UNDERSTANDING YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF SELF-AFFIRMING SEXUALITIES

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to enhance the current understanding of young women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality. Both a feminist social constructionist paradigm and a phenomenological qualitative paradigm were utilized to explore and describe the social context and personal experience of women between the ages of 25 and 30 who experience their sexuality as an affirming aspect of their lives. A deconstruction of the dominant discourse of women’s sexuality provided the contextualization to understand this experience.

Phenomenological interviews with 7 young women (ages 25 to 30) provided in-depth and detailed descriptions of young women’s experiences of self-affirming sexuality. The question guiding these interviews was: What is the meaning and experience of self-affirming sexuality for young women? These interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step method for thematic analysis of phenomenological data.

Within the women’s experiences of self-affirming sexuality a common process and four common themes, with sub-themes emerged. The women described a journey towards self-affirming sexuality, experiencing integrity of self, finding a sense of agency in sexuality, a sense of connection through sexuality, and experiencing celebration in sexuality. These themes were compared with the dominant discourse to understand how the participant’s marginalized experiences of self-affirming sexuality reflect and/or resist dominant male defined constructions of sexuality. The implications of the themes, and their comparison with the dominant discourse are discussed in terms of future research and counselling.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Sexuality has been inconsistently defined within the literature. In the past, sexuality was considered the sexual nature of people as it pertained to intercourse and reproduction (Bancroft, 1983). According to Tiefer (1995), the academic discourse of sexuality has largely focussed on the bodily functions related to sex and acquiring sex. Recently this narrow focus has broadened to include the social and political aspects of sexuality (Bancroft, 2000). The Oxford Dictionary (1989) contains four definitions for the word ‘sexuality;’ these include: sexuality as the quality of being sexual or having sex; sexuality as the possession of sexual powers, or capability of sexual feelings; sexuality as recognition of or preoccupation with what is sexual, or allusions to sexual matters; and sexuality as appearance distinctive of sex. This multiplicity of definitions reflects the elusive meaning of sexuality. Women theorists have proposed that sexuality is not simply a physical experience, but also involves the emotional, relational, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of self (e.g., Daniluk, 1998; Ogden, 1994). They argue that it is an ever-present social construction that cannot be considered simply a natural and instinctive act (Tiefer, 1995; Valverde, 1985). This study does not prescribe any of these definitions of sexuality, but rather chooses to let the plurality they encompass provide an open milieu in which to explore the lived experience of self-affirming sexuality.

Overall, one finds a negative focus in the literature on women’s sexuality. According to Tiefer (1988), Sexologists have focussed on the various pathologies that have been identified, and many feminist theorists have focussed on the deconstruction of the negative
sexological discourse (e.g., Nicolson, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Tiefer, 1988, 1991, 1995; Usher, 1993), or the political aspects of sexuality. They perceive heterosexuality to be the key source of the subordination and oppression of women (e.g., Valverde, 1985). Thus, although both empirically valid sexological research and rigorous theoretical deconstruction have been produced in ample quantity, there remains little on how women experience sexuality as a positive aspect of their lives.

Feminist theorists (e.g., Tiefer, 1991; Usher, 1993) have convincingly argued that ‘sexuality’ is largely male defined, and most research on sexuality has been through a male lens. In the opinion of these theorists (Choi & Nicolson, 1994; Eisler, 1995; Nicolson, 1993), men have been studying women’s sexuality from the authority of the church, politics, and medicine for over a millennium. Many theorists (e.g., Choi & Nicolson, 1994; Eisler, 1995; Usher, 1993; Tiefer, 1995) posit that our culture’s view of women has been permeated by, and constructed through, male concepts of women’s sexuality. Historically, women’s sexuality has been socially constructed as reproductive, devilish, or frigid, and has ultimately been owned by men, controlled by men, and defined by masculine discourses and heterosexual intercourse. For example, Usher (1993) argued that the male dominated field of Sexology, until recently, has primarily focussed on problems and pathologies, specifically physical failures in the performance of heterosexual sex. Moreover, Tiefer (1995) has pointed out that women were “discovered” to be “naturally” capable of multiple orgasms, therefore any woman that has not been able to achieve this regularly with her heterosexual sex partner is now perceived to have a problem.

Several feminist scholars have proposed that the limited physical focus in the research has defined sexuality in a way that does not fit the common experience of women
(e.g., Daniluk, 1998; Eisler, 1995). Baumeister (2000), not unlike many other male researchers such as Freud, states that women’s sexuality is more ‘plastic;’ more socially constructed, and more diverse, as though this diversity is reason enough to avoid asking women what sexuality is for them in their own terms. There is agreement within the feminist literature that women’s sexual experiences have been marginalized historically, and that women’s sexuality has not been accurately represented in the field of Sexology.

Recently there has been a call to give voice to women’s experiences (e.g., Hollway, 1995; Nicolson, 1993a; Tiefer, 1995; Usher, 1994). As more women have entered the field of Sexology, theoretical texts written by women have appeared that illuminate women’s experiences of sexual subordination, sexual aggression, and the negative sequela of these on women’s experience of sexuality, as well as the negative cultural stereotypes regarding expectations of women’s sexual behaviour and appearance (e.g., Daniluk, 1998; Leroy, 1993; McCormick, 1994; Valverde, 1985; Wolf, 1998). This theoretical writing seems to provide a justification and defence of the various ‘pathologies’ that Sexology has prescribed to women. Yet through all of this, little attention has been given to women’s positive experience of sexuality (Choi & Nicolson, 1994; Eisler, 1995; Leroy, 1993; Tiefer, 1995).

There is a growing recognition that both the dominant sexuality discourse and feminists have marginalized the positive and affirming aspects of women’s sexuality. It is possible that for some women their sexuality enhances their positive sense of self, validates them, and provides them with physical enjoyment. In response, women theorists and researchers are beginning to explore the positive aspects of women’s sexuality. For example, Ogden (1994), a feminist Sexologist recently published a work titled Women Who Love Sex, which presents a composite of the many women she has worked with throughout her career
who felt good about their sexuality. Also, Socher (1999) recently completed a dissertation that utilized a triangulation of descriptive analysis and secondary analysis of empirical research employing questionnaires to answer the question “what are the psycho-social factors that influence women’s sexual satisfaction?” (p. 102). She defined sexual satisfaction as a steady state of mind about one’s own sexuality that is reached in a process of bio-psycho-sociological sensations of sexual-self that tend to be positive. Her 2,395 participants were predominantly young middle-aged women; the mean age of respondents was 39.2 (SD=12.5) and the women’s ages ranged from 17 to 89. Thus, an attempt to balance the literature and theory of women’s sexuality has begun.

There is also a growing recognition of the need to develop an emancipatory discourse of women’s sexuality. A new perspective has developed calling for woman-positive definitions and models of sexuality (e.g., Choi & Nicolson, 1994; Daniluk, 1998; Poulin, 1992). Popular culture suggests that a shift has occurred towards a positive and affirming experience of sexuality for women (Horrocks, 1997). Female pop-music performers such as Madonna and Janet Jackson sing about women as sexual subjects who actively enjoy their sexuality. In the literature, pleasure, vitality, and fun in relation to sexuality are the focus in books such as Grosz and Probyn’s (1995) ‘Sexy Bodies’ and Califa’s (1994) ‘Public Sex.’ However, within this paradoxical cultural ethos of sexual pleasure and sexual danger, I assume that some women develop and act on a self-affirming sexuality. “Self-affirming sexuality” refers to an experience of sexuality that strengthens, confirms, supports, or validates oneself.

In the popular media, there is an expectation that women raised since the sexual revolution will be freed from the historical sexual oppression that women have endured
(Tiefer, 1995; Wolf, 1998). These women are expected to have “healthy” sexuality and know what they want and how to get it (Tiefer, 1995; Wolf, 1998). These expectations in popular culture lead one to ask, what is the experience of self-affirming sexuality for young women raised since the sexual revolution? There is an absence of research pertaining to women’s sexuality at this developmental stage as well as within this particular cohort.

**Purpose of the Research**

This research aimed to move beyond the negative focus in the literature on women’s sexuality. From a feminist perspective, I focused on young women who experience sexuality as self-affirming. The lived experience of self-affirming sexuality was accessed through phenomenological interviews. The focus on self-affirming sexuality not only illuminated woman-defined sexuality, but also woman positive constructions of sexuality. Furthermore, the results of this research illuminated how young women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality reflects and/or resists the dominant sexuality discourse. The question that guided this research was: what is the experience of self-affirming sexuality for young women?
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Human sexuality has been a very important and well-developed area of research and theory. Women's sexuality, in particular, has received a great deal of attention, however most of this attention has been from a male perspective (Tiefer, 1995). Moreover, many theorists have written on the topic and yet there seems to be little agreement on a definition of women's sexuality. Recently, feminist social constructionists have deconstructed the dominant discourse on female sexuality (e.g., Nicolson, 1993a, 1993b; Tiefer, 1995; Usher, 1994), and feminist sexologists have deconstructed the history of the concept of women's sexuality (e.g., Nicolson, 1993a, 1993b; Tiefer, 1995; Usher, 1994). In this chapter, I present the critical elements of this deconstruction and describe how the dominant discourse has been constructed. Additionally, the work of key feminist theorists in the area of women's sexuality are reviewed. The issue of woman-defined-sexuality, and self-affirming sexuality specifically, is a topic where little research has been done, despite many women's affirming experiences that contradict the dominant discourse (Ogden, 1994; Socher, 1999). Finally, the lack of research on young women's sexuality is explored as an important gap in current feminist theory on women's sexuality.

Historical Social Construction of Women's Sexuality

The dominant discourse of women's sexuality presents an oppressive and demeaning social construction of women's sexuality, in which women's subjective, positive experience of sexuality is noticeably absent (Tiefer, 1995). One cannot help but wonder how this notable absence came to be. When one considers the discourse of women's sexuality, the
main contributors are clearly the theological doctrine, nineteenth century science, and twenty-first century Sexology (Nicolson, 1993b).

Western culture is rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition (Brundage, 1987). When one examines the early beliefs regarding gender and sexuality posited by the church, one is struck by their similarity to the current stereotypes in our culture regarding women's sexuality (Usher, 1993). Also, one begins to comprehend the connection between our cultural history and contemporary theory and practice in Sexology.

Theological doctrine portrays women as weak, naturally frail, and prone to sin (Brundage, 1987). Brundage reports that the church perceived women as "fainthearted and yielding" (p. 426), because of "the delicacy of their physical constitution" (p. 426). He writes that, "Women were expected to be shy, retiring, coy, and modest about sexual matters" (p. 426). In addition, he points out the contradictions in how the Church constructed women's sexuality, because the message was also that men must be careful of "women's insatiable sexual appetite" (p. 350), because women's "burning ... fury of lust" (p. 301) would lead men into temptation. Women were seen to be sexually more voracious than men, because they were purported to desire intercourse more ardently, and enjoy it more. Consequently their sexual behaviour required stricter supervision than that of men (Brundage, 1987). The common belief was that women possessed unquenchable sexual appetites, that they were more likely than men to seek illicit sexual satisfaction, and that they were more often the source of marriage problems and sexual immorality (Brundage, 1987). The apparent contradiction between the "voracious" and the "fainthearted and yielding" aspects is striking.
When one examines how women’s sexuality has been objectified through theory, particular connections between sexology and Christian theology become salient. Feminist theorists have highlighted the fact that virtually all the Christian theologians and sexologists have been male (Usher, 1993). Therefore, it is not surprising to note that there remains the sense that there is some-unknowable-aspect of women’s sexuality in much of the contemporary Sexology literature (Usher, 1993). This is highlighted by Brundage (1987), a critic of theology, when his analysis draws him to conclude that, “laws presume that all women are usually bad, because they are so full of mischief and vice that are so difficult to describe” (p. 548). Additionally, the blatant misogyny in much early theological writing underscores the deeply entrenched negativity focussed at women within the context of the Church. Brundage writes,

The negative attitudes toward sex that are commonplace among Christian religious writers and teachers are also related to the misogyny entrenched in so much Christian belief and practice. The belief that sex is nasty, indecent, and impure has often tempted Christian theologians and canonists...to identify these characteristics with women, whom they see as the embodiment of sexual allure and temptation (p. 591).

These are the very beliefs that have structured so many of our cultural norms regarding women and sexuality (Brundage, 1987; Usher, 1993).

Another strong link between contemporary Sexology and the theological doctrines is their tendency to separate sex from love (Usher, 1993). Catholic sex theories typically deny that pleasure has spiritual value and treat sex as an unfortunate consequence of sin (Brundage, 1987). Usher reports that clinical studies have found that vaginismus and orgasmic dysfunction among women are closely related to religious piety and conformity among persons of Judeo-Christian upbringing. Usher argues that Judeo-Christian theology
has shaped our cultural context and created cultural stereotypes as well as biases in current Sexology to negate the sexual subjectivity and sexual expression of women.

By the eighteenth century (after the age of enlightenment) the concept of the sexually voracious female was noticeably absent (Usher, 1993). At this time the most commonly held view was that sexuality was a biological, instinctive drive that was essentially male, directed at the passive, if seductive, female (Usher, 1993). Man was driven, and woman received. Expert male scientists at this time began what Foucault called the ‘psychiatrization’ of sexuality (Nicolson, 1993b). However, Sigmund Freud (1886-1899) and Havelock Ellis (1894) are cited as important pioneers in the new discipline of Sexology (Nicolson, 1993b; Usher, 1993).

At the turn of the century, Ellis (1894) advocated and celebrated as ‘natural’ the traditional gender roles laid down for men and women, categorically stating that “woman breeds and tends; man provides” (Ellis, 1894, p. 440). In his view, women were designed with reproduction in mind; with female pleasure (Ellis did at least acknowledge the female orgasm) serving evolutionary ends in ensuring copulation (Usher, 1993). That female orgasm could exist outside a sexual relationship with a man was inconceivable: women were believed to become aroused only following “stimulation of the male at the right moment” (Ellis, 1936, p. 24).

Freud (1886-1899), on the other hand, argued for a basic bisexuality, which is only socially channelled into heterosexuality, and he drew attention to the large element of repression in all sexuality (Usher, 1993). Through the experience of childhood, girl children came to experience their sexuality as a lack, and their non-possession of a penis as a loss (Usher, 1993). Always seen in relation to men, following the Oedipal stage of development,
women’s sexuality was essentially castrated, the physical reality of the ‘inferior’ organs sentencing women to a lifetime of neurosis and unresolved conflict – which could be resolved only through psychoanalysis or through symbolic acquisition of the phallus following childbirth (Usher, 1993; Walton, 1994). With Ellis, Freud established once and for all the legitimacy of the scientific analysis of sexuality – and reinforced the association between pathology and sexuality (Nicolson, 1994; Usher, 1993; Tiefer, 1995). The writing of Ellis and Freud marked the beginning of the field of Sexology.

Sexology was formalized and further legitimized by the work of Kinsey (1948/1953), Hite (1976/1994), and Masters and Johnson (1966/1970). These four scholars are some of the most commonly cited researchers in the area of female sexuality. Most contemporary sex therapists rely on Kinsey and Hite’s large-scale quantitative surveys of sexual behaviours to inform their clinical practice (Bancroft, 1983; Nicolson, 1994; Usher, 1993). Large-scale surveys have the benefit of generalizability to an entire population (Stanley, 1995). Unfortunately, findings of academically and scientifically respectable surveys are often considered the ‘truth,’ when in fact they are products of particular ways of seeing (Stanley, 1995).

Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin’s (1948/1953) reports on human sexuality were in their time considered immoral and socially unacceptable, despite now being considered the plain facts of sexual behaviour (including frequency of masturbation, orgasm, types of sex, and sexual orientation). Some consider Kinsey the instigator of the sexual revolution (Stanley, 1995). Despite his large contribution in normalizing certain aspects of sexual behaviour, Kinsey’s narrow focus on the behavioural aspects of sexuality perpetuated a limiting
definition of sexuality that does not include the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that have been emphasized by recent researchers (e.g., Ogden, 1994).

The *Hite Report* (Hite, 1976) considered by some to be feminist in orientation, specifically aimed to define and discover the physical nature of women's sexuality. It revealed that despite 'orgasmic dysfunction,' many women easily and quickly orgasm from masturbation, and she posited masturbation as the sexual baseline. Hite popularized the idea that some women do not orgasm during intercourse, primarily because men initiate, control, and end sexual relations. She proposed that many women enjoy intercourse because it signifies the greatest intimacy men are able to communicate. Hite revealed that the minority of women who orgasm during intercourse do so when they ensure orgasm-producing behaviours, and that when women do not orgasm they experience it as their fault. Together, Hite and Kinsey brought the female orgasm into the forefront of popular media's discourse on women's sexuality.

Out of Sexology arose the field of Sex Therapy. Masters and Johnson wrote *Human Sexual Response* (1966) and *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970) and are considered the pioneers of this approach to treating sexual dysfunction. Sex Therapy has traditionally been undertaken from a cognitive-behavioural approach with an emphasis on reducing anxieties associated with inhibitions and increasing both partners' ability to orgasm while having intercourse (Katchadourian, 1985). I briefly describe the method of treatment, which is very systematic and progresses along two tracks. The first involves verbal interaction between the couple and the male and female co-therapists: detailed sexual histories are taken from each patient; roundtable sessions explore past experiences, conflicts, feelings, attitudes on both sexual, and nonsexual matters that have a bearing on the dysfunction; successes and failures
in the ongoing treatment are analyzed, and so on. Concurrently, the couple goes through a sequence of sexual assignments in private that are intended to eventually culminate in mutually satisfactory sexual intercourse. The early phase of treatment emphasizes abstinence and has a sensate focus on pleasuring rather than sexual arousal. From here the couple continue onto more specific assignments for particular dysfunctions. It is interesting to notice that Masters and Johnson’s goal for therapy is achieving orgasm through intercourse, which current research indicates is not the main indicator of women’s sexual satisfaction (Hite, 1994). Also, Masters and Johnson recognize the importance of both men and women reaching climax during intercourse, but their model of sexuality is inadequate in helping men and women who experience sexual concerns unrelated to physiological response. In this way, while apparently working towards sexual equality for men and women, Masters and Johnson attempted to model women’s sexuality after a male model of sexuality that focuses on the physiological response with the ultimate climax of an orgasm.

