how this informed their learning in connection to gender, especially being a woman.

H: Co-Researchers' Reflections On Pornography

KT and Barb both shared the recognition that pornography is different today than it was for them in their twenties. KT said, "we've grown up and we come from such a different generation in terms of pornography exposure." Barb also used humor when discussing that

> in order for us to look at porn online, we had to dial-up, who had time for that? Also, most of us [college friends] didn't have personal computers in college, we had to go to the library and our cell phones didn't have cameras [pause] it's totally different now.

KT and Barb bring to the light how different their exposure and access to pornography was compared with young people's experiences with technology and pornography these days.

TC, Barb, KT, and Jax all discussed their exposure to pornography in their teens and early twenties. These co-researchers all discussed that anytime they looked at pornography, by themselves or with friends, they knew there was nothing realistic about what they were seeing. Barb even questioned how the porn actors' bodies were bending and if they wanted to be in those positions. Barb first found porn

> In the bathroom under my brother's sink. I was so confused about what was happening on the pages [pause] like why did it change on every page [laughs], and I remember thinking, wow, who can bend like that, and who wants to? It was that very moment, where I just decided, nope, none of this can be real, no one can bend like that, can they? Something feels off…

Even though she remained curious about how the body moved in the pornography, there was a moment where she made a decision internally, to not buy into the 'reality' of porn, where something felt off. Barb also shared a memory from college:

> … the other memory around porn as sex education, which comes to mind was my second night in college, I was at my neighbor's house getting ready to go out with a group of chicks and my neighbor put this music video that had porn as well. We all stood around with our drinks laughing our faces off, talking about how none of us had ever had sex like this and that it wasn't possible. All I could focus on was how FAKE the moaning sounded, all I could hear was how bored the female actress was; this experience again solidified that porn was not real sex – I think that's why I never really got into it…

Jax's experience was similar to Barb's in the way that she made meaning from some of the porn she saw, "I always thought to myself, and said to a few girlfriends, how do these women just get off, when has it ever been that easy? [pause] This is not real." TC also described the unrealistic version of sex pornography gives women, "…porn doesn't show us what sex is! Sex isn't, you give him a blowjob, he spits on you, you have sex, you yell." TC, Jax, and Barb were able to decipher what was unrealistic about the pornography they saw, and what did not match with their real life sexual experience. None of them took this on, nor attempted to fit what pornography was showing them. Sarah used porn as a way to explore learning about women.

Sarah's experience in university and her sex education with porn was "downloading lesbian porn, or videos of chicks making out [pause] and not a lot of lesbian porn was enjoyable because it was made for men." Sarah had hoped that she would learn something about women, by watching videos that had more female exposure than male; unfortunately, she found that a lot of the lesbian porn was made for the male viewer. Sarah also discussed that she "didn't see a female condom until my third year of university! Tells you about sex education and heteronormativity in America, doesn't it?" It was not until her early twenties that she saw what a female condom looked like; Sarah astutely wraps up the main argument that even as recently as seven years ago sex

education was deeply biased, and even today remains inclined to discuss from a heteronormative stance, with a lack of inclusivity, even with condom use. Barb also shared the frustration of what she learned from sexual education at the Christian school she attended,

> …it was horrible and incredibly confusing. I had been sexually abused at a Church function, so I wasn't a "pure" girl [pause] all the teacher talked about was, you need to stay abstinent or else you're dirty. I felt so confused [pause] was I dirty because of what happened at the church, with the priest? Or am I dirty now because of it? Was a confusing time for me, to say the least. I did not receive helpful information about sex until I was in college and I sought it out!

Barb and Sarah's experiences are similar, in that they both found post-secondary education around sexuality helpful, and contrary to what they received in settings when they were high-school aged; Barb shared how confusing it was to not have an experience similar to the one the teacher was presenting.

I: Further Description's Of The Co-Researcher's Sexual Interests And Preferences

Woven throughout Element C were ways in which each woman embraced her sexual interests and preferences; however, they supported others' choices in engaging or expressing themselves outside of patriarchal expectations, so long as it was "in a consensual, safe, non-coercive, way". The following discusses what the women shared is of interest to them in a fantasy space. The succeeding section details specifics they engaged in with their partner and self-pleasure at the time of the interview, and the impact it has for their relationship. The courage to explore and embrace many of these activities is attributed to breaking through internalized 'grotesque' and embracing their inner yearning to what is arousing for their sexuality.