By tracing the discourse on women’s sexuality from early theological writings to early sexological writings, we begin to see how women’s sexuality was first constructed as a contradiction between weakness and all-consuming-desire, and later developed into a force of nature, such that women’s main sexual imperative was that of reproduction rather than sexual enjoyment. Finally, we see how women’s sexuality was further constructed as equal to the male physiological sexual response and defined as a behavioural quality rather than as a subjective experience. This lack of acknowledgement of women’s subjective experience of sexuality set the stage for a feminist deconstruction of the discourse of women’s sexuality.
Feminist Deconstructions of Dominant Discourses of Women’s Sexuality

Feminists have played an important role in establishing a body of research and theory that supports the view that women’s sexuality is socially constructed (Richardson, 1997). Richardson (1997) writes,

Feminists have emphasized how sexuality, which is commonly regarded as something that is private and personal, is a public and a political issue. They have challenged traditional assumptions about sexuality (for instance, the notion of sex as equalling intercourse and women as sexually passive), and proposed new ways of understanding sexual relations. (p. 171)

The dominant Sexology model as described above has been critiqued by feminists and others who argue that sexuality is socially constructed, which means that our sexual feelings and activities, the ways in which we think about sexuality, and our sexual identities are products of social and historical forces (Richardson, 1997). The point is that the body, its anatomical structure and physiology, does not directly determine our sexuality or the meaning it may have. "By giving sexual meaning to a particular bodily region or function we produce sexuality, we construct desire" (Richardson, 1997, p. 156). Social constructionism adopts the view that,

Patterns of sexual behaviour may vary over time and between cultures, and that physically identical sexual acts may have varying social significance and subjective meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and historical periods. (Vance, 1989, p. 19)

Foucault (1978) argued against the concept of a natural biological sexual drive. He claimed that by taking 'the sexual' as their object of study, various discourses, in particular medicine and psychiatry, have produced an artificial unity of the body and its pleasures; a compilation of bodily sensations, pleasures, feelings, experiences, and actions that we call sexual desire. This fictional unity, which does not exist naturally, is utilized to explain sexual behaviour and sexual identity. He argues that sexuality through history has not been
repressed, but rather has been produced. Foucault states that women’s sexuality has not been
denied or ignored through silence, but rather our values and beliefs about sexuality have
been shaped by the discourse of sexuality. Thus, the definition of sexuality may change from
one historical period to another. He draws attention to how the history of sexuality is the
history of changing forms of regulation and control over sexuality. Foucault has made major
contributions to feminist criticism of sexual discourse. However, his analysis appears to be
gender-blind in that he fails to examine the relationship between gender inequality and
sexuality. He also fails to account for how men and women have different orientations to
sexuality and different discourses. Foucault seems to conceive of one discourse of sexuality,
and that discourse is male.

Nicolson (1993a) has developed a clear model of how male scientific knowledge
determines women’s experiences of sexuality. She calls this model the knowledge cycle.
Informed by the work of Foucault (1978), Nicolson proposes that science has become the
most powerful social grouping and that it is predominantly a male group. The relationship
between science and the media is such that both heavily influence socialization. Thus,
popular culture, an individual’s self-concept, and personal experience are all informed by
scientific research. Further reifying this cycle is the lack of self-criticism within science that
encourages researchers bound in their own socialization and cultural norms to develop
evidence that will support their own experience of sexuality. Thus, scientific knowledge is
disseminated and the population is informed of what is ‘normal’ or ‘natural,’ in turn, data
collected from this population is provided as evidence to support masculine scientific theory.
Nicolson (1993a) has explored the ways the dominant discourse on heterosexuality have
penetrated women’s self-concepts, and has described how theological, medical, and scientific discourse enter the perceptions of ordinary women.

The lack of cross-fertilization between male dominated Sexology and feminist discourse on women’s sexuality highlights the strength of the male dominated discourse of women’s sexuality (Usher 1994). Feminists have clearly stated that current constructs of sexuality have been created by men, and based on the male experience (Nicolson, 1993a, 1993b; Tiefer, 1995; Usher, 1994). Generally speaking women have less power in sexual encounters than their male partners. Thus, women’s sexuality is perceived to exist to serve male sexual needs and to privilege male pleasure (Richardson, 1997). Usher (1993) has provided clear evidence that “psychological theory on female sexuality functions to maintain women’s sexual subordination” (p. 30). Similarly, Nicolson (1993a), who has examined sexological discourses and assumptions about what ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ desire and pleasure are for women, states that we need to deconstruct these sexological discourses and assumptions before women’s sexuality will be truly emancipatory.

Many feminists have stated that sexuality is the primary means by which men exercise and maintain control over women (e.g. Richardson, 1997). Heterosexuality has been termed ‘the eroticisation of women’s subordination’ (Nicolson, 1994). Richardson (1997) believes that sexual relations both reflect and serve to maintain women’s subordination. Hence, the concerns regarding how patriarchal constructions of sexuality constrain women in many aspects of their lives. Initially, sexual control had to do with ensuring heredity, so that a man could be sure that the children he raised and would be his heirs, were genetically his (Richardson, 1997). Out of this arose the notion of women’s sexuality as men’s property,
as exemplified by societal norm regarding a husband’s right to sex with his wife (Richardson, 1997).

What follows is feminist social constructionist’s deconstruction of the discourse of women’s sexuality (Nicolson, 1993a, 1993b; Richardson, 1997; Tiefer, 1988, 1991, 1995; Usher, 1994), as well as the critical theory surrounding this deconstruction. Although, these disparate discourses are presented individually, it is evident that they are interrelated and inseparable. This complex interaction of the various discourses of women’s sexuality serves to exemplify the hegemony of the dominant discourse.

The most basic of the discourses on sexuality is that *sexuality is a ‘natural’ instinct or drive*. Sexuality has been defined in an essentialist way as an instinct or drive to reproduce that demands fulfilment through sexual activity (Richardson, 1997). The assumption is that ‘naturally’ this urge would be directed at the opposite sex and consummated with vaginal intercourse (Richardson, 1997). Usher (1994) refers to this as the “biological drive discourse” (p. 160), and links it with the idea that once roused, the man’s drive must be released. Usher (1993) has criticized socio-biology for reifying negative reductionist discourses associated with female sexuality under the guise of rational science. Tiefer (1988, 1991, 1995) has been the most adamant in her deconstruction of this ‘nature’ discourse. Although acknowledging gender differences, Tiefer (1995) calls for an awareness of how sexuality is culturally constructed, rather than objectively determined by science. Tiefer contends that gender difference theories can become self-fulfilling prophecies. In addition, Usher (1994) describes the ‘permissive discourse’ that declares that, although both men and women have sexual drive and the right to express that sexual drive, they are
expected to act on this drive for different reasons. Men are expected to act on sexual drive and women are expected to act out of their need for love.

The *heterosexuality as the norm* discourse with its inherent gender power inequality is also prevalent. This discourse is supported by the ‘biological drive’ discourse, and concerns the nature of heterosexuality that is posited as biological and therefore natural, positioning women in a passive/responsive role and men as active (Nicolson, 1993a). It refers to both sexual intercourse and heterosexual courtship (Nicolson, 1993a). Women’s sexuality becomes a problem because women do not apparently enjoy heterosexual intercourse as ‘naturally’ as they should (Nicolson, 1994). Inclusive within this discourse is the *man as subject and woman as object* discourse. The man is portrayed as having a sexual need, and woman’s pleasure is a reaction to him and for him (Usher, 1994). Usher (1994) notes how the language of sexuality reinforces this discourse (e.g. ‘man fucks woman’). Women’s sexuality is men’s property. Also, within this discourse is the *double standard* discourse. Usher (1994) has linked this with what she calls the ‘sexual woman is dirty’ discourse. The double standard refers to men being active/dominant and women being passive/responsive/submissive (Nicolson, 1993a). Men are constructed as aggressive and active, and women as resistant and devious (Nicolson, 1994).

The *man’s sexuality as the norm* discourse perpetuates the idea that women’s sexuality is complimentary and different from men’s sexuality (Richardson, 1997). Tiefer (1995) states that the genital and reproductive focus in the literature is a result of phallocentric social values. Although many women report impaired arousal or anorgasmia (failure to orgasm), the majority of couples report that their sexual relationships are satisfying. This indicates low expectations or the adoption of a phallocentric view that
denies the importance of female arousal (Usher, 1993). The *orgasm as goal* discourse suggests that orgasm for both partners is the goal of sexual engagement, such that particular genital stimulations lead to orgasm, which is the ‘climax’ (the most intense part of the sexual experience), and the ultimate goal to which the behaviours lead (Nicolson, 1993a). The focus on orgasm does not permit women to have different sexual needs (Nicolson, 1994). The *centrality of vaginal intercourse* means that many women still expect the ultimate orgasm through vaginal penetration alone (Nicolson, 1994). Nicolson (1993a) describes how this discourse of penetration encourages men to prove their masculinity by overcoming women’s resistance. Women must prove their femininity by allowing themselves to be conquered through the act of penetration. The heterosexual discourse is that women desire sex, but they are passive, which ‘attracts’ men. Responding to penetration satisfies women and that satisfaction is represented by orgasm (Nicolson, 1993a). Therefore, women who are lesbian or bisexual, sexually active, unconcerned or careless as to whether they attract men, unable to experience orgasm during penetration, or who refuse to be penetrated are considered ‘sick’ (Nicolson, 1993a). A more recent discourse is that women enjoy sex for relational reasons rather than to achieve orgasm (Usher, 1994). The *relational* discourse makes clear that women cannot enjoy sex for its own sake (Nicolson, 1994).

The *double standard* discourse pertains to women and men having different rules to regulate their sexuality. As Richardson (1997) posits, the *man with uncontrollable sexual desire* discourse determines that men have difficulty controlling their sexual desires, therefore, men cannot be held accountable if they lose control when provoked by women. Moreover, the *woman as gatekeeper* discourse determines that women are responsible to activate, respond to, and regulate men’s sexual desire and thus all sexual activity.
Richardson suggests that this includes the belief that women often provoke men sexually by teasing, flirting, and saying no when they really mean yes, thus women are put in the role of gatekeepers to sex and they are seen as responsible for the behaviour of themselves and men. Women are also expected to think of birth control and disease prevention when men are having difficulty just controlling their desire, because men are ‘naturally’ less able to restrain themselves when it comes to sex. According to Nicolson (1994), women are constructed as objects to activate men’s sexual drive and desires, and this action by men is essential to heterosexual activity. Further, women must guard their virtue, but enjoy and be receptive to sexual advances. This double standard for men and women creates a web of contradictions that obscure the meaning of pleasure (Nicolson, 1994).

Socher (1999) refers to the double message discourse and Usher (1994) refers to the Madonna/whore discourse, which both indicate the dichotomous positioning women face. On the one hand there is the passive/submissive woman and on the other hand there is the voracious female, whose sexual appetite is hard to please. With the advent of the multiply-orgasmic-woman, women now have a new standard to meet (Nicolson, 1993a). This discourse is found in popular media where women are expected to control their sexual desire, because desire is dangerous, as it contradicts the passive discourse. Women are caught in a dilemma between the biological drive discourse and Madonna/whore discourse. Usher (1994), in reference to the discourse of the passive/reactive yet sexually demanding woman, states “these constructions of ‘woman’ as signifier directly affect the experience of individual women, as these discursive constructions have to be negotiated and resisted—or conversely, accepted” (p. 164).
The predominant discourses that prescribe women’s sexuality produce complex dilemmas and constraints for women. Nicolson (1993a) has documented how these discourses overlap into a complex construct that binds women into an impossible experience of sexuality. Since the sexual revolution, there is a clear definition of sexual pleasure that women must adhere to: sexual pleasure achieved through loving relationships, sexual pleasure achieved through being the object of desire, and sexual pleasure achieved through orgasm (Nicolson, 1994). Thus, women are objects of desire, but also responsible for attracting and responding to male desire, as well as ensuring her partner feels as though he has performed well (Nicolson, 1994). The high prevalence of faking orgasms attests to this responsibility that women experience (Leroy, 1993).

Nicolson (1993a) argues that women collude with these patriarchal perspectives on femininity, masculinity, and sexuality, and suggests that women who actively enjoy sexuality are coerced through media to be what men want them to be. She highlights the problematic relationship between the patriarchal discourse and women’s’ self-concepts, with an attempt to explain how and why women appear to collude with this pathologisation. She proposes that men and women must face up to the issues of dominance and inequality.

Although there is not space here to fully describe the theory relevant to all of these discourses, Nicolson (1993b) has identified, in the classic texts in Sexology, three emergent discourses and carefully critiqued these discourses from a feminist perspective. A summary of these are presented here as an example of the omnipresence and hegemony of the dominant discourse.

The first emergent discourse is around the nature of heterosexuality as including female and male roles and their inherent power relations (Nicolson, 1993b). Heterosexuality
is positioned as ‘natural’ and biologically driven. There is an expectation that women take a passive/responsive role and men an assertive/active one. Nicolson writes that woman is portrayed as ‘playing’ at being passive, which stimulates the male aggression deemed responsible for male sexual performance. In a modified form, Sexologists describe male sexual assertion as being essential for sexual activity because women themselves are ‘naturally’ passive. Nicolson argues that the insistence on male ‘aggression’ is problematic and implies that ‘natural’ male sexuality is on a continuum with rape (Nicolson, 1993b). The influence of sexual violence on women’s experience of sexuality is addressed below.

The second emergent discourse identified by Nicolson (1993b) is the orgasm, for women and men, as the ‘goal’ of sexual behaviour, and sexual intercourse is equated with ‘real sex.’ She asserts that the origins of this discourse are problematic and contradictory. Freud’s (1933, cited in Nicolson, 1993b) model of the vaginal orgasm as the index of mature femininity, in many ways remains in place with the discovery of the G-spot. This is in contrast to the empirical evidence provided by Kinsey et al. (1953) and Masters and Johnson (1966) about the achievement of clitoral orgasms. The unifying theme of contemporary sexual knowledge-claims about female (and male) orgasms is the idea that the orgasm is a natural, healthy ‘outlet’ with dire consequences if not achieved (Nicolson, 1993b). This non-gendered account, in the tradition of Ellis and other sexologists concerned with sexual liberation, led directly to more recent sexologists focusing on sexual outlets (i.e., orgasms) as being desirable goals. It also led to direct comparisons in orgasmic potential and practice between women and men, with the failure to orgasm conceptualized as a sexual dysfunction (Nicolson, 1993b).
The third emergent discourse that Nicolson (1993b) identified in Sexology texts is “the centrality to heterosexual relationships of penetration of the vagina by the penis” (p. 198). She argues that it is the most pervasive of the three discourses. Within this discourse women are portrayed as drawing attention to the inadequacy of their chosen man by ‘teasing’ and ‘enticing’ them while not ‘delivering the goods’ (Nicolson, 1993b). The two most common causes of women’s resistance to penetration are dyspareunia (painful intercourse) and vaginismus (intercourse is prevented by the ‘involuntary’ spasm of the thigh and vaginal muscles) (Nicolson, 1993b). Despite the fact that vaginismic women desire sexual stimulation, can achieve orgasm, and often enjoy giving and receiving oral sex, their resistance to penetration remains intolerable to their partners, and dehumanizing cures have been adopted by sex therapists in the tradition of Masters and Johnson’s behavioural therapies (Nicolson, 1993b). It is interesting to note that very few contemporary texts discuss the high prevalence of sexual aggression in our culture and how this sort of violent sexual experience might affect a woman’s willingness for penetration.

The above critique of Sexology highlights the absence of feminine perspectives and consideration of social context in Sexology. There exist striking incongruencies between these male defined theories and practices, and women’s social context and subjective experiences of their sexuality. Women’s experience of sexual violence in our culture is a good example of how these dominant discourses contribute to individual men and women’s sexual experiences (Wyatt et al., 1993).

The precursors of many deeply shielded beliefs and stereotypes found within the dominant discourse of women’s sexuality, which until recently have been upheld by the courts, can be sourced to early theological writing and are perpetuated by Sexology (Usher,
1993). For example, the belief that women will not directly ask for sex, and therefore men must give it to them even when they say no, is prevalent in patriarchal society (Wyatt et al., 1993). Studies have shown that it is this belief that encourages men to rape and prevents courts from convicting sex offenders (Wyatt et al., 1993). From the Judeo-Christian tradition women and men learn that women must be modest and hence should not instigate sexual relations. It then falls to the man to initiate sexual encounters and it becomes the man’s responsibility to watch carefully for surreptitious signs that the woman desires him sexually (Wyatt et al., 1993). Research has shown consistent differences between men and women’s perceptions of body language and social interaction in sexual situations (e.g., men perceive sexual invitations where women perceive none) (Wyatt et al., 1993).

Given this historical context and these research findings, it is not surprising to find that there is a high prevalence of male sexual violence aimed at women in our culture (Wyatt et al., 1993). Wyatt et al.’s overview of the literature on sexual abuse revealed that prevalence rates for childhood sexual abuse range from 5% to 38% depending on how sexual abuse is defined. According to their analysis, an average of 20% of girls report being ‘sexual abused’ before their teens and 97% of perpetrators are male, and 20% to 40% of girls experience attempted-or completed rape before the age of 18. Survivors of sexual violence are predisposed to having both short-term and long-term sexual and psychological problems (Socher, 1999; Wyatt et al., 1993). Given these high prevalence rates it becomes imperative that a woman’s sexuality is considered within her social context. This social context is often left unexamined in Sexology (Nicolson, 1993a).

This lack of consideration of social context has lead to Sexology pathologizing women’s sexuality. The pathologization of women’s sexuality is a prominent theme in the
feminist discourse. Sexology has ignored most feminist research, choosing to focus on the traditional notion of difficulty and dysfunction (Usher, 1993). Since the 1970s and the advent of the proscription of multiple orgasm, more women fall under the spectre of sexual dysfunction (Nicolson, 1994). A clear example of the pathologization of women’s sexuality is that a woman who refuses to engage in oral sex is currently diagnosable with a sexual phobia, but in a different era (and certain American states) this act itself is considered deviant and even illegal (Usher, 1993). Usher writes,

   The psychological discourse on the subject of female sexual dysfunction occupies a central position in the regulation of women, both because the limited, fragmented, and one dimensional view of sexuality offered within psychology may be internalized by women, who subsequently experience their own sexuality as negative, and because the psychological discourse reinforces the positioning of woman’s sexuality as liability within the wider cultural discourse. (p. 9)

According to Usher, this is not ‘merely’ an academic debate, because women clearly internalize these definitions of ‘normal’ sexual functioning.

   Choi and Nicolson (1994) demonstrate how women’s sexuality has been pathologized, mystified, and portrayed as object rather than subject. They argue for the necessity of considering psychology, biology, and social context when conducting and reading research on women’s sexuality. They focus on the diversity and differences in women’s sexuality. They state,

   While biology endows most humans with the attributes to express their physical sexuality, through an ability to seek and gain pleasure from physical contact, sexuality is constrained according to the availability of sexual discourse and through individual interpretations of biology and discourse. (p.4)

   Usher (1993) argues that the sexological analysis of female sexuality is fragmented, decontextualized, and offers less than a complete understanding of women’s experiences, and that it continues to focus on incidence, frequency, and physiology (e.g., the vibration of
the vaginal wall), and ignores women’s own experiences of sexuality and the social context in which women live. It is important to consider discursive aspects as well as material reality in order to understand women’s sexuality. In 1993, Usher stated that the academic and clinical literature was devoid of any notion of women’s own experience, and this remains predominantly true. Dominant psychological discourse, emphasising the penis and heterosexual intercourse remains largely unchallenged.