Some women shared specific sexual fantasies that they returned back to but were tentative to live it out in real life. For a few of the co-researchers, there was a focus on threesomes with another female and male participant; KT described her sexual fantasy of a threesome to be, "… an idea that I find really sexy and appealing, but I hesitate to play it out in reality. Without an extreme amount of open communication, there are so many things that could ruin a solid relationship." Stef, Barb, and Jax also briefly discussed the appeal of threesome in a fantasy. They were turned on by thinking about it, but chose not live this out, as they did not have the communication for this expression of sexuality with their current partner. Even though engaging in certain activities did not match their arousal template, they supported others' preferences or choices; all of them expressed their "support [and] non-judgement about others who do [threesomes] in a consensual, safe, non-coercive, way." Some co-researchers also shared other sexual activities that

they enjoyed participating in and which created novelty in their current sexual relationship. For example, KT discussed, "… light BDSM, watching porn together [with her partner] and separately, and using toys, are all activities that I, and we, regularly engage in. All these are activities that we use to keep our sex life varied and interesting." It is no secret that part of what keeps long-term monogamous relationships invested sexually is awareness of sexual needs, safety to express these, having clear communication, and generating curiosity with playfulness.

Jax didn't feel like there was a specific experience, but more of a time frame where she was all about exploring her sexuality, which helped her discover her arousal template and speak up for her sexual needs:

> I don't believe I have one single experience. It's more of a time frame. When I lived in [Western Canada], I started to develop the keen understanding of how attractive I am to other people. It broke me out of my shell sexually and gave me freedom to express myself. This is something that has continued to grow and I have brought down a lot of reservations about myself because of it.

Jax also shared a deeper meaning from one of her casual sexual experiences during this time frame of exploration,

> I call it, 'intuitively unconscious', I don't know how to explain it, but I knew I was where I was supposed to be, with the person I was with, I shared everything and was curious, and I had the most [pause], no words to describe the experience of being energy, there was no time or space… it was a deep loving energy which emerged from this one night stand. It was the best sexual experience I ever had and it changed me…there's more to it than P in the V… [laughs, hands up] … who knew? It unleashed some inner wildness…It broke me out of my shell sexually and gave me freedom to express myself [pause] this is something that continued to grow and I have never put my needs aside, since.

The energy that emerged from this experience pushed her to recognize that there is more to sexuality than what she was experiencing previous to that night. Jax's hook-up experience changed how she approached her sexuality, and consequently, she never put

her needs aside again. Barb and Stef shared that their journey ignited their "wild energy", which generated "curiosity" and "relational awareness, inside and out". For these co-researchers, embracing their inner 'wild energy', which emerged from a non-prescriptive way of knowing and vulnerability through sexual authenticity, allowed for an opening of energy in their being. The opening of energy resulted from a shift in the way they were living their lives, from internalization of patriarchal ideas towards honouring their own needs. For Stef and Barb, these experiences urged them towards movement beyond their constructed reality into a sacred space through practice. This section articulated that the most important factor for each co-researcher to expand their definition of sexual 'grotesque' is honouring their personal needs rather than focusing on trying to appease others.

J: Co-Researcher's Further Descriptions Of Their Non-Dual Practice & Experience

> *Practice is engaging all the moments of life through practicing being present-sensing and looking and listening as we go through our day…Our devotion to practice reflects our love of the truth, our love of the condition of realization, our love of reality. Practice is remembering that appreciation, expressing it, and being harmonized with it as much as possible.*
>
> - A. H. Almaas, Runaway Realization: Living a Life of Ceaseless Discovery (2015)

It is important to remind the reader that it is nearly impossible to tease apart all these experiences, impacts, and meanings, as they are so entwined. Co-researchers have touched on components of transcendent Tantric nondual orientation, such as curiosity, 'openness', 'no judgement', 'letting go', or 'fuck it'. KT shared how a mindful practice of continuing to return to the moment, dissolved any thoughts she had and allowed her to fully experience pleasure with her partner,