Whereas Richardson (1997) and Socher (1999) both state that the feminist deconstruction of dominant discourse has been essential in attempts to understand women’s sexuality, many theorists have remained focussed on the ‘problem’ aspects of women’s sexuality. Most theory and research pertaining to women’s sexuality is limited by ‘the problems’ of the conceptualization of women’s sexuality. For example, Nicolson (1993a) has problematized the concept of ‘sexual pleasure,’ because it is defined by male discourse. She argues that discourse on human sexuality constrains individuals, particularly women, and that ultimately the sexual liberation is the freedom for women to take pleasure in their own erotic subordination.

Richardson (1997) points out that early feminists encouraged women to reclaim their own sexuality for themselves. Some feminists saw the sexual revolution as a time of positive change, such as access to abortions and divorces, whereas other feminists saw it as serving the goals of men rather than women. However, women who step outside of the dominant discourse have been perceived as unattractive ‘ball-breakers,’ and women currently have very little room for choice in the expression of sexuality that is socially sanctioned (Nicolson, 1994).
There have been few feminist researchers who have focused on understanding women's experience of sexuality, and even fewer who have entertained the idea of affirming, positive, or emancipatory sexuality. One of the outcomes of establishing how women's sexuality has been socially constructed is the knowledge that sexuality need not be coercive or oppressive; it can be affirming (Richardson, 1997). Usher (1993) proposes,

Perhaps the first step for a new psychology of female sexuality would be to acknowledge the positive potential of female sexuality, to examine sexuality outside the realm of pathology, and to integrate feminist theorizing into an interdisciplinary framework which works for women, not merely seeing sexuality as a variable to be manipulated by the sex expert. (p. 32)

Until women are asked what really ‘turns them on’ and what they want, sexological research will be no more accurate (Nicolson, 1993a).

Usher (1993) states,

One of the most positive movements in recent years has been the reclamation of female sexuality as a positive empowering force for women, allowing women to understand and express their own sexuality as individuals, with women or with men (p. 32).

She proposes that psychology needs to move away from a position in which female sexuality is either ignored or seen as a potential root for pathology. She argues that ‘normal’ female sexuality has been marginalized or ignored, because male social scientists are puzzled by it. Thus, feminist researchers need to focus on women’s experience of sexuality before an emancipatory sexuality can be understood.

**Woman Defined Sexuality Based on Women’s Experience**

Many of the feminist deconstructions of women’s sexuality conclude with an emphatic proclamation of the need for women-defined-sexuality based upon women’s experiences. New woman-defined theories of sexuality and treatment of sexual problems are slowly filtering into the literature (Daniluk, 1998; Ogden, 1988, 1994; Usher & Baker, 1993).
However, Foucault has established that scientific literature is a factor in how women experience their sexuality. Hence it is impossible and yet essential to tease apart what women want and what women are told they should want through various social messages. Presented here are a few of the clinical and theoretical perspectives on sexuality as defined by women’s experience.

Very little is known about women’s experience of sexuality (Jordon, 1997). The activity of arriving at accurate epidemiological statistics is fraught with difficulty because sexuality remains an aspect of experience positioned very much in the private domain, and thus is very rarely discussed by clinicians (Usher, 1993). As one moves forward into this area of exploration and theory development, it remains important to acknowledge the plurality of women’s sexual experiences, orientations, and desires (Daniluk, 1998). Tiefer (1995) has suggested that research up to present indicates that women’s sexuality includes a “rich diversity of personal meaning and experience” (p. 77). In what follows, it is evident that woman-defined-sexuality often includes the whole of the woman and her experiences at physical, emotional, and spiritual levels.

Feminist Sex Therapy although relatively new and undefined in practice has begun the endeavour of creating psychological treatments that work toward understanding woman-defined-sexuality and revaluing women’s experiences (McCormick, 1994). Feminist Sex Therapy emphasizes holistic pleasure, meaning that the whole woman physically, experientially, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually is involved in her sexual pleasure (McCormick, 1994). Cuddling, touching, and hugging are prized as ends rather than means and orgasm is not rejected, but is reconsidered as non-essential. Similarly, limiting ideas about ‘normal’ sex are challenged. Women are encouraged to see themselves as actors rather
than objects to be desired. They are taught that they can direct when and how they make love and that their orgasm belongs to themselves and not their partner, and that sex with a long-term partner requires effort and creativity. Sex, like other forms of intimacy involves thought, planning, talk, work, and collaboration, and the brain is the greatest sex organ. It is important to give women permission to enjoy sex rather than simply ‘servicing’ their partner. Sex with a partner can be playful, and does not have to be dangerous. And sex with oneself can be celebrated. As Betty Dodson (1987, cited in McCormick, 1994, p. 235) writes,

Masturbation is...not just for kids or for those in-between lovers or for old people who end up alone. Masturbation is the ongoing love affair each of us has with ourselves throughout our lifetime.

Sexuality is something all women possess irrespective of whether they have a sexual partner.

While redefining sex in terms of pleasure (and not the political), the therapist can encourage an awareness of the dynamics of power involved in the client’s sexual relations in the client (McCormick, 1994). Men often have more resources and power than women, and the therapist and client must deal with the existing power relationship and not an idealized one. Both partners are seen as responsible for the couple’s difficulties. Clients learn to be assertive and to define their ‘sex problems’ in their own words (McCormick, 1994).

Leroy (1993), a feminist theorist in the area of women’s sexuality, in her book *Pleasure: The truth about female sexuality*, presents an argument that sex is a social performance. She contextualizes the double standard in men and women’s sexuality, with a focus on women faking orgasms. Her focus is on the physiological nature of sexuality, demanding that women should have orgasms for their own pleasure rather than for the
pleasure and fulfillment of their partner. The preconditions for sexual happiness in her eyes are to have sex when you want it and not to have it when you do not want it; hence self-knowledge and self-assertion are necessary for women to find sexual fulfillment. She claims that women who take sexual initiative for their own pleasure and delight are still quite rare. Interestingly, despite her awareness of the lack of sexual pleasure discourse in feminist writing and the title of her book, Leroy (1993) fails to illuminate the question of women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality. Her book like many other feminist writing unintentionally focuses on the problems of women’s sexuality.

Davis (1995), in Women, Sex, and Desire: Understanding your sexuality at every stage of life, explores women’s sexuality from a feminist perspective. She begins with the critical discourse regarding male sexuality as the norm and the sexual revolution as a time when women became enslaved by sexuality rather than freed by it. An attempt is made to expand the definition of sexuality to include all aspects of a woman’s life. Davis suggests that women are able to incorporate the erotic into all aspects of their life. However, she goes on to normalize the various transitions that women go through in their sexual desire at the different stages in development. Unfortunately, she begins with pregnancy and one reads nothing of young women’s sexuality before pregnancy. This type of portrayal of women’s sexuality, including the social context of women’s sexuality, women’s ‘need’ for relational meaning in sexual interactions, and a continued focus on orgasm seem to be the farthest many theorists are able to go in breaking away from the dominant discourse.

Daniluk (1993) undertook a phenomenological study of female sexuality. The participants spoke of both positive and negative experiences, and her findings revealed that women felt they had not played a major role in the social construction of their own sexuality.
Her participants spoke of the influence of medicine, religion, media, and sexual violence on the construction and constriction of their experience and expression of sexuality. How the participants spoke of central areas of importance, such as sexual expression, reproduction, body image, and intimate relationships, reflected that women's sexual development occurs within a patriarchal culture.

Daniluk (1998) presents her and other women’s perspectives on women’s sexuality in her book *Women’s Sexuality Across the Life Span*. She writes that based on one’s vantage point (medical, religious, psychological), women’s sexuality can be defined and circumscribed by physiology, reproductive capacity, relationships, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions. Women’s sexuality may be personal or interactive, emotional or spiritual, and may include mind, body, and soul. Whether a woman perceives an experience as sexual does not depend so much on what body parts are involved or whether another person is involved, but rather on whether the woman experiences the situation as sexual. With the work of Feminist Sex Therapists, Leroy, Davis, and Daniluk, we begin to see women-defined-sexuality based upon women’s experiences.

**Women’s Experience of Self-affirming Sexuality**

Few within the academic milieu have presented positive or woman affirming constructions of women’s sexuality. Hollway (1995) writes, “there is no emancipatory discourse concerning women’s heterosexual desire” (p. 86) and that this creates a “serious gap in feminist political discourse” (p. 87). Some theorists have argued that there can be no emancipatory heterosexuality for women under the conditions of patriarchy (e.g., Tiefer 1988, 1991, 1995). Hollway (1995) asks whether feminism has neglected “an extra-discursive terrain” (p. 90) and to what extent individual practices and/or desires transcend
dominant discourses? She sees Foucault’s (1978) contention that discourse is the sole determinant of individual experience as too deterministic. Exceptions to the dominant discourse do exist and she points to these as a source for future change in how we socially construct women’s sexuality. Similarly, Usher (1994) describes how women resist and negotiate, or accept discourse. She suggests considering women’s ‘true feelings’ as well as their behaviour.

There has been a recent shift in focus in feminist perspectives on sexuality towards greater exploration of sexual pleasure (Richardson, 1997). Richardson sites the publication of the edited collection Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality (Vance, 1984/1992) as the resurgence of this marginalized theme from the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s. Many writers in this collection argue for greater recognition of sexuality as pleasure, rather than the previous emphasis on women’s sexuality as dangerous and problematic. Richardson concludes that other feminists have seen the focus on pleasure as problematic under patriarchy, because the focus on sexual pleasure is counterproductive to women’s liberation. Despite this argument, a few feminists have begun to illuminate the positive aspects of women’s sexuality.

For example, Daniluk’s (1993) study of the meaning and experience of women’s sexuality revealed positive elements to women’s experience of sexuality. Although this study was completed at an earlier time as well as being comprised of a sample of 10 women aged 30 to 66 years of age, it is worth mentioning the themes that arose that are relevant to self-affirming sexuality. For a few of the women in her study, sexual expression involved the experience of connection, mutuality, and pleasure. Their early sexual experiences were characterized by respect and caring, or they were involved in mutually enabling
relationships. Within these relationships women felt trust, harmony, joy, validation, and integration of the self. Aspects of their experiences that related to reproduction came to be positive in the sense that they were essential to the women's experience of womanhood and were a source of connection to other women and themselves. Their reproductive capacity was something they needed to celebrate and honour. These women came to experience an integration and wholeness later in life, when in mutually enabling relationships they acquired a sense of bodily acceptance, self-acceptance, and self-love. In intimate relationships, such as parenting, and mutually caring and supportive relationships with friends and lovers, women experienced validation, empowerment, healing, and growth. Daniluk states, "Each of the women experienced some discrepancy between her lived experience of her sexuality, including the messages of her body, and the sociocultural constructions of female sexuality in formal and informal discourses" (p. 66). In spite of cultural oppression, the women were "able to access positive life- and self-affirming experiences of their sexuality" (p. 66). These women were able to come to a place of pleasure, appreciation, and joy in their intimate experiences of self and others through their bodies, reproduction, and mutually caring relationships. Daniluk notes the enhancing aspects of "sharing female experiences and energy, the enabling impact of shared knowledge and wisdom, the importance of connection with self and others, the healing power of self-care, and the liberating impact of choice" (p. 66). The women expressed that celebration of the feminine through female-centred spirituality and greater connection to female knowledge, culture, and wisdom was an antidote to the shame they felt around their sexuality. They felt that the celebration of the uniqueness of woman's experience was central to positive experiences of sexuality. Daniluk also highlights how the absence of appropriate language is
an impediment women face when trying to find their sexual voice, and suggests that individual interviews with women from specific other groups would be beneficial in further developing the understanding of women’s experience of sexuality. Both the sample size and age range of the women in this study limit the information we can gain from its findings. Also, the women in this study seemed to focus primarily on how their societal context impeded their experience of positive sexuality, so that only a small portion of the results related to affirming aspects of sexuality.

Although Ogden’s (1994) focus on the act of sex in her book—*Women Who Love Sex*—is limiting, she does attempt to expand her definition of sex to include the variety in women’s experience of sexuality. She suggests that throughout history women have loved sex despite the danger inherent in sexual behaviour. She proposes that there is not yet a counterbalance to feminist discourse that gives women permission to explore the positive possibilities of what sex means for them. As a consequence, she aims to offer more inclusive positive models of female sexuality. To her sex is more than physical. It is an “opening of vital energy,” “a sense of wholeness, a connection of body, mind and soul,” and “a sense of oneness with one’s partners, with the universe” (p. 1). She recognizes how women’s sexuality is often pathologized, and acknowledges the impact of male dominance on women’s struggle to communicate their positive experiences with sex. She chooses to focus on women’s stories about “a full rainbow of positive sexual experiences” (p. 3). She validates women’s stories that “envision a sexual response cycle that flows directly from (and to) all kinds of life situations, not just genital stimulation, lubrication, and climaxes” (p. 3). In her view sexuality informs the whole of the being and ‘healthy sexuality’ is integral to the quality of life. Some women enjoy sex and see sex as a source of connectedness, health,
personal power, and a route to ecstasy. She presents narrative composites of many women’s stories to illustrate what she terms “a number of system-shifting facts and insights” (p. 24). These include: “broadening the scope sexual desire” (p. 24) to include feelings of connectedness; “envisioning an alternative sexual response cycle” (p. 24) in which sexual satisfaction is multidimensional and affected by desires, partner involvement, memory, as well as the present moment; “exploring the riches that lie beyond the vulva” (p. 24); “extending dimensions of the mind-body connection” (p. 25) to include spontaneous orgasms; “validating the sensuous possibilities in attachment and altruism” (p. 25); and “integrating romance, love, and commitment” (p. 26) into the concept of sexual intimacy. She refers to “sexual ecstasy” as a woman-defined alternative to the male discourse of sexual pleasure. Her main focus seems to be on ecstatic union and emotional involvement, while she claims that the core story of *Women Who Love Sex* is that broadening our understanding of sexuality is a model for social change.

Jordan (1997), in *Clarity in connection: Empathic knowing, desire, and sexuality*, shares an inspiring and positive view of her own experience. She writes,

> My sexual pleasure is a function of my own intense sensate experience, joy in joining with and exploring your experience, excitement in having fun, pleasing you and knowing you want to please me, feeling “abandon with you;” but there is a larger, synergistic sense of the pleasure of both, the mutual surrender to a larger union, a diminished self-consciousness and decreased awareness of the other as a separate person. This is the heartbeat of passion. So the desire is not simply a desire of each self for its self-pleasure. But what is it for? Possibly, if it is for anything, desire is for the experience of joining toward and joining in something that thereby becomes greater than the separate selves. (p. 59)

From the perspective of relational models of development and theorists such as Jordan (1997) whose work is informed by these models, women’s experiences of sexuality as described above begin to provide an entirely new approach to sexuality.
More empirically flavoured than the work of Daniluk (1993), Ogden (1994), or Jordan (1997), Socher's (1999) research explores the correlates of sexual satisfaction in women. She applies a feminist social constructionist approach to self-report questionnaire data. Her research is thorough in examining both scientific and clinical perspectives on women’s sexuality, and attempts to contextualize her focus on women who experience ‘sexual satisfaction.’ In her work, a differentiation is made between sexual pleasure and sexual satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction is defined as a steady state of mind about one's own sexuality, reached in a process of bio-psycho-sociological sensations of sexual-self that tend to be positive. Sexual pleasure is defined as momentary experiences of pleasure that may or may not lead to sexual satisfaction and may even have a negative effect on self-esteem, emotional growth, and overall sexual satisfaction. She differentiates erotic attraction from sexual attraction in that erotic attraction is not limited to the genitals.

Socher (1999) presents tantric practices as an alternative to the western paradigm of sexuality, and as an alternative to current sex therapy practices. She suggests the 'Kundalini Woman' as a model for a sexually satisfied woman. 'Sexually satisfied' refers to a dynamic transition rather than a moment frozen in time. It requires a level of comfort with one's own bio-psycho-social reality, and permits people to seek the benefits of their sexuality in their full potential. The Kundalini Woman is,

A sensual person who is able to experience an intense physical and emotional pleasure while engaging in sexual activity; who allows loss of self into the feelings of love making; and who reaches a higher level of self-acceptance as a result of this positive experience. (Socher, 1999, p. 108)

Socher (1999) claims that, "it is only some 'fortunate' women who can assert themselves; balance the role expectations; avoid being condemned by society; and achieve sexual satisfaction" (Socher, 1999, p. 71). She wonders that social constructs of female
sexuality and femininity are adversarial to women’s sexual satisfaction, and yet many women are able to achieve sexual satisfaction. She assumes that there are mitigating factors that reduce the negative impact of social constructs, and that act as prophylactics and/or have a corrective influence. She postulates that integration of positive feelings in bio-psycho-social areas, original sexual socialization, interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of self and physical self have an effect.

Socher’s (1999) data came from a secondary analysis of questionnaires developed for the purpose of another study. She describes the sample as 2,395 “predominantly white, middle and upper class, educated women, 40% of whom were from California” (p. 100). The mean age of her sample was 39.2 years (SD = 12.5), and the women ranged from 17 to 89 years old. Socher is transparent in the shortcomings of this secondary analysis in that the original researchers may not have defined their constructs in the same manner that she has. Even with this limitation in mind her results are very interesting. Socher found that the strongest correlations were between sexual satisfaction and sexual affirmation ($r = .74$) and orgasmic satisfaction ($r = .42$). This suggests that women who are more accepting of their own sexuality, feel comfortable communicating their needs, and experienced more genital pleasure report being sexually satisfied. Sexual affirmation was the most dominant predictor of sexual satisfaction ($R^2 = .438$ [80%] of the overall $R^2 = .541$). Sexual affirmation was defined as a combination of openness, assertiveness, and honest acceptance of own and of/from partner’s sexual feelings. Thus, comfort initiating sex, honest expression of likes and dislikes, self-acceptance, and mutually accepting interpersonal relationships were the most important predictors of sexual satisfaction. Comfort with and acceptance of one’s own body, sexuality, and emotional and sexual needs, seem to allow women to seek fulfilment. Also,
she inferred that these women would rather abstain than be compelled to experience their sexuality by engaging in situations not appealing to them. The second highest correlation with sexual affirmation was with orgasmic satisfaction \((r = .42)\), which indicates the importance of women experiencing a sense of satisfaction with their orgasms in sexual relationships.

These findings support the contention that multiplicities of bio-psycho-social factors predict sexual satisfaction. Rather than being a natural process, her findings suggest, “sexual satisfaction is rather an art to be reached and that extensive learnings are required to attain it” (Socher, 1999, p. 141). She proposes that satisfactory relationships influence the quality of sexual experience, not the other way around. She refers to Roger’s (1961) concept of self-actualization, and proposes that this is how women come to experience sexual satisfaction despite their socialization. She reports that for women who experience sexual satisfaction, less satisfying experiences are seen as an opportunity to grow rather than devastation leading to self-denial.

Socher’s (1999) research is an important contribution to an empirically validated model of women’s sexual satisfaction. She considers many potential variables that may impact women’s ability to discover sexual satisfaction despite contradictory social messages. The central limitation of Socher’s research is her use of secondary data, because the initial research used different definitions than she did for sexual satisfaction, such that sexual satisfaction and orgasm were considered equivalent. It seems that Socher’s research may have benefited from data collected with her socio-cultural definition of sexual satisfaction in mind. Additionally, Socher’s study does not differentiate between women of varying age, socio-economic status, or ethnicity, and in this way is not specific in illuminating the
experience of women at different stages of development, and from different socio-economic and ethnic groups.

The women researchers noted above have all made important contributions towards an emancipatory discourse of white middle class women’s sexuality. Yet, there still remains a gap in the literature regarding women’s definitions of sexuality, sexual satisfaction, and self-affirming sexuality. The understanding and integration of the phenomenological experience of the positive aspects of women’s sexuality is essential for gender-balanced construction of sexuality.

*Young Women’s Experience of Sexuality*

None of the afore mentioned research has differentiated between women of different age groups and/or cohorts. Perhaps because of the plurality in women’s experience of sexuality, little developmental work has been done on women’s sexuality (Daniluk, 1998). Most texts on women’s sexual development jump from adolescence straight into pregnancy without any consideration of the plurality of women’s experiences that do not include adolescence directly followed by pregnancy. For example, Davis (1995) in *Women, sex, and desire: Understanding your sexuality at every stage of life*, proceeds straight into pregnancy and we read nothing of young women’s sexuality before pregnancy. This lack of developmental research together with the common perception that young women raised since the sexual revolution are sexually empowered, presents a clear gap in current research on women’s sexuality. Presented here is a general developmental overview of women in early adulthood.

Sexual decisions are particularly salient for 25 to 30 year old women as they move through the developmental stage of early adulthood. Erikson (1968) describes early
adulthood as the “crisis of intimacy” and as a counterpointing as well as a fusing of identity. From his perspective, sexual intimacy is only part of the task of developing intimacy vs. isolation. Intimacy goes beyond sexual relationships to include companionship and community. He believes that the formation of identity in adolescence provides the foundation for mature acceptance of differences among people, which leads to a heightening of one’s own identity. Romantic love is a major theme at this stage, and one must find someone or something to love and be committed to. He discusses the importance of testing the extremes in order to find a deep commitment, to develop a sense of choice, and to experience loyalty.

Stevens-Long and Commons (1992) highlight the mastery of the intellectual tools of formal thought, and the deeper understanding of the self and others, which permit young adults to establish a niche in the world. They posit that in early adulthood satisfaction is derived from activity rather than social gains, and that the experience of competence is the most important validation at this stage. Stevens-Long and Commons summarize the research of many researchers (including Erikson, 1968; Havighurst, 1972; White, 1975), and suggest that caring, commitment, and mastery, although present throughout adulthood are more crucial during early adulthood when people are “finding mates, establishing families, developing social circles, and becoming committed to long-term occupations and interests” (p. 137).

However, feminist developmental theorists such as Gilligan (1985) have critiqued the work of Erikson (1968), White (1975), and others who favour the male developmental stages and try to fit women into models that are based on men’s experiences. Also, Daniluk (1998) points out that biologically the ages 25 to 30 are not unique when compared to ages 20 to 25
or 30 to 35; yet many developmental models, including the sociobiological and psychoanalytic, tend to focus on the “maternal instinct,” which is assumed to dominate women’s lives at this stage in development. In this way, we begin to understand how developmental models may favour a masculine perspective, and a stereotypical male lifecycle. However, a new model based on age-related developmental experiences of women is yet to be proposed.

The feminist theorists from The Stone Centre (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) proposed a model of women’s (and men’s) development based on the idea that identity formation occurs primarily as a result of “being-in-relation.” Here, Miller (1991) proposes that, in the past, young women have chosen a non-active way of being in relationship that contributes to a sense of self that lacks agency. This choice is perceived to be the result of the female’s socialized experience that any identity growth threatening to the relationship is forfeited to maintain the connection and intimacy girls are socialized to value above all else. However, the theorists from The Stone Center have yet to propose a progressive model of development with age-related stages.

When these disparate perspectives on young women’s development are considered together, the themes of intimacy and development of self seem to be central. Intimacy here refers to close relationships with friends, lovers, and community. Part of this experience of creating intimate relationships involves sexuality for many young women; hence the parallel development of sexuality may be very influential in the whole developmental picture during this stage. Additionally, Stevens-Long and Commons (1992) state that this period is characterized by independence from parents, which opens the way for experimentation with sexual behaviour and sexual orientation. They state that today’s cohort of “young adults are
more sexually active and sexually uninhibited than earlier cohorts" (p. 138). Conversely, Miller (1991) argues that at this stage women are most at risk of basing their own identity upon the identity of their partner, and may delay the developmental task of finding a sense of self with which she can explore the world and begin to experience agency.

Development of self as described by these theorists pertains to what young women do with their time, what they are committed to, and what they become successful at. As young women engage in various activities they must determine how and if they can express aspects of themselves in particular contexts. The expression of one’s sexual self becomes a challenging endeavour as young women seek affirmation for their success at work and in play. Furthermore, sexual expression may be an activity that women will become committed to and wish to experience success through. In this way, the experience and expression of sexuality are central to the developmental process of women between the ages 25 and 30. It is possible that self-affirming sexuality may act as a prophylactic at this stage in development more so than any other stage, because self-affirming sexuality is likely a necessary element of both intimacy and development of self.

Many theorists have acknowledged the importance of sexuality for identity development and formation (Person, 1999). However, as evinced above sexuality is a complex experience with both intrapsychic and psychosocial components. The sexuality that a woman comes to experience is a product of gender, historical context, biology, and many other aspects of human development. Daniluk (1998) writes, “The sexual self is a rather complex construction that involves physical and biological capacities, cognitive and emotional development, and evolving needs and desires” (p. 15). She describes the sexual self as a fluid, complex entity consisting of various forms of self-relevant information. She
posits that, "It is a product of the private and the public, the personal and the political, the individual and her context" (p. 15).

Daniluk (1998) elucidates that young women "do not have alternate, more expansive constructions of sexual expression that affirm women’s sexual agency and the diversity of their sexual feelings and desires" (p. 221). She contends that within this context young women must negotiate and make sense of their sexual and erotic desires, and the sensations of their bodies. Daniluk quotes Janeway (1980), and says that at present there is no acceptable vision of a woman “self choosing, enjoying, directing and controlling her own pleasure” (p. 9). Daniluk highlights how the paradox between ‘sex as powerful’ and ‘sex as bad and sinful’ makes it difficult for most young women to develop and maintain positive sexual self-perceptions. Women’s experience mirrors the conflict in dominant constructions of sexuality, therefore it is difficult for young women to initiate sexual pleasure or diversity; to step outside dominant discourse without shame; and to develop sexual self-perception based on a sense of efficacy and entitlement.

It seems the dominant discourse shapes young women’s sexual experience and expectations, and that some young women will struggle to resist. Daniluk (1998) proposes that this resistance will occur individually and interpersonally in negotiating shared meaning in intimate interactions based on reciprocity, mutuality, and respect. She argues that there is uniqueness in women’s sexuality, but that negative stereotypes and false premises must be overcome before this uniqueness can be fully understood. To expect young women to experience their sexuality as bountiful and to explore their erotic boundaries would require blindness to the effects of context. Although particular young women may experience their sexuality as self-affirming, despite the dominant discourse as outlined by feminist social
constructionists, young women continue to have few contexts and little language to express their sexuality in popular culture. As outlined previously they may even need to find new ways or create new ways to describe sexuality so that it fits their experience and can still be framed positively.

In *Promiscuities: The secret struggle for womanhood*, Wolf (1998) describes her and her girlfriends' experiences of growing up during the sexual revolution. She conveys that the sexual 'freedom' of that time added an extra burden for them as they faced the challenges of adolescence. She tells the stories of young women who had the freedom of sexual choice without the agency or sense-of-self necessary to make informed decisions. These stories portray the difficulty people face when living in times of rapid social change. Her message is that after the sexual revolution women's sexual subjectivity was assumed although the social structures women lived within did not support this sexual subjectivity.

Currently popular music, television, film, and magazines commonly portray the sexuality of young women. Popular music stars such as Britney Spears (2001), Pink (2001), and Missy Elliot (2002) all sing songs that are openly about sexuality. However, these songs often focus on the relational aspects of their sexuality, perhaps because it is still perceived as unsuitable for young women to be knowledgeable about the physical realities of sex. On the other hand magazines such as Cosmopolitan seem to focus solely on the orgasmic and physical functions involved in sexuality, to the exclusion of the relational elements of sexuality. Further intensifying these contrasting messages in the media, film, and television portrayals of young women are highly sexualized. The majority of visual images of young women are aimed at objectifying their sexual appeal. On music video stations, a popular source of entertainment and fashion trends among young people, it is now rare to see a
woman who is not showing her breasts, thighs, stomach, and buttocks in a sexual manner. The camera shots seem to focus on enhancing the sexual appeal of young women's bodies, rather than conveying any sense of how these women experience this implied wellspring of sexuality. As such, the sexuality of young women portrayed in the media seems to be highly objectified, and one wonders what all these women in the pictures think and feel about their own sexuality.

Thompson's (1990) narrative research, drawing on 400 interviews with teenage girls' regarding their sexual initiations, included a subsection of participants she called the 'pleasure narrators.' These teenage girls imagined significant others, such as family and friends "who believe in pleasure: who think masturbation and childhood sexuality are good omens, not sins, and that the double standard is a dead issue; who encourage the search for the body's wellsprings and for supportive and exciting lovers" (p. 350). These teenage girls seemed to take sexual subjectivity for granted. Similar to Daniluk's (1993) finding, these teenage girls conveyed that their open conversations with older women about sexuality were important to their experiences of subjectivity. Thompson's research on young women who would presently be in their late 20s is the closest academic research has come to examining young women's experience of self-affirming sexuality.

A casual glance at various 'alternative scenes' also indicates that young women outside of the spotlight of popular culture are interested in more affirming expressions of sexuality. The riot girl scene of the late 90s is an example of a generally sexualized image of young women who conveyed the attitude, "I do what ever I want, whenever I want." Singer/songwriter Ani Defranco is an example of this significant subculture, and her songs speak about the physical and emotional pleasure and pain involved in sexual expression. The
recent trend in young women to explore bisexuality, and films such as *High Art* (Cholodenko, 1998) that depict bisexuality in young women indicate a broadening of sexual norms in the current cohort of young women. Additionally, popular plays, such as *The Vagina Monologues* (Ensler, 1998) indicate that women are finding non-academic mediums in which to express their resistance to the dominant discourse of women’s sexuality.

In particular, it is the omissions in this review of the literature pertaining to young women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality that guides me to my research question. Feminist social constructionists have developed a strong argument that current constructions of sexuality privilege the male experience. Few researchers have truly examined how women experience sexuality and even fewer have chosen to explore the positive aspects of sexuality for women. Additionally, very little research has examined how young women experience sexuality during the time between adolescence and maternity. Although researchers such as Daniluk (1993/1998), Ogden (1988/1994), Socher (1999), and Thompson (1980) acknowledge the existence of an affirming experience of sexuality, they have not been able to describe this experience from the phenomenological perspective that is important to the process of beginning to incorporate women’s experience of sexuality into the dominant discourse of sexuality. Many researchers have proclaimed the need for an emancipatory discourse of women’s sexuality (e.g., Hollway, 1995; Tiefer, 1995), and there seems to be assumptions in both the popular and academic literature that the current cohort of young women socialized since the sexual revolution have somehow surpassed the sexual oppression of the past. This therefore leads me to ask the question, what is young women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality?
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Method

In this study, I sought to understand the experience of self-affirming sexuality for young women. I asked what is the lived experience of self-affirming sexuality for women between the ages 25 and 30? Due to the exploratory nature of this study and its focus on the lived experience of the phenomenon, a qualitative phenomenological method was utilized. Additionally, a social constructivist approach was applied to situate the individual experiences within a socio-cultural context. Social constructionism and phenomenology together provided a coherent methodology with which to understand young women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality (Cosgrove, 2000).

I chose a qualitative methodology to explore and illuminate these questions for epistemological reasons. From a social constructivist perspective, earlier empirical research has generally reified the dominant male discourse of genital/climax-orientated sexuality, thus reflecting the subjective nature of all research. Within a qualitative approach, I accepted my assumptions and made them explicit so as to acknowledge their impact on my research findings (see Personal Assumptions below).

Phenomenology’s general purpose is to illuminate a phenomenon, and in particular to identify the essential structures, and to explicate the thematic meaning of a phenomenon (Osborne, 1994). Phenomenology aims at providing a richer and deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1997) by developing a description of a phenomenon that permits the reader to understand the meaning of the experience (Osborne,
1990). The purpose of such a method is not to generate an explanatory law, but rather to understand a person's experience of her own world. The aim is to develop a detailed descriptive account of the experience as it has been lived. This method is exploratory and descriptive rather than explanatory, and thus well suited to research in an area where little is known and in which current theory excludes the very experience this research sought to illuminate.

Colaizzi (1978) sees the identification of the phenomenon as a “crucial first step in psychological research” (p. 57). Colaizzi (1978) proposes that if one wishes to understand and identify a phenomenon, one must first make contact with the phenomenon. Phenomenology facilitates our understanding of an experience by allowing for meaningful contact with individuals who have experienced a phenomenon, and by remaining faithful to their lived experience (Colaizzi, 1978). In this way phenomenology was particularly useful in identifying the phenomenon and understanding the phenomenon from young women's own perspective.

Additionally, phenomenology is considered complementary to counselling practice (Osborne, 1994), and was a good match with my skills as a counsellor. Heppner et al. (1992) write that methodologically, phenomenological research is similar to a counselling interview. Phenomenology and counselling both involve exploration of the inner lives of participants. Both require the same personal qualities such as caring respect for others, openness, ethical integrity, and interest in the life-world of others. Interpersonal skills are equally valuable in both. Osborne (1994) states that counsellors are uniquely qualified for phenomenological research, thus further supporting the suitability of phenomenology in this case.
In addition to phenomenology, feminist social constructivist discourse analysis was utilized to illuminate the social context in which young women construct their experience of self-affirming sexuality (Cosgrove, 2000). I contend that phenomenology is most useful as a feminist research tool when it is accompanied by another method that illustrates the effects of social context on peoples’ experiences of their worlds. In this research, previously undertaken discourse analysis of women’s sexuality provided the social contextualization that is important to understanding an experience holistically. Feminist social constructionists have provided a discourse analysis of the construction of women’s sexuality, and have specifically called for an exploration of marginalized discourses of women’s experiences of sexuality (Daniluk, 1998; Socher, 1999; Tiefer, 1995). Further, in the discussion of the emergent themes of the present study, I compared the results to those dominant discourses outlined in the literature review. This comparison was expected to illuminate how these young women’s experiences both reflect and resist the dominant discourse, as well as how young women construct marginalized experiences of self-affirming sexuality.

Inherent to both phenomenology and social constructionism is the concept of co-constitutionality. Co-constitutionality eliminates subject-object dualism and contends that the person and the world constitute an interdependent unity (Osborne, 1990). Osborne (1990) writes that, “we cannot consider the environment independent of the ways in which people construe their environments, nor can we consider persons’ experiences of their environment without considering the way in which those environments have influenced persons’ experiences of them” (p. 80). Thus, through the choice of methods applied to the research question the researcher acknowledges the co-construction that emerges between the
researcher and each participant, and the contextual nature of all experience and production of knowledge.

**Personal Assumptions**

Self-reflection is an essential component of phenomenological research. Osborne (1990) describes, "the unavoidable presence of the researcher in the formulation of the question, the determination of what are the data, the collection of the data, and their interpretation" (p. 81) in all research. Colaizzi (1978) suggests that the personal interest of the researcher in their topic, and the influence of that interest on the form of interpretation are unavoidable. It is understood that the knowledge coming from the research is necessarily perspectival. Furthermore, I assert as a feminist researcher that the phenomenon cannot be decontextualized, or separated, from the researcher (Gergen, 1988). To enable the reader to judge the impact of the researcher’s predisposed positions and biases, the researcher does not attempt to eradicate or avoid such influences, but rather attempts to articulate them so that they are made explicit (Osborne, 1990). The phenomenologist must carefully delineate personal prejudices, viewpoints, and preconceptions about the phenomena in an attempt to suspend judgement and investigate the phenomena without imposing meaning (Patton, 1990). Thus, within a qualitative approach I engaged in self-reflection throughout the study to explore my assumptions and make them explicit so as to acknowledge their impact on my research findings.

My personal experience of young women’s self-affirming sexuality was the catalyst for this research. I may be categorized as a white, middle class, young woman, and most of my experience and how I have conceptualized my research question flow from this social position. My sexuality has been a positive and fulfilling aspect of my life. Sexuality has
come to take on a sacred meaning for me. Many of my friends have had similar experiences of sexuality despite the violence and judgement that is often directed at women who act freely on their sexuality. I assumed that many women do experience self-affirming sexuality in some form in their lives. This sexuality may have nothing to do with intercourse, genitals, or even a sex partner. It was private conversations and delightful confidences that motivated me to explore what I perceived as a marginalized and often misunderstood aspect of women’s sexuality. I focused specifically on young women’s sexuality, because this was the area in which I had the most experience.

My interest in the topic also arose from my experience working as a safer sex educator for youth. In this setting, it was clear to me that women who are not empowered by their sexuality may not have the ability to demand safer sex practices from their sexual partner. This unempowered stance may also impact young women’s ability to ask for what they want and to conceive of their relationship as a context in which they can fulfill their personal aspirations. I believe one’s sexuality has ramifications for other aspects of one’s life. This experience highlighted for me the need to articulate a more affirming discourse around women’s sexuality, especially for young women.