> One of the most satisfying aspects of sex for me is being unreservedly in the moment and present with my current partner. During the initial stages of a sexual experience, anything from foreplay to oral sex to penetration, my mind often wanders and becomes easily distracted from the action unfolding. I have to intentionally refocus my attention to my actions, sometimes multiple times, on myself and my partner. Only after I put intentional effort into connecting with the present moment, that I really begin to enjoy myself. The pleasure becomes more intense, and I become aware of both me and my partner's body and am able to fully commit myself to the experience. Occasionally this can feel like a surreal experience. To be able to not be bothered by outside thoughts and have complete and full focus on a single passion isn't something that happens to me regularly. I don't think this state is exclusive to sex, but so rarely is anything else so overwhelming to the senses that I am able to completely release myself to the moment…

KT's in-depth description shares the process of what mindful sex looks like for some women and the deepening awareness that occurs because of the commitment to presence in the moment. Other co-researchers shared their learnings on the "journey" they are on.

Specifically, Barb and Stef shared that they were on this particular "journey"; both acknowledged during their interview that they were on a "journey", and that as part of experiencing this path, they both partook in rituals as a way to be aware of their dualistic existence (Ego), to build the capacity for mindfulness, and to be aware of nondual states of consciousness and the meaning that occurs due to embracing these ways of Being.

For Stef, this "journey" was about, "…consciousness [pause], connecting to the Earth from where I am originally from [Atlantic Canada] and present surroundings"; Jax and Barb also spoke about the importance of being connected to the Earth. While Jax did not share her intention of travelling this specific path, she had similar descriptions,

> I'm from [Atlantic Canada] and the ocean, the waves, the cliffs are so beautiful… I go to the water, I breathe into them, the waves, to feel better, when I am feeling overwhelmed [pause], the ocean washes away negativity… the ocean is something that soothes me in every way and regularly washes away any negative residue that comes up…

Barb expanded on her need to be, "… connected to mountains, trees, and clouds – these elements help remind me that the body I am in, is also the Earth, we are all connected…" For each of these co-researchers, having a connection in Nature has been a practice that helped them work through feelings of being overwhelmed and negative, and experience something larger than themselves.

Barb expanded this narrative by describing her "journey" as,

> … just trying to be mind-fucking-ful; mindful and conscious [pause] sometimes [I'm] totally present, sometimes [I] dissociate, sometimes [I'm] totally feeling the flow, and sometimes [I] feel like shit [pause] it's all part of the process, and daily practice, gratitude, and connection to the nature is what keeps me present and engaged through this – there really is so much to consciousness and this world, and not in my Ego [laughs].

Stef and Barb's journeys both shared an intention of becoming aware of their patterns, how they engaged in the world, and the state of consciousness they were in, depending on context. Barb said,

> One of the most important things I learned, was authenticity is based on context… and then, if I still know I am entering a space where there are such opposing beliefs to mine, I'm okay. Sometimes I have to choose how I'll respond… whether I am sassy with attitude and intelligence or down right rude about it, as I am in my integrity and have not betrayed myself, because of wanting to conform to something I don't believe in… Somedays I'm good with it, other days, I need to lean on others for support.

Barb's journey shared the importance of context and the choice she has when she enters environments with people who have a differing perspective than hers. Barb's experience is a clear example of recognizing the many states of *Being presence* one goes through, and that there is not an inner state goal, but simply space to be with whatever is arising within. Stef expanded on this narrative as she described how her

> relationship with consciousness and awareness has allowed me to practice not engaging with violent energy, but not have to be passive; I can be assertive and hold true to my beliefs and true nature, in the same space as someone who has violent and negative energy, even females. I can flow in my feminine being.

This is huge learning as Stef was brought up in violence and had to work through a lot of trauma, which resulted in her ability to be around others who are negative or have violent energy. She shared how the place where she currently works has many people with this type of energy, and she is thankful to have a practice to keep returning to, to help her work alongside these people and not take on their energy. Stef reiterated the importance of this work for herself as she can engage in the world, not through a trauma response to women who carry violent and negative energy.

Stef was very clear on what the by-product of this work has been for her; she felt it was important to share the type of practice she was engaging in to keep herself connected in this process, and the meanings made from these practices,

> Well, for me, and like, I, what has really brought a lot of sense to what that is too, that really speaks to me about what's masculine and feminine… So, masculine, when I feel masculine I feel like I want to *do*, I'm like, I want to conquer, I want to have a warrior type of energy. And I feel a need to be very vocal, and like, um, sometimes competitive, like, y'know, "Fuck you, I'm going to take this shit over," like, that kind of thing, y'know. And, mmm [pause] yeah, I would say that that's kind of how it is for me when I feel, feel in a masculine type of vibe. For a feminine vibe, I feel very like, tender, and very like, open and receptive, and like very connected to the earth, like, that's true, like, I feel very connected to um [pause] Like, legit, like the elements, like, I feel, like I [pause] and this always comes up around where I'm like, on my period, like, I need to like, have a lot of baths, because I feel like I need to be enveloped in water and stuff, and I'm very connected to the earth and like, um, like, y'know, um, well, I'm into shamanism a bit and so like, y'know, spirits, like animal spirits and stuff like that, that comes up at that time…, I get real connected to the earth like, in that, in that female energy. Now, animals with that, that would kind of like, gravitate towards a *masculine* side of energy like, oh like, totally like, birds, like, like, not owls so much but like, like a eagle is usually, and um, and a bear with feminine, I find. But like, it's weird, because I find I have two different type of bears that come to me and one is polar bear and one is like, like a grizzly bear. Like a brown bear, yeah, and so I find that the polar bear is like, quite masculine, but the brown bear or the grizzly is like, very feminine for me, and so it comes up at different times and like, I don't, like I'm very aware of like, when energy shifts. Like, and so before I would be worried that if I felt masculine I must be gay, or something. Now, it's not like that, like, since I've able to burn through what orientation means, like, to me it's just, I'm literally I just feel like I'm just fluid and it's cool.

Stef's description of working with a Shamanic practitioner shifted her ability to accept and integrate both feminine and masculine energies, in the form of spirit animals, what she is needing guidance on, and the roles she would like to take in her experiences. Through these gifts, she calls upon these power animals to help her navigate whatever situation she needs support with. And it is through this ritual of working with a

practitioner that she feels like she can work through the trauma from her past, and disconnection from herself.

These rituals helped her in dual and non-dual spaces. In a Nondual space Stef experiences, "…there's not even a thought of grasping. Like, there's no thought really, and that's just interesting 'cause thinking like, we know about like, narcissism, Ego and stuff like that - there's no 'I'." From these spaces, she has found that she is able to make space for her needs, and not through an addictive conquest; Stef shared that from a Non-dual space she is,

> … very in touch with my own intimacy and like, being intimate with other places and other things in my life like, y'know, like, the shamanism stuff and like, my own inner process with grief and I'm intimate with all consciousness like that…I no longer need alcohol to be okay with this…

It is through these practices that a deeper meaning and connection of intimacy are a by-product of this work. Barb often uses,

> … essential oils to help calm my somatic body, in order to connect internally and the world around me… I also have a daily practice of gratitude and meditation, to help me not get too bogged down with the Ego, and it helps me connect to my spirit guides, too [pause] I can't always be 'out of my Ego', and that's OK, it's trying to be in awareness when that happens, and the cycle continues – in and out, in and out [laughs], the work is really about trying not to judge what is happening, but to just *experience* the experience… it's the same thing I had to do for a lot of my trauma work – make a new meaning for some of my experiences… it's very powerful to experience no 'I' [pause] just energy, helps me not get too weighed down in life, and not take everything so seriously… humor is one of the many gifts that come from this work too [pause] and learning about Tantra [pause] the continuum is totally open and that brings a lot of freedom…

Stef and Barb shared that on this pathway, there is an importance of using practices and rituals to stay in awareness of their Egoic self, to make meaning from the dual world, and to connect to the non-dual world. The most important aspect for this process is to not judge experiences, but simply to fully embrace what is happening in the present moment

(Almaas, 2000, 2014; Tzu, 2014a, 2014b; Tzu & Damgaard, 2015). These very practices and reminders help Barb and Stef stay connected to themselves and others, and be in awareness about their state of consciousness, in dual and Nondual spaces.