As a counsellor I am aware of the strength of positive reframing and I assumed that women would benefit from a positive and reconstructive focus on female sexuality. Without the academic recognition and confirmation of self-affirming sexuality, women’s experiences of self-affirming sexuality would remain cloistered. I preferred to reconstruct new social constructs that empower women, rather than giving all my energy to the deconstruction of discourses that are not empowering women (or men). My focus was on helping and facilitating growth toward personal fulfillment.
I assumed that women do experience self-affirming sexuality, and this discourse was missing in the academic literature on women’s sexuality. I was intrigued by the absence of information on women’s positive sexual development, and the focus on women’s sexuality as a ‘problem.’ I believed that more women presently than in the past were able to experience self-affirming sexuality. I assumed that most of the dominant discourse of female sexuality conveyed a double-standard that trapped women in a no win situation that disempowered them, and for many complicated their experience of sexuality or even negated it. I thought that it was likely that the women who participated in this study would be unique and vibrant women who had great personal strength to resist the dominant discourse. These women would likely be resisting the dominant discourse of gender in other aspects of their life beyond their sexuality.

Social constructionism and feminism have epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge and power inequalities that affected my choice of research methodology. I believe that knowledge and experience are largely socially constructed. Also, I believe that the power imbalance in most gendered relationships shapes the experience of those involved and how they come to make meaning from their experience. I assume that social constructionism does not adequately explain the full range of human experience and that there are other factors that contribute, such as biology and genetics. Humanist and feminist traditions inform my practice as a counsellor, in that I believe that all people have an inherent ability to self-actualize and that many women have been oppressed by patriarchy. Self-actualization for many women has meant fighting patriarchal oppression in their personal relationships and many have been winning that fight, although in private ways.
I believed that sexuality extends beyond the body to encompass the relationship, environment, and spirit of humanity. I saw self-affirming sexuality as a holistic experience rather than purely physical, emotional, or spiritual. Current male dominated discourse on sexuality has set the stage for many feminists to deny sexuality as a source of inspiration and empowerment. I hoped that when women are able to find a language for the expression of their experience of self-affirming sexuality then this would have a positive impact on all social, political, and economic relations.

I was aware that my assumptions and my experience with self-affirming sexuality influenced me in the process of collecting and analyzing the data for this research, however, this potential shortcoming was surmounted by the expected enhancement in rapport and trust that participants experience when interviewed by a researcher they feel can relate to their experience. This was particularly relevant in research pertaining to a topic of an unusually private and personal nature. In addition to an enhanced sensitivity with participants, my experience promoted insight when analyzing the data. Therefore, I used previous knowledge and experience of this topic as an advantage, while remaining open to new information.

As I made my assumptions and presuppositions explicit (Van Manen, 1997), I attempted to set them aside or 'bracket' them. This process supported my goal of seeing the phenomenon for what it was rather than as what I wanted it to be (Osborne, 1990).

**Participants**

The use of the term “participants” is intended to reflect the equality and respect intended for contributors, and to avoid objectifying contributors (Gergen, 1988), as is essential in feminist research. The interviewer and participant are partners in
phenomenological exploration (Osborne, 1990), although the researcher undertakes the interpretation of the data.

Sampling was purposeful, meaning that participants were purposely selected to satisfy specific criteria (Patton, 1990). This form of sampling is also known as criterion sampling (Creswell, 1998). There were three criteria for participants to be involved in this research. First, participants must have self-identified as being women with self-affirming sexuality. Second, participants had to be young women, specifically between the ages 25 and 30 years old. This developmental stage and age cohort are of particular interest in relation to the changing social discourse on sexuality in the past 30 years as described in the literature review. Third, participants had to be interested in and able to articulate their experience in detailed and rich description. Fluency in English was essential so that I was able to fully understand the participant’s experience. As the goal of phenomenological research is to explore the inner world of the participant (Osborne, 1990), young women who were unwilling or unable to articulate their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, or perceptions verbally were not conducive to this type of exploration. Thus, for the purposes of the present study, participants were asked to self-assess their ability to provide rich and in-depth descriptions of their experience of the phenomena.

Additionally, convenience sampling was utilized due to my limited resources. This means that participants were selected based upon being available and easy to study (Patton, 1990). This method saves time, money, and effort, but usually at the expense of information and credibility. However, this impact was alleviated by the use of the snowball or chain method, which identified participants of interest from women who knew which participants would provide information-rich descriptions (Creswell, 1998). Through purposeful and
snowball sampling, I expected that in-depth and information-rich interviews would provide ample data from a small number of participants to exhaust possible themes or to reach saturation of themes (Morse & Field, 1995). Phenomenological research focuses on the richness of the information rather than the quantity (Osborne, 1990). However, the number of participants must ensure that themes do not occur by chance (Morse & Field, 1995).

**Procedures**

**Recruitment.** The participants were recruited through word-of-mouth and through advertisements (see Appendix A). Pamphlets were given to women who expressed interest or thought they might have a friend that would be suitable, and advertisements were posted in locations likely to be visited by women (e.g., UBC’s Women’s Resources Centre, UBC Department of Counselling Psychology, UBC’s Women Student’s Office, YWCA, and various recreation and community centres across Vancouver). Those interested in participating telephoned the researcher directly.

The initial telephone contact with participants entailed both screening potential participants to determine if they fit the criteria for inclusion in the study, as well as providing potential participants with additional information regarding the study. Participants were informed of the nature of the study, as well as given information regarding the training and background of the researcher. I explained the time commitment required and the confidentiality of their contributions. Participants were asked if they had any questions, and if they were appropriate for the study I arranged a time and place for the first interview. Women were included in the study in the order they contacted the researcher.

I interviewed 8 participants, however, the results presented here are based on only 7 participants’ stories. After completing all of the interviews and conducting the initial stage of
analysis, I decided not to include one participant's story. My analysis of her story revealed a uniquely different story of self-affirming sexuality. Her description of her sexuality was couched in broad generalizations about sexuality rather than her specific personal experiences. In contrast, the other women spoke about personal experiences, and their stories shared much in common.

**Interviews.** Two interviews were undertaken with each participant. These interviews were conducted at mutually agreed upon locations, such as the participants' homes or offices, or my office, with consideration given to maintaining confidentiality and to ensuring that distractions were minimized. Each interview was audiotaped by the researcher and transcribed by a transcriptionist.

The first interviews involved asking broad questions to elicit an in-depth description of the participant’s experience of self-affirming sexuality and to access the essence of their experience. These interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours. I engaged in a collaborative interview with each participant (Heppner et al., 1992). Thus, the atmosphere or relationship in the interviews had to be one of respectful concern for the participants, a shared interest in illuminating the experience, and good rapport (Osborne, 1990). The intent was to remove as many demand characteristics as possible, and to replace them with a sense “empathic understanding and trust so that the genuine experience” (Osborne, 1990, p. 82) was conveyed. In this manner I gained an empathic understanding of each participant’s frame of reference.

To enhance consistency between interviews, the following protocol was followed for each participant. First, due to the personal nature of the interview and the desired depth and richness of information provided, it was essential to create an atmosphere of safety, trust,
and comfort. This was achieved by engaging in casual conversation. Osborne (1990) refers to this aspect of the interview as empathic rapport. Second, the consent form was reviewed (see Appendix B), highlighting particulars such as confidentiality, the choice of a pseudonym for anonymity, and the audio recording of the interviews. I reminded participants that I was not interested in making judgements and I conveyed open curiosity regarding their personal unique experience. They were reminded that they were free to stop at any time without any penalty. Third, after reading and signing the consent form, the participant retained one copy, and was asked if they had any questions. Finally an orientating statement was read (see appendix C), and I asked the participant to express her experience verbally.

I followed the guidelines for qualitative interviewing as detailed in Kvale (1983). The interview focused on the worldview of the participant, and aimed to access the perspective of the participant rather than imposing the researcher’s preconceived notions of the phenomenon. The interview was minimally structured in order to gain in-depth descriptions (Osborne, 1990). Counselling skills such as active listening and empathy facilitated the exploration of participants’ thoughts and feelings. Paraphrasing and reflection were used to keep the participant focused, as well as to gain an in-depth understanding of each participant’s experience. Silence was allowed for participants to process and clarify their thoughts. Open-ended questions were used to obtain detail and clarification, while avoiding guiding the participant. The list of questions (see appendix D) were referred to when the participant had “run out of steam” (Osborne, 1990, p. 84), or to help deepen exploration. I remained non-judgemental, non-directive, and non-threatening throughout. The first interview continued until the participant was satisfied with their description of the
experience. I also recorded process notes during and after the interviews to capture salient body language and facial expressions that were not captured by the tape, and to record any salient thoughts or insights that occurred during the interview.

The second interview focused on clarification and a discussion of themes and ideas about self-affirming sexuality that arose in the first interview with the participant. Each participant was sent a copy of her transcribed interview, and a summary of the themes common to all the research participants. The women were asked to read the transcript and make any comments or discuss any additional thoughts they had on the topic since the first interview. They were invited to discuss how well each of the themes resonates with their own experience, and any other thoughts, feelings, or perceptions that they may have had regarding the themes. Also, the second interview focused on assessing the goodness-of-fit between my analysis and emergent themes, and the experience of the participant. Phenomenological researchers suggest this 'validation' interview as a follow-up to ensure credibility (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990). No new data emerged from the second interview, and only minor biographical changes were made to the final write-up of the study findings. Each woman was similarly offered the opportunity to read the study when it was complete.

A member of the thesis committee reviewed the first transcript for potential interviewing problems before the remaining interviews were undertaken. Feedback was solicited regarding any apparent influence of the researcher’s personal assumptions, and was taken into consideration in following interviews.

Sexuality is a deeply personal topic and the interviews may have triggered memories with emotional content. A list of counselling resources was available to participants if they
demonstrated a high level of distress during the interview. However, these referrals were not necessary and the participants reported that the interview was inspiring, empowering, and an excellent opportunity for self-reflection.

Transcripts were numbered and each of the participants chose a pseudonym for reporting the results. Audiotapes and transcripts were kept in a locked file for the duration of the study, audiotapes will be erased upon completion of the study, and typed transcripts will be kept in a locked file for at least 5 years and shredded when deemed appropriate.

Text Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, Colaizzi’s (1978) method of thematic phenomenological analysis was applied to all transcripts. Each transcript was first read in its entirety to gain a sense of the whole experience. In a second reading, I extracted sentences and phrases significant to the phenomenon under study. Each sentence and phrase was considered and a concise statement of the meaning of each was formulated. These concise statements were referred to as salient themes. This process of elucidation required creative insight, and involved going beyond the original data, but maintaining connection with it at the same time (Colaizzi, p. 59). In this way, I attempted to interpret the participant’s descriptions in a way that went beyond the obvious, surface characteristics to illuminate the “meaning structures” inherent in the women’s experiences (Osborne, 1994).

The statements of meaning were then grouped according to similarity, from which the themes arose. These steps represented a within-persons analysis (Osborne, 1994). The above steps were completed for each transcript. When all the transcripts had been analyzed, the extracted themes were organized into common themes shared by all transcripts, constituting an across-persons analysis (Osborne, 1994). “Empathic generalizability”
Osborne, 1990) was established when the themes identified in one account emerged in the other accounts.

The common themes were then checked against the original data. I ensured that the themes represented what was expressed in the original transcripts and that each of the themes was implied in the original transcripts. Giving the participants an opportunity to comment on the themes during the second interview also ensured credibility.

The thematic results were then integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon of interest (Colaizzi, 1978). From this a condensed descriptive account was developed, which postulated the fundamental structure of young women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality as it was lived by the women involved in this study. At that point, the second interview or validation interview was undertaken as described above, and based on the participant’s confirmation no further changes were made to the themes and sub-themes.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

This chapter contains brief synopses of the stories of each of the 7 participants, an introduction and list of the four themes and their respective sub-themes, as well as in-depth descriptions of the themes and sub-themes. The synopses include a brief demographic profile of each woman, personal stories of how each woman arrived at her current experience of self-affirming sexuality, and the main characteristics of her experience. Following the synopses, I provide a list and brief description of the themes. Finally, I describe the common process these women shared in their journeys towards self-affirming sexuality, and describe each theme and sub-theme in detail, supported by quotes from the women’s interviews.

The Women’s Stories

Seven women were interviewed for this study. Each woman chose a pseudonym for herself, and these pseudonyms are used throughout this manuscript, rather than the participant’s real names. Additionally, minor changes have been made in the women’s stories to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The following are synopses of the stories each woman told.

Jennifer. Jennifer was a 25-year-old Caucasian woman. She was living with her boyfriend of 6 years who is 8 years older than her. They had no children. Jennifer owned her own business, as well as being involved in various art and design projects.

Jennifer felt that she has been “very sexual” since the age of 2. After “a long bad phase” in her teens, Jennifer said, “I made the decision that that’s not what I wanted sexually
out of life.” She shared the choices she made and actions she took to build a sense of sexual “self-respect” while learning to balance “intimacy” with “feeling vulnerable.”

Jennifer explained, “My sexual experiences with my current boyfriend have been the most affirming that I have had,” because “I’ve never been able to let myself go like that with anybody before.” She attributed this to her partner’s perspective that “everything is natural,” because she therefore felt that “its 100% okay to be myself.” Important elements of Jennifer’s sexual experiences with her partner were her feelings of contentment and surrender. She said, “I think attraction and security go together.” She expressed that he had been an important teacher in her life and had helped her be less judgmental of herself.

Jennifer talked about her sexuality in relation to her artistic expression through visual art and fashion. These were mediums through which she expressed her sexuality as well as “breaking through ways of thinking that are not mine...that have been picked up from the way my parents are.” She described, “I probably oppressed my own sexual self in a lot of ways, but breaking that barrier it seems like leaping forward in a huge leap.” She talked about how her sexual self-judgment had been a “weak link,” but recently she felt it was something she did not have to “struggle” with. She said, “I feel a lot stronger,” because it is “something I don’t really fear.” She explained that “sexuality is just part of yourself,” and within the context of her “safe” relationship she felt that, “I am more myself...the more he loves me.”

*Kathleen.* Kathleen was a 25-year-old single Caucasian woman with no children. She came from a middle-class family of British descent. She worked in the social services and as a waitress, and studied English at a post-secondary school.
Kathleen seemed to see sexuality as a “natural” part of who she is. She said, “I think children are very sexual, and it was always a positive thing for me, but at the same time I remember being quite self conscious about it too.” She explained, “I think that has a lot to do with my family,” and she went on to describe how her mother’s rigid standards regarding sexuality were particularly challenging for her.

Kathleen talked about “the first time [she] got [her] heart broken” during her teens. She seemed to reflect on many of her past sexual experiences with a stance of “vulnerability” and wanting to “be open with” her partners so that she could “be intimate,” but also wanting to “protect” herself from men who hurt her in their “flakiness.” Kathleen expressed that recently she has come to enjoy sexual experiences more with people when they are about “simple physical pleasure,” because this was when she was able to be most “fully present.” She reported that when she was “attracted” to a person more than just physically and was interested in being “more than casual lovers,” she found that she felt more vulnerable, and this sometimes impeded her experience of physical and emotional pleasure. And yet Kathleen was also clear that her most affirming experiences had been with men that she can “connect with emotionally, physically, and intellectually.”

Kathleen reported that, “there’s a concrete possibility that I suffered some sexual abuse or had a negative sexual encounter when I was quite young.” Kathleen saw these experiences as part of her “complete sexual history,” which had led her to where she was. She talked about how healing it was to accept those “negative things that have happened,” and to love every part of herself, positive or negative. This experience of self-acceptance seemed to contribute to her feeling “whole.”
Natasha. Natasha was a 25-year-old Caucasian woman. She lived with her husband of 4 years. They did not have children. She worked in management at a retail store, and was fostering her artistic abilities during her free time.

Natasha talked about how her sexuality was a part of the whole of her and could not be “parcelled off” or “packaged.” Her earliest memories of a positive sense of sexuality were of “being noticed” or “watched” in high school. This was “kind of scary but powerful” for her. She described how beauty was an important part of her life, although she went through a stage when she began to notice attention from adult men where she “started wearing really weird shit to try and scare people off.” Recently she has felt that within the “safety” of her marriage she could enjoy “showing my stuff,” which seemed to relate to feeling healthy in her body and being able to express her personality through her appearance (i.e., wearing unique clothing).

Although Natasha talked about a variety of sexual experiences from her past, the primary source of sexually affirming experiences has been in relation to her husband. She said, “it’s not always about experiences or the story line,” but that it was “the thoughts, and the feelings, and the emotions” that made her feel good. She attributed her positive experiences of sexuality to the “safety,” “comfortableness,” and “mutual acceptance” that she felt in her relationship. In addition to her sexuality as it related to others, Natasha talked about beauty and her pleasure in taking care of her body and dressing up in costumes to represent different aspects of herself. Related to this was her description of enjoying seeing herself while making love, because she enjoyed seeing how her husband perceived her and also because she appreciated her own female form. Natasha seemed to perceive subtle and yet clear differences in her private and public sexual selves. This was highlighted by her
focus on “safety” and “mutual acceptance” within her relationship, and her focus on “beauty being an important part of my life” when talking about more public aspects of her sexuality.

Sara. Sara was a 26-year-old Caucasian woman. She had been living with her boyfriend for 1 year, and she had no children. Sara worked in the arts and was doing graduate work in the arts.

Sara reported that her sexuality had always been a natural part of who she was. She said, “I’ve always known that I feel really free about my sexuality because I grew up in a really liberal and really open community.” Recently Sara seemed to be experiencing a newfound sense of freedom from her family and a 10-year relationship. She explained, “I felt like I had this fire in me that was burning my insides because I didn’t get to let it out.” Sara said that in her relationship with her ex-boyfriend she had repressed the sexual aspect of herself. She also felt she had repressed her sexuality in order to maintain approval from her parents. More recently, she reported being able to express her sexuality in many ways that allowed her to feel whole as a woman. She explained, “being sexual is part of who I am...that is part of being a strong woman and feeling strong.” Sara attributed her recent experience of sexual freedom, fun, and fulfillment to her current relationship.

Sara described that within the safety, acceptance, and encouragement of her new relationship she has “been reborn again in a way that part of myself that I always knew was there is able to be expressed.” She talked about the “energy” that she felt and how it gave her a sense of power and strength. She described how sexuality was “a being, so it is in me, so it is something that exists in me, it is my own, the power that belongs to me.” The celebration, surrender, visibility, and joy she experienced in her own sexuality were also topics she talked about at length. When asked what she was celebrating, she replied, “Me!”
**Shiva.** Shiva was a 30-year-old single woman of Caucasian origins. She had worked in politics and was attending university. She lived in a shared house and practiced Buddhist meditation.

Shiva felt that she has had "a real sense of sexuality" her whole life. She described that most of her sexual experiences had been "positive" from when she was the "kissing queen" in grade one to more recently when "I chose this route of celibacy for 3 years." She recounted having enjoyed a variety of forms of sexual exploration and fun over the years. She expressed her pride in her own "fluid sexual identity," having explored same sex and heterosexual relationships as well as a variety of less traditional sexual roles. She remembered a short period of "negative" experiences that involved "feeling used" after high school. She attributed these to her having "no self-esteem" at that time, and "seeking reaffirmation that I was sexy, ...lovable, ...worthy." Shiva expressed that sexuality, "it's a huge part of who I am," and that she had gained self-confidence through her role as a sexual teacher for her friends and for her lovers. She had also read extensively in the area of sexuality and had personally "investigated power and control" in her sexual relationships.