K: Table Of Themes & Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Theme A: Patriarchy as a Sculptor of the 'Grotesque'	Classic vs. 'Grotesque' Body Living with the Media Good Girls Don't – Gendered Expectations Learning the Rules of Engagement – Sexual Education Carrying the Feminine Burden - Religion Formative Experiences – Childhood Experiences Formative Experiences – Adolescent Experiences Puberty
Theme B: Denying Self	Deny, Deny, Deny… The Making of a Slut – Changing of Relational Connection Dark Pockets of Shame – Scars of the 'Grotesque' Experiences of Coping Confronting Contradictions Cyclic Nature Learning and Awareness
Theme C: Transgression for Transformation	To Hell with Permission Delightful Discoveries Sexual Transgressions as the Path to Freedom Embracing the Erotic Self Blazing Their Own Trail Liberating Revelations Final Reflections on Themes

L: Further Family Of Origin Discussion And Development Of The Sexual Self

Other co-researchers also experienced bonding issues with their mothers. Barb described her mother as "cold and unavailable". Sarah described feeling that her mother "would never accept me", and as a result also struggled to form friendships with females. McDaniel's (2012) work emphasized that girls' early bonding issues with their mothers results in "Mother Hunger" which has lasting impacts on the way women develop their sense of self, especially in romantic relationships and sexuality. For some women, this results in a loss of self-awareness and focusing on the needs of others, as a way to cope with early deficits in their childhood bonding relationships. TC's horrific sexual trauma experience also highlights the impact of opposite sex bonds, and the impact on self and sexuality.

Other types of childhood experiences were shared by other co-researchers; KT shared a specific experience of when her mother found a journal with her sexual fantasies written down. KT shared that her mother did not directly attempt to shame her, a sense of feeling bad occurred because of how her mother reacted to the information found. Yet, KT's exploration is considered 'normal'; Daniluk's discussion on children's sexual behaviour outlines the progression of curiosity in North American culture and the normalcy for children and adolescents to explore their thoughts, sensations, and bodies through questions and writing (1998). A by-product of these experiences may also include negative belief systems which carry devastating effects and shame, especially in the area of sexuality (Katehakis, 2016; McDaniels, 2012; G. Ogden, 2008, 2018; P. Ogden et. al., 2006) and developing a healthy sense of self. Research further supports that a healthy and nurturing relationship between children and their mothers, and caretakers,

is essential in developing healthy coping strategies to self-regulate and develop a healthy sense of self (Ogden & Fisher, 2015; P. Ogden, 2006). Without this there may be instances of internalized oppression (Schippers, 2007; Syzmanski et. al., 2016), shame (Brown, 2010; G. Ogden, 2018), mental health issues (Almaas, 2000, 2014; G. Ogden, 2008, 2018), addictive pathways, (Kasl, 1991; Katehakis, 2016), and questioning their own needs, based on external demands (Daniluk, 1998; G. Ogden, 2018; Lerner, 1988; Nagoski, 2015; Shields, 2008; Syzmanski et. al., 2016).

M: More Shared Examples Of 'Grotesque'

The co-researchers' definitions of 'grotesque' were primarily informed by what external sources deemed appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour for females. KT's definition captured this shared perspective when she said "the female image is a box…it's like this little square, perfect box that's being marketed, anything that comes up against that doesn't match can be considered 'grotesque'… and uncomfortable". KT's description aligns with many co-researchers' experiences when their body did not align with media representations of embodied femininity. Due to their body shape, KT and Barb avoided wearing certain clothes because they had never seen examples of women with their body shape wearing those types of clothes. This is consistent with what Orenstein describes as media only showing one body type, so young girls and adolescents frequently attempt to try to make their bodies fit into these shapes (2016). KT, Barb, and Sarah discussed how they attempted to meet these standards by dieting, wearing high heels, and clothes that gave the illusion that they were taller. In effect, they were enacting behaviour that endorsed their perception that their bodies were not good enough, while contributing to the performative construction of what was considered an appropriate presentation of femininity (Schippers, 2007). KT also shared that she often harboured doubts she was desirable, because her body did not align with the box projected. She also wondered if other girls would wonder if she was worth having romantic or friendship relationships with, if her appearance did not align with the media images women are bombarded with. While each co-researcher shared the impact of media, they each focused on the impact of relationships on their development. Each co-researcher shared that if their gender orientation and expression did not support the box through which

femininity is expected, there were negative repercussions for them individually. For these co-researchers certain periods in their development were formative in their understanding of self, and what was deemed to be grotesque for them.

Each co-researcher described formative experiences during their adolescence which solidified what grotesque meant and what not to do sexually, with the impacts of self. Or, certain experiences were influential in helping them get through a developmental period, which is often described as important for understanding self and healthy sexuality (Daniluk, 1998). Puberty was a phase that was critical in understanding what was happening with their bodies, and for some co-researchers, there was little support from their parents about what was occurring for them. The interpretation from these experiences was shame that something was wrong with them (Brown, 2010).

N: Ogden's 4D Dimensional Wheel Of Sexual Experience

Ogden and from (2013): Image descriptions

https://ginaogden.com/walk-the-4-d-wheel/

The Physical Path

The path of sensation: A full range of sensory experience-smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing. Movement and stillness. Comfort and safety. Arousal, orgasm, and other physical pleasures. The physical 4-D experience is characterized by heightened senses-brighter colors; increased sensitivity to touch, taste, smell, and hearing; exquisite awareness of how all parts of the body connect to all the senses.

…and the path of sexual dysfunction: The physical quadrant includes issues like pain, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), disease, disability, distorted body image, and sexual dysfunction, including the dysfunctions listed in the DSM, such as anorgasmia, vaginismus, erectile dysfunction, and premature, delayed, and retrograde ejaculation.

The Emotional Path

The path of passion and compassion: A full range of feelings-love, passion, longing, anger, and fear. Whatever touches the heart. Empathy—the ability to feel what others feel. Compassion: the Dalai Lama describes this as the ability to love yourself and others regardless of conflicting feelings. Trust—the ability to let go of control. The emotional 4-D experience is characterized by open-heartedness and heightened feelings.

…and the path of fear and anger: The emotional quadrant is also the container of so-called dark feelings: anger, fear, angst, disgust, and any emotions that are the fallout from sexual experiences that were disappointing, controlling, scary, painful, violent, abusive, or just plain boring.

The Mental Path

The path of discernment and choice: Beliefs and messages about both sexuality and spirituality—including religious messages. Imagination, intuition, memory, and dreams. Waking dreams and fantasies. Wishes, intentions, anticipations, and expectations. The

mental 4-D experience is characterized by an open mind, increased understanding, expanded beliefs, and letting go of judgements about what sex should be like.

…and the path of judgement, guilt, and shame: The mental quadrant is also the container of guilt and shame—those constructs instilled in us by a society, a religious practice, or a community moral code that fears sex and its consequences. Sometimes sex is absolutely to be feared—given the incidence of rape, incest, and other monstrous sexual aggressions over the course of human history. But most often the monster is the violence and not the sex.

The Spiritual Path

The path of connection and meaning: A deep sense of connection with one's self, one's partner, and/or a "higher power." This can include inner visions, communication with divine forces, experiencing one's self as part of all that is sacred. The spiritual 4-D experience is characterized by ecstasy, increased energy, lasting satisfaction, and transcendence.

…and the path of disconnection and over control: The spiritual quadrant is the container for a variety of "irrational facts" about sexual responses and relationships, including disconnection, isolation, depression, and dissociation, or a problematic need to dominate, or be subservient, or keep one's self or one's relationship tightly controlled. These may range from religious and cultural messages to aspects of abuse and trauma that wounds our spirits as well as our bodies, minds, and emotions.

The Center—Where the Four Dimensions Meet

The place of integration and transformation: As you near the very center of the 4-D Wheel you enter a kind of high-definition Oz where everything seems vibrantly colored. It may feel like a place of mystery and paradox where opposites merge in an uncanny way. The experience of the Center differs from person to person and time to time. It is totally subjective, and yours to define for yourself. You may experience opposites, oneness and integration, shape shifting, and timelessness. You may experience extraordinary light and lightness of being. You may find yourself communing profoundly with your partner and with yourself. Each journey to the Center can encompass your whole life. There's no past and no future here, only a greatly expanded now. It's a place of clarity and vision, of vastness, of unconditional love.

…and the shadow side, when sex falls apart: When physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual experience meet they can blow our circuits, especially if there is unresolved density and negativity. This is the shadow side of the Center—the experience of pain and repression of pain, the feared and the unexplored. This is the agony of despair, the terror of sexual violence and abuse, the burden of shame, guilt, loneliness, isolation—and dysfunction. This shadow place can be a place of dissociation, as well as of association. One client calls it "the valley of the shadow of death". How we can move from this place to a sense of vibrant sexuality is the subject of my trainings and my books.