For Shiva, her sexuality was one of three resources in her life that she felt helped her access the "non-physical spiritual level" where she felt integrated into "complete peace, complete love, and complete beauty." Sexuality seemed to be a source of personal freedom in "communion" for Shiva. Although her practice of Buddhism had forced her to more closely examine her own beliefs regarding "sexual misconduct," she seemed to be strong in her conviction that when people have consent, and maintain mutual respect and care, that "the sky's the limit." Shiva's concluding statement conveyed her strong sense of
intentionality and self-acceptance when she said, “I’ve had a rich, healthy sex life, and I plan on continuing to live so.”

**Sophie.** Sophie was a 28-year-old woman. She was in a heterosexual relationship, and lived with friends. She had no children and worked primarily as an actress. Sophie described being raised by a “feminist” mother.

Sophie seemed to see her own “journey” towards self-affirming sexuality as being related to her strong sense of “inner beauty” as well as her ability to contribute positively to the well being of others through her expression of sexuality. She said, “my sexual being unravels men’s blocks” and “I open worlds for myself, and...my partners...beautiful, deep places.” Through the process of overcoming sexually aggressive experiences as a child and as a teenager she had come to see her sexuality as an “empowering” aspect of her life. She attributed her ability to overcome these challenges in her past to three things: her own personal “self-care” and “self-celebration,” the healing of “being celebrated” in loving sexual relationships, and a counsellor who helped her be “self aware” of her own talent, intelligence, and sensuality. Sophie talked about her process of “discovering” and “owning” her beauty, rather than feeling that it was something she had to hide so that it would not be “taken from” her.

Sophie spoke about sexuality as an avenue for adventure, and connection “on a deeper level.” She had “a really strong foundation of loving myself” and seemed to enjoy bringing this radiance out into the world to affect others. She enjoyed the experience of “I see you seeing me,” which seemed to be about having another person recognize the inner beauty she already experienced within herself. Sophie said, “I am a powerful being,” but made it clear that the power was “courage” and “an energy” rather than “power over.” For
Sophie sexuality, with its “celebration” and “sensuality” seemed to be just as much a personal experience of “connection to self” as it was an interpersonal experience she shared with others.

**Veronica.** Veronica was a 26-year-old Caucasian woman who lived with her boyfriend. She had no children. Veronica worked in the public school system.

Veronica stated that, “I have always been a sexual person.” She explained that she “grew up worshipping Madonna” and that Madonna “is a very sexual person.” She expressed that sexuality is not something people need to hide, “because everyone knows that everyone does it.” Veronica explained that as a result of her first relationship being one that was focussed on casual sex, “I learned to relate to people by sleeping with them.” After this initial experience she had several “negative” experiences that she felt hurt by. However, it seemed that through developing her “sense of self worth” and eventually learning to “orgasm regularly,” she had “been able to frame in a positive light” her earlier negative experiences.

Veronica seemed to focus on the “physical pleasure” and relational aspects in her sexual experiences. The level of connection or intimacy in her relationships seemed to affect her pleasure in sexual interactions, and she described that in her current relationship “it feels like very open selfless love.” Although Veronica primarily seemed to express her sexuality within the realm of relationships, she did talk about ways in which she expressed her sexuality outside of her relationship. For example, she recounted, “I got my (clitoris) hood done ... for purely selfish reasons, no deeper meaning than pure sexual pleasure... I’m doing this for me and nobody else.” Similarly, Veronica spoke about masturbation as a very natural self-care practice, “it just feels good to do those things for yourself some days.”
Veronica expressed her belief that, “there’s a lot of myths surrounding women’s sexuality.” For example, “the myth of men wanting sex more than women.” She said, “I don’t really fit into those myths.” Instead, Veronica seemed to feel that “women are very powerful sexual creatures.” Although she liked that her sexual rebellion (i.e., piercing) was not visible, she also enjoyed the variety of sexual experiences that she has had, because she enjoyed being a sexually “open person.” Veronica stated about sexuality that, “it’s not something to be hidden in the closet and we should be proud of our sexuality.”

The Journey and Themes

The results of the phenomenological analysis revealed a common process, four common themes, as well as several sub-themes (see Table 1). The themes and sub-themes are interrelated in that they all interact as parts of the same phenomena (see Figure 1). For example, the experience of integrity of self seemed to foster a sense of agency. A sense of agency empowered the women to create the type of connections they find affirming and as a result of these positive connections they experience celebration, which in turn contributes to their experience of integrity of self. However, the goal of phenomenological analysis is not to develop theories or to demonstrate developmental processes. Therefore, the order in which the themes and sub-themes are presented is not representative of relative importance, chronology, or frequency, but rather is representative of a conceptual ordering that is helpful in understanding young women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality.

The themes were as follows: experiencing integrity of self, a sense of agency in sexuality, a sense of connection through sexuality, and experiencing celebration in sexuality. Experiencing integrity of self was about experiencing a sound, complete, and integrated sense of self. In talking about their experience of integrity of self through sexuality the
<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Theme</strong></th>
<th><strong>Sub-theme</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Experiencing Integrity of Self</td>
<td>A Sense of Self-Acceptance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A Sense of Self-Awareness</td>
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<td>A Sense of Self-Love</td>
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<td>A Sense of Strength of Self</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Sense of Agency in Sexuality</td>
<td>A Sense of Respecting Me</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Experiencing Intentionality</td>
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<td>Experiencing Power Through Sexuality</td>
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<td>A Sense of Connection Through Sexuality</td>
<td>A Sense of Intimacy</td>
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<td>Being Myself</td>
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<td>Experiencing Celebration in Sexuality</td>
<td>Feeling Good</td>
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<td>Experiencing Freedom</td>
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<td>Being Seen</td>
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<td>Feeling Alive</td>
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Figure 1. Several interactions between the themes and sub-themes.
women expressed self-acceptance and self-awareness, and supported their self-love, which in turn promoted strength of self. Their sense of agency in sexuality reflected the women’s experiences of being able to act on their own behalf, for their own well-being. Central to this sense of agency were: a sense of “respecting me,” experiencing intentionality, and experiencing power through sexuality. The women’s sense of connection through sexuality conveyed the key role that sexuality plays for these women in feeling connected to themselves and the world around them. Their sense of intimacy and “being myself” were key elements of this theme. The final theme was their experience of celebration in sexuality, which reflected the joyful “honouring” and rebelliousness these women spoke of as part of their sexuality. This experience of celebration involved feeling good, experiencing freedom, being seen, and feeling alive.

In addition to these four themes a common process or “journey” emerged from the women’s stories. All the women described overcoming challenges and persevering on their journey toward self-affirming sexuality. The journey describes how the women came to experience sexuality as self-affirming, and the themes and sub-themes describe the women’s lived experience of self-affirming sexuality. What follows is a description of this journey followed by descriptions of each of the themes and sub-themes detailed with direct quotes from the women’s stories.

The journey towards self-affirming sexuality. In addition to the common themes that emerged, a common process seemed to be evident in the women’s stories of self-affirming sexuality. Many of the women referred to this process as their “journey.” They described a journey towards self-affirming sexuality rather than a static and constant state of self-affirming sexuality.
The journeys they described began with the perception of a "natural" or "free" sexuality during their childhood. These descriptions often involved memories of sexual play with childhood friends and were recounted with a smile on the woman’s face. Then sexual “oppression” or sexual aggression negatively influenced their core experience of sexuality as a positive aspect of their lives. Many of the women talked about the internalized sexual “oppression” they developed out of their parent’s values and beliefs. For example, one woman talked about “things I picked up from the way my parents were,” and said, “the more I shed those things...the more I am happy.” Additionally, many of the women experienced forms of sexual aggression such as childhood sexual abuse, rape, and sexual coercion. One woman explained, “I started to have more of an awareness of what awful things adults do to each other in the sexual world of badness.”

Each of the women then experienced a “healing” of their wounded sexuality. One woman, while reflecting on being hurt in sexual relationships and the healing she experienced following this experience said, “It was an important part of the journey for me.” This healing as “part of the journey” was consistent across all of their stories, but took a different form for each of the women. Many of the women talked about a reconnection with their earlier sense of a positive sexual self. For example, one woman said, “I had felt like my sexuality was taken away from me as a little girl, and then as a teenager it was introduced to me again.” For some of the women this reconnection was the result of positive and affirming experiences with lovers. For others, this involved reframing past negative experiences and was the result of major life changes, talking with other women, and/or psychotherapy. For example, one woman said, “The other big part of that is talking really openly with my girlfriends as well, because I know that they have those experiences too, and that sex is
really complicated and being a woman is really complicated.” Another woman said, “I still wouldn’t call it a mistake, ...it was a learning curve.”

Many of the women talked about realizing that they did not want the kind of sexuality they found themselves experiencing previously, which often focussed on their lovers’ sexual needs and involved feeling “hurt” and “betrayed.” As a result they made active decisions to do things differently in their future sexual relationships. These decisions seemed to be precipitated by a positive self-construction that developed out of affirming life experiences, both directly related to sexuality and those apparently unrelated to sexuality. One woman attributed her sense of sexual agency to maturation, and said, “I am feeling more and more like a woman.” Similarly, another woman explained, “Age and maturity takes away some of the hard edges and I am okay with that. I’d rather feel good about [my sexual past].” Furthermore, all of the women spoke of a time in their life when they started to see sexuality as political and became aware of “societal traps” inherent in sexual relations. For example, one woman talked about wanting to avoid social stereotypes, and said, “I care less about how I think I should be or what other people might think I should be.”

Through the experience of healing their sexuality, the women seemed to return to a positive sexual self-perception. However, now their positive sexual self-perceptions were enhanced by a new sense of personal awareness and personal strength as a result of overcoming the impediments they had faced on their journeys toward self-affirming sexuality. The women were eventually able to enact their positive sexual self-perception in their relationships, as well as in the world around them. For example, one woman described, ...getting to a place where I feel like the majority of my sexual experiences are affirming in comparison to my early sexual experiences, most of which were not affirming, although I think they were necessary in getting to where I am right
now. They were part of learning about who I am and what I want and what I don’t want.

Another woman explained, “I’ve always known that it is a big part of me, but now it’s a part of me that I can really express.”

In summary, the women spoke of a journey towards self-affirming sexuality rather than a consistent and static experience. Although their journeys appear linear when presented in this format, in reality what the women described was far more dynamic and circular. Each of the stages of the journey seemed to reoccur for the women in altered forms as their lives continued, and new obstacles to self-affirming sexuality presented themselves. However, all of the women felt an initial sense of freedom and naturalness in their sexuality during childhood. This positive experience was eventually undermined by negative sexual events in their lives. They overcame these challenges and returned to a more affirming experience of their sexual self. Finally, the women experienced this reinforced sense of sexual self as stronger and better integrated. What follows are the four themes the women expressed in their stories of enacting and experiencing self-affirming sexuality.

**Experiencing integrity of self.** All of the women in this study described experiencing integrity of self as a theme of self-affirming sexuality. Their experience of sexuality seemed to be integrated into their sense of self, rather than being fragmented from it. In this way the women’s sexual experiences contributed to their experience of integrity of self. Contrary to the common meaning of “integrity” as an uncorrupted moral state, the women talked about integrity referring to the less common meaning, which is being whole, complete, and sound, rather than incoherent and fragile. Previously in their lives, some of the women had lived with a sense personal fragmentation as a result of their struggles with
sexuality. However, during the time the women were interviewed they felt that they could integrate their sexuality into their sense of self.

Four sub-themes emerged within the experience of integrity of self, these were: self-acceptance, self-awareness, self-love, and strength of self. Their sense of self-acceptance and being able to accept all aspects of themselves, including their sexuality, was an important capacity for creating the feeling of wholeness that is central to experiencing integrity of self. Furthermore, the sense of self-awareness they expressed seemed to enhance their experience of knowing and accepting all the aspects of themselves. Similarly, the self-cherishing and self-honouring that is involved in their sense of self-love seemed to be fundamental to their experience of integrity of self, because they were able to experience their own special inner beauty and feel strong as a result. The women’s sense of strength of self seemed to reflect their potent experience of an inner source of personal power through their developed sense of self, and it contributed to the robustness involved in experiencing integrity of self. In this way, the women’s sense of self-acceptance and sense of self-awareness enhanced their sense of self-love, which in turn enhanced their sense of strength of self, and all four combined to lay the foundation for the experience of integrity of self.

For the women interviewed, sexuality was not something they could separate from their experience of a their whole selves. One woman explained, “I can't lump sexuality into affecting anything in particular in my life, it feels like that's part of the whole person that I am, it’s all part and parcel of me.” The women spoke about feeling they were missing something essential to their whole self when forced to suppress their sexuality or when they were not able to express their sexuality. One woman described that, “I'm really conscious of making sure that sexual intimacy is there for me all the time because that is part of what
makes me feel really happy, the feeling of being sexual, possessing that is part of who I am.”

For some women this sense of integrity seemed to go beyond integrity of self to a sense of integration with spirit. One woman described that during sexual intercourse she felt:

...reintegration into wholeness, where I’ve found that it’s almost like there’s somewhat of a melting, or a real being in touch with magic, being really in touch with the spirit, and able to feel energy and fire burning through my whole body.

This woman conveyed the integration and wholeness involved in the experience of integrity of self.

Experiencing integrity of self seemed to be both a precursor for self-affirming sexuality as well as an outcome of affirming sexual experiences. Also, integrity of self seemed to be a desired outcome for some of the women, in that once they had found it they sought out experiences that reinforced this sense of wholeness. One woman illuminated how affirming sexual experiences contribute to integrity of self when she spoke about her current sexual relationship, and said, “It allowed me to be a completely full person. I take risks I wouldn’t otherwise take with the rest of my life because of the comfort or centeredness or confidence that it brings with it.” Many of the women spoke of dancing as a sexually self-affirming experience. One woman associated dancing with integrity of self when she said, “I think dancing does it, and your body becomes a mind, your body, its mindlessness when you're dancing, and spiritness.” This woman seemed to experience a unity of mind, body, and spirit while dancing as a form of sexual expression.

A sense of self-acceptance was commonly expressed by the participants in this study and is the first sub-theme of experiencing integrity of self. The safety associated with self-acceptance seemed to open possibilities for these women to trust the process of their own sexual development. One woman spoke about “being able to be honest with myself” about
her sexual needs and desires when she felt safe and comfortable. One woman expressed self-acceptance quite generally when she said, “I am what I am and I realize that's okay.” Specifically, the women talked about how important it was to feel comfortable with their own sexuality as an aspect of their whole self. For example, when asked what had contributed to her experience of self-affirming sexuality one woman replied, “I think being comfortable with your sexuality and expressing your sexuality, because I think I’m probably a lot more sexual than I wanted to let myself admit.” This woman talked about the importance of “being okay with those things and with what your desires are.” The women all seemed to feel that their sexuality had been repressed at some point in their lives and one woman said, “bringing to the surface, no longer repressing all of these urges allowed me to find a real empowerment.” Hence, accepting her sexuality allowed her to feel better about herself. For another woman being open about her sexuality seemed to have contributed to her feeling particularly good about her sexuality. She said, “that has been the big breakthrough for me, being open about it.” By being open with themselves and expressing their sexuality more openly, these women seemed to feel more integrated as people.

As part of their sense of self-acceptance, the women all experienced themselves as open-minded, as well as open with others in relationships. The women felt that they were honest, candid, and approachable interpersonally in terms of their own sexuality, as well as sexual matters in general. One woman talked about being open to new sexual experiences, and said “I came to a new openness about, there’s a few things that I’m definitely real clear don’t turn me on, but almost everything else I’m pretty much willing to try.” The women talked also about an “openness of self,” or being “your real self.” One woman described it as, “The whole feeling of reintegration and space to be completely myself, no hiding
anything.” Their sense of integrity seemed to emerge when the women were able to create a connection with their complete sense of self through self-acceptance, specifically through sexual self-acceptance.

A sense of self-awareness, the second sub-theme, seemed to result from the participants’ experience of self-acceptance, which allowed them to feel more comfortable with the many aspects of their self. The safety and comfort resulting from their self-acceptance provided the opportunity for enhanced openness with themselves and the ability to be their “real” selves. One woman, in discussing how she created safety and comfort in relationships explained, “It’s become a process of just trusting the process and watching my own expectations.” She depicted how self-awareness and understanding her own expectations allowed her to trust the process of establishing new sexual relationships. When making decisions about their sexuality the women talked about “trying to get in touch with the real me” or being more self-aware. The women explained that through sexual experiences they learned about aspects of themselves that they could not express in their everyday lives. One woman described:

Sometimes I’m surprised by myself, it’s this power, and then I really let myself go and have fun with it, I don’t care what anybody is thinking, and it’s really affirming because it makes me learn more about myself, and it makes me think there’s a lot more to explore too.

She demonstrates how in having fun with her sexuality she deepens her self-awareness. As part of their sense of self-awareness the women described being “in touch with the beauty of [their] existence.” In this way, their enhanced experience of knowing themselves promoted a stronger sense of integrity, because they feel strengthened by their thorough and coherent knowledge of themselves.
Similarly, understanding their sexual history seemed to be a source of self-awareness and contributed to their experience of integrity of self. For example, when looking at her recovery from negative sexual experiences in her past, one woman said, “I realized that that’s what made me who I am today and it made me feel much more of a whole individual, so I think that was a pretty huge part of the process.” This participant revealed how the process of understanding her sexual history, and therefore becoming more self-aware, has contributed to her feeling more integrated as an individual. Regarding the experience of remembering past negative sexual experiences, another woman said:

It makes me feel whole, and I’m able, I want to love every part of myself even the negative things that have happened, and I think that can sometimes be the most healing thing, to be able to embrace those and accept that they’re a part of who you are, whether they were a negative or a positive.

This woman portrayed how the experience of embracing her sexual history had helped her feel more whole and integrated. Understanding their own sexuality and sexual history led these women to know themselves better and feel more connected to themselves, thus their sense of self-awareness supported their experience of integrity of self.

The third sub-theme of their experience of integrity of self was the women’s sense of self-love. Many of the women spoke explicitly about “self-love” when talking about self-affirming sexual experiences. Through their sense of (sexual) self-acceptance and (sexual) self-awareness the women were able to cherish themselves, and feel pride, self-esteem, and self worth. One woman described, “feeling really happy to be me, to be who I am on every level.” She highlighted how her sense of self-appreciation contributed to her experience of integrity of self. The women talked about experiencing inner beauty and sensuality through sexual experiences. After travelling and having sexual interactions with men abroad, one woman said, “I really discovered being beautiful...I started glorifying the fact that I was
beautiful.” She went on to explain, “it is not looks when I say beauty, it’s the inner I mean.”

Another woman exclaimed, “I am a beautiful human being!” The women seemed to gain ever more clarity of reflection regarding this experience of self-love through sexuality as the interviews evolved.

Although each woman seemed to experience self-love in her own unique way, there were common elements. Each of the women engaged in activities that they perceived as making love to themselves. One woman described:

I lie in the sun, and have the sun shinning on me, and feeling glorified by that moment, and it’s sexual. I would imagine the sun as an imaginary lover making love to me. I feel my own giving of myself, and that’s quite healing to know that I don’t need anybody else but me.

Self-love seemed to have healing properties for many of the women. One woman explained how she healed from sexual aggression in her past: “How I healed from those was having a really clear connection with myself as my own lover.” Another woman talked about enjoying looking at her own body in the mirror, and explained, “its very narcissistic I think, and I’ve realized that I’m totally okay with it, and in some ways how I make love to myself is through appreciating that kind of stuff.” When asked what “narcissism” meant to her, she explained:

I think for me its looking in the mirror a lot, its making sure the gut is not getting too big but it also means I like my own self, I like the smell of my skin when I’m sweating in the sun, and I like to look at myself when we’re making love.

In this way, the women spoke about their ability to make love to themselves and feel a sense of personal integrity by loving and embracing all aspects of themselves.

The fourth sub-theme evident in the theme of experiencing integrity of self was a sense of strength of self. It seemed that as a result of the self-acceptance, self-awareness, and
self-love they derived from their sexual experiences the women also experienced strength of self. This aspect of self-affirming sexuality appeared to be experienced as an internal source of power and was difficult for them to articulate. They used words such as “the fire inside,” “my energy,” “life force,” or “beauty” to refer to this experience that seemed broader than sexual energy. While talking about the strength of self they experienced through sexuality, the women described trusting their intuition, feelings of confidence, and empowerment. One woman captured well how sexuality contributes to her strength of self and personal empowerment when she described,

...sex as a source of power, a source of empowerment, a source of transformation, a source of reintegration, a source of healing, a place in which to be completely one’s self, completely free to express our own true desires and to live them, create them.

Thus, similar to all the participants, sexual intercourse seemed to contribute to her ability to feel complete, such that she experienced a stronger sense of self, which seemed to be a central element of her experience of integrity of self.

Ironically, the women also talked about how few outlets there were in their lives for this inner source of power or energy. One outlet was through their sexuality: “there’s very few outlets for me for that fire inside experience, but sexuality’s definitely a place where I can let it out.” Another woman talked about her experience of holding in this energy: “I felt like I had this fire in me that was burning my insides because I didn’t get to let it out, now I just feel like I can breathe fire all the time.” When the women talked about being beautiful the essence of what they said was very similar to their experience of the “fire inside.” This inner experience of beauty seemed to be an internal source of personal strength. For example, one woman while describing a particular self-affirming sexual experience
explained: “I'm saying that I'm beautiful, I'm owning my own power but it's not like power-over, it's your energy.” When asked about what beauty meant to her, this woman explained:

My perspective is that beauty is everywhere, the way the wind blows in the trees, the flowers blossoming, beauty is an expression of life, life for living and life in the big capital L is a beautiful thing. Love is a beautiful thing. And so my own beauty puts me in place with the fact that I'm connected to the actual universal thing, like the heart of the universe. When I'm feeling my beauty, it gives me courage, it gives me a sense of perspective, and that's empowering.

This sense of “energy” and “beauty” that the women experienced as part of their sexuality seemed to give the women confidence. One woman said, “I'm an attractive woman, and it gives me courage.” Another woman talked about how feeling confident “allowed that deeper level [of herself] to come out.” In this way, having the confidence to express all aspects of themselves, “it’s like independence and that’s like self confidence. I think having that down, all of a sudden your sexuality is part of yourself.” In trying to convey this vague sense of energy or power that the participants struggled with words to describe and that seemed to be so central to their experience of self-affirming sexuality, the women did convey a concrete sense that their sense of self had deepened and become strengthened as a result of their sexual experiences. This strengthening of their sense of self is a fundamental component of the theme experiencing integrity of self.

Experiencing strength of self and integrity of self also seemed to empower the women to access and trust what they called their “intuition.” One woman described this as, “an instructual thing where I know if there’s a danger of someone not being as kind to me as I deserve, my body will just clam up and not let me go there.” This woman seemed to describe being able to trust her bodily sensations in guiding her in what is good for her. She talked about a time when she did not trust this bodily sense, and said:
I think it was an important part of the journey for me because it made me realize how much I can trust my body and myself as far as knowing what’s right and what’s wrong for me, and any doubts that arise now I can put in context and know that I really can trust myself when it comes to instincts.

The strength of self she has developed through her sexual experiences has allowed her to trust her intuition, and therefore experience integrity of self.

In summary, all the women in this study described experiencing integrity of self as a theme of self-affirming sexuality. For these women experiencing integrity of self was about feeling sound, whole, and complete as people in their sexuality. The four sub-themes interplayed such that through (sexual) self-acceptance the women were able to experience themselves and therefore know themselves better. Their (sexual) self-awareness and their feeling of knowing themselves better contributed to their sense of self-love. Finally, their self-acceptance and self-awareness, together with their self-love provided a safe context (in their sexual experiences) in which the women experienced a strength of self that was essential to their experience of integrity of self. In this way, the women’s sexual experiences engendered feelings of strength and integrity as they faced the world around them.

Finding a sense of agency in sexuality. All of the women in this study spoke about finding a sense of agency in sexuality. Here agency refers to how the women seemed to experience themselves as active agents in determining their experience of sexuality, their sexual experiences, and their life choices related to sexuality. One woman described this element of “action” when she said, “it quickly became really evident that he wasn’t someone I wanted to involve myself with, so I acted upon that just as quickly as I acted upon involving myself with him.” Agency was reflected in their ability to determine their own best interests, to act in the service of their own best interests, and to take charge of their sexual decisions.
Three sub-themes emerged within the theme finding a sense of agency in sexuality. The first sub-theme, a sense of respecting me, relates to how the women’s sense of self-respect motivated them to act as agents in taking care of themselves and in seeking out satisfaction in their sexual experiences. The second sub-theme, experiencing intentionality, represents how each woman seemed to experience purposefulness as agents in the sexual choices they made for themselves. The third sub-theme, experiencing power through sexuality, illuminates how their sense of agency seemed to go beyond the confines of personal well-being into an enjoyment of the positive effects of their sexual power in the world around them. Thus, the theme finding agency in sexuality is shaped by the three sub-themes “respecting me,” intentionality, and power.

The first sub-theme of the participant’s sense of agency in sexuality was their sense of respecting me. Respecting me involved self-respect as well as respect from others. Their self-respect was reflected in their agency towards their own self-nurturance, self-care, and self-protection. One of the women conveyed her experience of agency through self-respect and self-nurturance when she said, “I can fill my own holes and fill my emptinesses by dancing, by waking up under the sun, by buying myself flowers, having baths, and the ritual of sometimes shaving my legs or doing yoga.” She, like the other women, often took time to do special things she associated with her sexuality, like drawing, bathing, dancing, sewing, or running, simply for her own well-being. The women also demonstrated self-respect in how they talked about sexual intercourse as a mechanism for their own self-care. One woman described her agency in using her sexual relationships for self-care:

I almost feel like my relationship with my boyfriend and the positivity that I get out of our sexual relationship together has kind of balanced the other things so I’m almost happier than I should be considering the other things going on. So for me its
almost like it’s a coping mechanism right now, that one aspect of positivity kind of perseverates and spreads across the other aspects that are not so good.

Many of the women also talked about “taking care of myself” in terms of sexual and emotional self-protection. One participant linked her ability to act as an agent for her own sexual protection directly with her growing sense of self-respect, and described: “I had more self respect and I didn’t allow people to use me and suppress my pride, users don’t come onto me anymore because they’re not going to get anywhere.” When asked what taking care of herself meant, another woman spoke about emotional self-protection and replied:

Just being really kind to myself and my needs, and being really kind about the people that I get involved with physically too... and being kind to myself in the sense that I'm not going to put myself in a situation where I'm going to be taken advantage of or hurt or treated unkindly or just fucked around.

In this way, the women portrayed how they perceived themselves as agents with will and power to engage in self-nurturing, self-caring, and self-protecting behaviours out of respect for themselves.

The women’s sense of agency and their sense of respecting themselves were also conveyed by their standards regarding respect from others in sexual situations. One participant captured this standard of mutual respect when she said, “if someone wanted to be more sexually intimate with me there would have to be a lot of respect before that happened.” These standards of mutual respect were demonstrated in their basic expectation of satisfaction in sexual experiences. Their “unwritten rules” about mutual satisfaction seemed to be an outcome of their belief that sexual satisfaction is an indicator of respect within sexual relationships. These women conveyed a sense of agency in developing standards of mutual respect and by actively requiring these standards be fulfilled in their sexual experiences.
The second sub-theme within the women’s sense of agency in sexuality was their experience of intentionality. They acted as agents with purpose and intention in seeking sexual and relational outcomes that served their own well-being. They seemed to feel they had freedom of choice, and they took responsibility for both positive and challenging sexual experiences in their lives. Specifically, they talked about taking personal responsibility without burdening themselves with blame for negative sexual experiences in the past. The women seemed to actively reframe their negative sexual experiences as learning opportunities. One woman said about her history of sexual relationships, “I’ve been lucky in the sense that more of them have been positive than negative and even the negatives I’ve been able to frame in a positive light.” Her sense of agency seemed to have enabled her to intentionally reframe experiences of sexual aggression so that she felt empowered rather than disempowered. Another woman described a strong sense of agency in her intentionality about being sexually assertive:

I guess for me in that particularly situation I think I had a lot of leadership, I made the moves, and I was aggressive about it. It was great because I wasn't leaving it to him to do it, and that's something that I've carried throughout my sexual experiences in my life, it's just that I pursue and when I pursue usually things happen, and they've been mostly all positive.

The sense that she had created “mostly all positive” outcomes in her sexual experiences seemed to be very self-affirming. The women’s overall experience of intentionality was conveyed well when one participant, while talking about her current sexual relationship, said:

I feel like I don't want to go back to a place where I feel repressed sexually, I like this feeling of celebrating my sexuality, so in terms of getting out of norms, I feel like I can demand a certain level of sexual intensity, I mean not in a demanding way but that these are my expectations.
Here she spoke directly about her intention to act on her own behalf to fulfill the standards of sexual intimacy that she had learned to expect. Similar to the other participants, she had determined what benefits she derived from her sexual experiences and in acting upon this knowledge she experienced agency and a sense of power.

The women also spoke with a sense of agency in their intentionality about “doing it for me.” One woman related this to sexual pleasure, and described:

During sex when you're being physical, you're really tuning into your body and into pleasing your body and especially now that I've really come to the epiphany about what my needs are...and wanting to fulfill those needs in my relationship, I'm not afraid to look into myself and ask 'well what is it, what are my needs and what is it that is pleasurable for me?'

Another woman described her experience of having her clitoris pierced, and reported:

It just felt good to go out and do something that was purely for me, it would purely serve my enjoyment, nobody else's, the primary purpose is to expediate my pleasure and it just felt good to be able to do something like that for yourself, it was like masturbating in the afternoon just because you want to, it feels good to do those things for yourself some days.

Both of these women conveyed their sense of agency in how they intentionally acted on their own behalf for their own benefit. “Doing it for me” also pertained to the women’s experiences of acting as agents in their own sexual healing. The women talked about how their sexual agency contributed to their healing after being hurt in relationships or by sexual aggressors. One woman talked about her childhood experience of sexual “oppression” and described how her art was a venue in which she actively rediscovered her “sexual self.”

Another woman talked about the pain she had experienced in sexual relationships in the past and the measures she intentionally took to heal from these injuries:

I have taken this 3 year hiatus where I had stopped being with anyone, I was basically trying to deal with some of the past emotional traumas that have happened to me and to break old habits and patterns of being with men that weren’t good for me, and desiring to be with men so that they could reaffirm my identity for me. I
really wanted to be on my own for a period of time, so I chose this route of celibacy for 3 years.

All the women talked about making decisions to take care of themselves in sexual situations. One woman talked about having to make difficult decisions in sexual relationships, and said, “really making the decision to do what was best for me at the time, selfish as it sounds, it was important.” All of the women conveyed the intentionality involved in their finding a sense of agency in sexuality as they actively made choices to take care of themselves and to heal from sexual harm.

The third sub-theme within finding a sense of agency in sexuality that all the women spoke about was the experience of power through sexuality. For example, one woman stated very directly, “you use sex for power sometimes, you do it all the time, it’s a very powerful tool.” She explained that:

I think women are very powerful sexual creatures and … sometimes I don’t think that women are aware of it… taking better care of myself made me realize how powerful I am. Not power maybe, powerful isn’t the right word, but that I can make a difference or something.

Here she talked about a sense of agency in affecting people without wanting to have power over them. This sense of power seemed to come from the combination of owning their sexuality and it’s affect on others, together with having control and choice in their sexual experiences. Owning their sexuality seemed to be about owning the external power of their beauty and sexuality to affect other people, but also about owning their sexuality as an internal source of power. For example, one woman said, “I feel like I can undo men in bed.” She went on to explain:

I find that my sexual being unravels men sometimes, meaning that places where their bodies have been blocked or their mind frame, and their way of making love gets challenged in a good way. I unravel men's blocks because of my own sensuality and my sexuality and that's something that makes me feel good. Realizing that I'm a
powerful being and can make people who are feeling shy feel loved or people who feel like they have to hide in the corners, and I touch people in places that they are hiding from and then I get a feeling of worth, value, or pride, or something. I know they will never forget, and that's affirming for me because it makes me feel really powerful, not powerful, it makes me feel really human, really alive, and really connected to the important things about life like the sensual things about life, closer to the love about life.

This woman conveyed the common sense of agency in her “owning” the healing quality she perceived in her own sexuality.

The women all seemed to agree that it felt good and powerful to feel sexy. For example, one woman explained:

Well it feels really good to feel sexy; you know that's why we dress up, put on makeup. It gives you that drive and you feel strong. My other girlfriend says, ‘I got my jazz, it's my jazz going on or got your groove on.’ It's a feeling of being powerful in your sexuality.

The participants seemed to enjoy feeling sexy when they had a sense of choice, when they felt no obligation to attend to the interest they received for their natural beauty. One woman, when talking about being in a committed relationship, explained:

I feel way more safe wearing a skirt and wearing a tight shirt, I'm proud of who I am and how I look and I want to be feminine and if that means that someone is going to whistle at me, that means I'm going to put up the bird. If someone thinks I'm hot, sure, but it doesn't mean that there's an obligation.

They seemed to be aware of the social phenomenon of the powerful attractive woman, but they did not seem to take on the burden of being required to be an attainable object. One woman spoke about this element of power from the perspective of control and choice when she reported, “I actually felt like I had the upper hand in that, it actually made me feel good.” Choice and control seem to be important constituents of their sense of agency. Another woman described “owning” her choice to talk about sex:

I like to play with talking about sex, to have a sense of ownership of it, because women don't always. Maybe it's changing with our generation. I feel like I can talk
about it and own it, it's not anything to be scared of, and it's just something everybody does, sex. I guess I can only describe it in terms of it giving me a sense of feeling strength and power, because it's such a powerful thing.

In this situation the woman acted with agency to "own" sex-talk, and felt powerful as a result. Another woman talked about a sense of power and control in terms of rejecting stereotypes that she felt were unfounded. She said:

In movies the man is always in control, and he's the one who's doing it to the woman. I can feel that strength specifically as a woman, in terms of expressing my sexuality in a really powerful way, during actual sex, taking control, because men don't own that kind of power, and it's not something that you have to be passive about because it is this fire inside of us, and women are sexy and I think that it's really great to be sexy, not as an object, but as someone who owns that power.

The women all seemed to have a sense of ownership and control in their sexual interactions that contributed to their experience of being powerful, and their sense of agency in sexuality.

In summary, the women interviewed all expressed finding a sense of agency in sexuality. They were able to act with agency on their own behalf toward their own personal desires. This agency was based in the power they felt because of their sexuality, and they demonstrated their agency in their ability to maintain a sense of respect in their lives and to act with intentionality in the choices they made. In this way, a sense of respecting me, experiencing intentionality, and experiencing power through sexuality interweave to engender a sense of agency that all of the women shared. Their sense of agency seemed to be essential to their ability to build the connections that they desired in their lives.

A sense of connection through sexuality. During the women's interviews each woman spoke about relational connection through sexuality. In talking about relational connection through sexuality, the participants described an experience of union or joining when affectively involved with themselves or another through their sexuality. This joining seemed to create a sensation for the women of feeling close with herself or another. One
woman described this as a “togetherness.” The experience of connection and closeness seemed to be highly valued by the participants as a source of learning and personal growth.

The women spoke about connection within a sexual context, such as “we had connected so deeply on a sexual level.” As well, they spoke about mental connections; for example, one woman spoke about “being able to connect on a mental level and really being able to get to know them” as part of relational connection through sexuality. When talking about her connection with other people one woman described it as an “energetic, spiritual, psychic connection.” For the participants there seemed to be an element of spiritual connection in addition to the interpersonal and intra-personal connections. One woman said, “I’m feeling connected to the universe, to life, and to spirit.” Another woman described it as “being really in touch with the spirit.”

Two sub-themes emerged within the women’s sense of connection through sexuality; these were a sense of intimacy and “being myself.” The women in this study described their sense of intimacy as a desired result of their sexual relational connections. Being myself reflected their experience of being open about themselves and feeling that they do not have to hide anything about themselves in sexual situations. In this way, the safety they felt in intimacy provided a context in which they could express themselves openly, thus feeling more deeply connected to themselves and others within a sexual context.

The first sub-theme of their sense of connection through sexuality was their sense of intimacy. Intimacy here refers to deep familiarity with one’s most inward, deep-seated, and fundamental character. This deep familiarity seemed to be an essential element of the connection the women experienced through sexuality. One woman explained that, “feeling pleasure through being intimate with people” was an important aspect of her experience of
self-affirming sexuality. Yet another woman highlighted how intimacy was not simply a physical experience, and said, “being intimate with someone is opening up to someone on more than just a physical level.” For these women intimacy meant not only physical intimacy, but mental and emotional intimacy as well.

There seemed to be mutuality to the intimacy that the women described, a give and take that is necessary for any literal or metaphorical connection to occur. One woman when describing a particular self-affirming sexual experience talked about being “allowed to give myself and also, in turn, they give themselves.” This mutuality highlights the relational element of this theme as the women talked about interpersonal exchanges. Another woman described what made a particular experience special and affirming for her when she said, “it was the way we were communicating and treating each other that particular day, there was a real strength in our company.” Other women talked about their sexual roles as teacher or student as an interpersonal source of intimacy and connection. One woman talked about her experience of connection and intimacy in her role as teacher for her lovers. Conversely, another woman described enhanced intimacy as a result of her role as a student in her sexual relationship. Thus, mutual give and take in the women’s relationships seemed to deepen their experiences of intimacy, and their sense of connection.

“Safety” and “comfort” also seemed to be important elements of the intimacy these women sought and built in their connections. In talking about sexuality and attraction, one woman emphasised security when she said, “I think attraction and security maybe go together.” Another woman highlighted safety and said, “for me to be able to completely immerse myself in a sexual experience I need to feel safe.” The women seemed to be clear that “feelings of being vulnerable” were a part of intimacy that scared them; “being known”
sexually seemed to be a risky business. Hence, building deep mutual familiarity in their sexual relationships seemed to be a common strategy for insuring safety. One woman said that when she had “gotten to know people at a deeper level, I’ve noticed the trust is there just because you feel that they know you a little better.” Another woman talked about the “peacefulness” she experienced in an intimate relationship. She said, “there's a peacefulness about knowing each other really well, knowing what buttons to press for each other, and knowing to respect times where one or the other isn’t comfortable doing whatever the other is asking.” By creating safety in their lives and relationships the women’s ability to be intimate in sexual relationships and to “really connect” seemed to be enhanced.

The second sub-theme of the women’s sense of connection through sexuality is directly related to this concern with “safety,” “vulnerability,” and “being known.” “Being myself” seemed to require safety because the women seemed to feel vulnerable as they opened themselves to being known. One woman captured the special quality of openness that is part of sexual intimacy when she talked about, “that level of intimacy in which you have to trust, because you’re exposing a part of yourself that we usually hide from most people.” One woman called this “opening myself.” Another woman talked about having the “space to be completely myself, no hiding anything.” The women talked about being able to make contact with “your real self” and “feeling like I can express myself, uninhibited” as a source of connection with themselves. One woman illuminated the women’s desire for mutual understanding when she talked about the importance of “having the knowledge, the history, the complete trust, and complete understanding of each other.” Another woman said, “I want to be known just as I want to know.” The women referred to this as “sharing” themselves. One woman discussed the positive results of being open about herself in a
relationship. She talked about "being able to let it all loose with someone," and how "during that time I went from being quite self conscious about my body to being actually really comfortable in my skin." The serial experience of "being myself," "being seen," and "being accepted" seemed to feel self-affirming for the women. One woman said, "It just felt good that he recognized me, and he could see me, and he was attracted to that."

The sub-theme "being myself" did not only apply to openness to others, but also openness to oneself. The experience of connection with self through sexuality seemed to promote a deeper knowledge and therefore appreciation of self. The experience of coming to know themselves on a more intimate level seemed to enable them to feel more caring towards themselves. They talked about "knowing myself and really taking care of myself." Also related to this "openness to self," one woman talked about being more sexually open and "how much more connected I am to my body." This woman highlighted the connection the women experienced with their own bodies through sexuality. In this way, the women demonstrated "being myself" and an enhanced connection with self as aspects of self-affirming sexuality.

In summary, the women in this study all spoke about a sense of connection through sexuality as a theme in their experience of self-affirming sexuality. The first sub-theme, a sense of intimacy represents a key element of what the women valued about the experience of connection. The women highlighted the importance of mutuality in their connections as they spoke about being intimate with others. As a result of the safety and comfort of mutual intimacy the women were able to experience "being myself," the second sub-theme of a sense of connection through sexuality. While talking about the experience of getting in touch with and expressing their "real" selves, the women described how the relational connection
was not only with others but also within themselves. The women’s ability to create meaningful connections with themselves and others facilitated their experience of celebration through sexuality.

Experiencing celebration in sexuality. All of the women interviewed spoke about experiencing celebration through their sexuality. The word celebration means to observe, honour, and praise through rites and festivities (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1964). They used words such as “glorifying” and “self celebration” to describe this experience of “transcendence from the mundane.” They expressed that self-affirming sexuality involved honouring themselves, their partners, and life in general. This honouring was captured well when one woman said, “I lie in the sun, the sun shining on me, and I feel glorified by that moment.” One woman referred quite specifically to “celebrating that sexual girl in me.” Another woman described how good it felt to celebrate herself when she said; “I feel on top of the world, I feel so high, because I’m celebrating myself.” Another woman spoke more broadly about celebration, saying, “I’m celebrating now, and I think its great because it makes me feel really excited about life.”

Within the experience of celebration there were four sub-themes: feeling good, experiencing freedom, being seen, and feeling alive. The sub-theme feeling good reflected the women’s common experience that sexuality was a venue in which to have a good time and feel pleasure, both of which the women saw as fundamental to celebration. The second sub-theme, experiencing freedom captured the sense the women had of being about to lose control and do things that might otherwise be forbidden as traditional aspects of celebrations. The third sub-theme, being seen, illuminated the women’s desire to be visible and visibly sexual, so that sexuality could be publicly celebrated. The fourth sub-theme,
feeling alive revealed the women’s experience of sexuality as sacred, energetic, and natural. These elements of feeling alive are essential to the energetic magnitude of the women’s experience of celebration in sexuality. All four of these sub-themes interact to create a dynamic portrayal of celebration in sexuality.

All the women talked about the first sub-theme, “feeling good,” as part of their experience of celebration in sexuality. Feeling good was described as “euphoria,” “feeling a 100% content,” being “over the moon with happiness,” and “something to look forward to” when other things were getting them down. In talking about sexual intercourse, one woman said, “this is something that makes me feel really good.” It seemed that sexual intercourse was something that the women thought of as a treat, or a good thing for themselves. One woman described in detail how “feeling good” happened for her, “I think it makes me happier in general and probably more relaxed, it’s good to have that relief. There’s got to be some endorphins and some chemical something that’s released during that time.”

“Pleasure” and “orgasm” seemed to be important elements of their experience of feeling good. The women talked about “pure sexual pleasure” and “tuning into your body and into pleasuring your body.” One woman said, “its not that I really think the goal of sex is to achieve orgasm, but it’s a good bonus.” However, another woman explained:

I’ve had experiences where it felt really good, and I know it’s the feelings that make me feel that way, it wasn’t the act that made me feel that way, and so conversely it’s the good feelings I have in my sexual experiences that make me know that they're good and positive. So it’s not just about the orgasm, it’s about feeling such an intense love that it makes me cry, so it’s not just about the physical.

“Chemistry,” “attraction,” and “desire” also seemed to be significant elements of feeling good in the celebration. The women talked about “enjoying the vibe” and “feeling magnetic.” In this way, having a good time and feeling good were definitely an element of
the celebration that these women described as part of their experience of self-affirming sexuality.

The sub-theme experiencing freedom was another important piece of the experience of celebration in sexuality for the women interviewed. For this group of women, sexuality seemed to be a unique medium for them to experience a complete sense of abandon and freedom. One woman explained, “There’s very few outlets to let it all loose.” Another woman said self-affirming sexuality “means being completely free.” In the women’s descriptions of celebration through sexuality there seemed to be an abandon that one woman described well; “you can completely lose control, you can be completely free, you can play silly games, talk dirty, and try all kinds of crazy things and express your deepest desires, you can be really free.” This sensation of celebration seemed to be accentuated by “losing your inhibitions,” “letting go,” “surrendering,” and “losing control.” They seemed to be surrendering to their “needs,” “pleasures,” and “feelings.” One woman said, “its like surrendering to the fact that you have these needs, it’s always more pleasurable if you just let go.” It was not simply about freedom in the act of sexual intercourse, but also “being free with your imagination and being okay with those things.” There was a freedom to be “silly” and have “fun” too. They talked about “humour” and “laughter” being important parts of their sexuality. One woman said that what she liked about her sexual interactions was that, “I don’t have to be a serious adult all the time.” Another woman said the sense of integrity previously described was the “ultimate freedom.” In describing how energizing she found this freedom in her sexuality, one woman said, “I just feel like I can breathe fire all the time.”
For the participants, the experience of freedom through celebration was an intentional source of rebellion and breaking taboos. For one woman this meant “breaking through ties of ways of thinking that aren’t mine, or feelings that I don’t believe are mine, that I have picked up from the way my parents are.” Another woman talked about how “so many women have repressed so many desires for so long in the name of feminist politics,” and to her this was “antithetical” to being a feminist. The “experience of bringing to the surface, no longer repressing all of these urges” allowed them “to find a real empowerment, a real freedom” in their sexuality. They expressed the uniqueness of being able to express the “really free fiery, full of life, little bit mischievous kind of person” in each of them. The women described adventurousness in their experience of sexuality. They used words like “exploration” and “excitement” to describe their experiences of sexual adventurousness. They expressed that “rebellion feels good.” For one woman this was about “challenging taboos” and “being cutting edge.” Within an environment of safety, the women felt free to break norms and be adventurous in celebrating themselves and life through their sexuality.

The third sub-theme the women conveyed as an important part of celebrating themselves and their sexuality was “being seen.” Visibility seemed to be a valued part of self-expression, because it seemed to be a form of being experienced by another. In this way “being seen” was a necessary part of their experience of self-affirming sexuality. Being “viewed” as beautiful was described as “a very feminine thing, it’s about showing your stuff because you’ve got it.” One woman explained,

I find beauty being an important part of my life. I put effort into my clothes and I put effort into my fitness, I put effort into the food I eat, and when I look good, I feel good. I know that sounds so shallow and so commercial but I’ve always felt that way.
This “showing” of their beauty seemed to have an aspect of “performance” to it. One woman talked about “showing my stuff” when dressing up and how she was “acting the part and that was so much fun.”

The desire to “put it on display” for others was expressed by one woman when in describing her sexual connection with her boyfriend, she explained, “it was really self-affirming for me to be able to show everyone else.” This woman expressed a common assertion, that by making her sexuality visible she was proving to herself and everyone else that sexuality is not bad and does not need to be hidden. One woman expressed that “being seen” as a sexual person was important to her, but also that she found it difficult to avoid feeling like a sex object. She described:

It is a reminder to me of this big part of who I am, and I can show that without sort of feeling like a sexual object. I want to be who I am and not be just sex. I mean it’s sort of a fine line as women, its a really good feeling, but then there is another feeling, as a woman of being also a sexual object that doesn’t have this dis-attachment from her power. And so maybe my experience with being more public about my sexuality is that I feel really comfortable with expressing that and so then it’s a way that I can express it in a powerful way.

It seemed that while being visible as sexual beings contributed to their experience of personal power, it became necessary to avoid being perceived as a sexual object and “having my power taken.” For the women interviewed “being seen” seemed to be about balancing the celebration of their own beauty and sexuality with the potential of sexual objectification.

The fourth sub-theme the women talked about was “feeling alive” in their experience of self-affirming sexuality. Feeling alive was variously expressed as “feeling really there,” “that sense of really being alive,” and “awakening all your senses.” One woman described a particularly affirming experience, saying, “Every single cell of my body is alive and
reverberating.” She explained, “the physical experience intensifies the feelings, the physical experience solidified those feelings, and made it all more real.”

The women seemed to share the perspective that feeling alive through sexuality is “natural” and “sacred,” which further enriched the women’s experience of celebration. The “naturalness” of sexuality and sexual intercourse were conveyed in many ways during the women’s interviews. Many of the women talked about sexuality as a natural aspect of themselves that they were born with. One woman said, “I feel like I’ve always been a sexual person.” They seemed to believe that sexuality is “normal,” and has a “natural ebb and flow” to it. They said, “Everyone knows everyone does it.” Many of the women talked about “self-love” or “being with women” as “very natural” and a form of “celebrating.” These women described, “not restricting sexuality” and “realizing that everyone is sexual, it’s okay to be sexual, and to express that when you feel it.” In terms of sexuality being sacred, the women also spoke of “magic and power,” and “living completely in the spirit.” One woman explained, “for me sex has become really sacred and, in turn, my body has become really sacred.” It seemed that through the process of accepting their own sexuality as natural and cherishing it as sacred, these women experienced an invigoration of self, which contributed to their overall sense of celebration through sexuality.

In summary, through the women’s descriptions of feeling good, experiencing freedom, being seen, and feeling alive, a dynamic portrayal of celebration emerged. Although many of the experiences the women described as moments of celebration involved sexual intercourse, when asked to explain celebration the women demonstrated that celebration was a part of their whole lives and not limited to sexual interactions. For example, the good feelings and freedom experienced during sexual intimacy seemed to
pervade their lives, and affect their work and their ability to cope with life’s trials. Being seen and feeling alive both seemed to energize and empower the women beyond their sexual relationships. Thus, celebration through sexuality illuminates how these women experience self-affirming sexuality.

Summary

Finally, the women’s sense of celebration seemed to feedback to and support their sense of integrity of self, and all of the themes come together to form a complex description of these young women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality. The self-acceptance, self-awareness, self-love, and strength of self that contribute to their sense of integrity of self seemed to give them the courage to act with agency in their sexuality. The respect, intentionality, and powerfulness involved in their sense of agency enabled them to set and enforce standards of personal fulfilment in their relationships. As a result, they seemed to experience profound intimacy, as they felt safe to express all aspects of themselves in their connections with themselves and others. With a stronger sense of self and stronger sense of agency, the connections the women experienced within themselves and with others seemed increasingly celebratory. Their experience of celebration further contributed to their positive sense of self and their ability to feel good as they felt more freedom, more alive, and more able to reveal their sexual selves. In this way, the journey that these women described was illuminated as a dynamic, continuous, and ongoing process.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to illuminate young women’s subjective experience of self-affirming sexuality. Phenomenological methodology was utilized to provide a deep and rich understanding of this phenomenon in women between the ages 25 and 30. The research was guided by the question: what is the meaning and experience of self-affirming sexuality for young women? Four themes with sub-themes emerged through analysis of the interviews with seven participants. These themes capture the essence of the young women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality. This chapter presents a redress of the meaning of sexuality for young women, and a comparison of the results with available related literature, including a comparison with the dominant discourse of women’s sexuality. Finally, the implications of these results for future research and counselling are considered.

Little research has been done on women’s experience of self-affirming sexuality, and even less research has focussed on young women’s experience of sexuality. This study responds to the call for an emancipatory discourse of women’s sexuality. The women in this study experienced sexuality as self-affirming, and had a great deal to say about the positive influence sexuality had on their personal development and identity formation. These women developed self-affirming sexuality within the paradoxical cultural ethos of sexual pleasure and sexual danger.

The Meaning of Sexuality

Before discussing the phenomenological results, a review of some meanings of sexuality is necessary in order to re-orient one’s perspective on the phenomena, self-affirming sexuality. In Chapter One, the elusive meaning of sexuality was demonstrated.
The variety of potential meanings were described, and they included: sexuality as the quality of being sexual or having sex; sexuality as the possession of sexual powers, or capability of sexual feelings; sexuality as recognition of or preoccupation with what is sexual, or allusions to sexual matters; sexuality as appearance distinctive of sex; and sexuality as emotional, relational, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of self. This study did not prescribe any of these definitions of sexuality, but rather chose to let the plurality they encompass provide an open milieu in which to explore the lived experience of self-affirming sexuality.

During the interviews each woman described sexuality as an aspect of their self that was inseparable from their whole self. It was something they learned about themselves as they developed, and was affected by their experiences. When asked to talk about situations in which they experienced self-affirming sexuality, the women talked about a wide range of activities, some of which might not traditionally be considered part of sexuality. The women might have appeared to get off topic in discussing something apparently unrelated to sexuality, such as a sense of personal integration, when in actuality what they described was very much central to their experience of sexuality.

The women described sexual interactions with other people as well as solitary experiences. Sexuality seemed to be something one could share with another, but that was something that belonged to them and could involve only oneself as well. Examples of this solitary sexuality included masturbation, lying naked in the sun, dancing alone in their room, looking in the mirror at themselves, and running. Sexuality also seemed to be about both enactment as well as conceptual fantasy, and the women's thoughts about sexuality seemed to be an important part of their sexuality. Therefore, in this study the women's meaning of sexuality was as encompassing as the definitions provided in the introduction, with the
addition that these women experienced sexuality as an inherent quality that people are born with and that is shaped by life experiences.

Although the themes identified provide a rich description of the women’s experiences of self-affirming sexuality, one must keep in mind the dynamic nature of human experience. This dynamic quality was illuminated by the women’s declaration that they arrived at their current experiences of sexuality as a journey; a journey that each of the women considered essential to the experience of self-affirming sexuality. All the women described the process of developing self-affirming sexuality as unfinished, and continue to challenge themselves to progress in experiencing sexuality as self-affirming. As well, the women described how their current experience of self-affirming sexuality fluctuates. This was reiterated in the second interview when the women confirmed that the resulting themes fit their experience, but that their sexuality is not always that affirming because their experiences fluctuate depending on life circumstances and relationships.

Which brings me to an important point; the women in this study described multiple experiences of various sexualities. Throughout their lives and on different days the women described different experiences of sexualities. They experienced a plurality of sexualities rather than a singular characteristic, sexuality. Thus, the women in this study seem to indicate that a re-conceptualization of “the experience of self-affirming sexuality” is required so that instead one asks about “experiences of self-affirming sexualities.” It does not fit with the results of this study to continue to refer to women’s experiences of sexualities as a singular quality.
In the following sections, I compare the results of this study with feminist popular literature, feminist sexological and theoretical literature, and popular culture pertaining to young women’s sexualities and self-affirming sexualities.

**Feminist Popular Literature**

In general, the results of this study support feminist literature on women’s sexualities. Specifically, feminist popular literature has identified many aspects of women’s experiences of self-affirming sexualities that pertain to the theme experiencing celebration in sexuality. For example, pleasure, vitality, and fun have been key areas of focus in Grosz and Probyn’s (1995) ‘*Sexy Bodies*’ and Califa’s (1994) ‘*Public Sex*.’ These three aspects of women’s experiences are represented in the theme experiencing celebration in sexuality. The sub-theme feeling good involves pleasure and fun, and feeling alive involves vitality.

**Feminist Sexological and Theoretical Literature**

The findings of this study support previous feminist research and theory regarding women-defined sexualities, and reveal the necessity of broadening our definition of sexualities to include the mental, emotional, and spiritual, as well as contextual aspects. Women’s experiences of connection and celebration in sexualities have been developed in feminist research and theory (e.g. Daniluk, 1993; Ogden, 1994), and were supported by this study. Additionally, the results of this study reveal that both experiencing integrity of self and agency are important elements of women’s sexualities that have not previously been adequately studied.

One of the main criticisms that feminist sexologists (i.e., Tiefer, 1995) pose to the dominant sexological discourse is that it emphasizes physical or behavioural aspects of sexualities over mental, emotional, and spiritual elements. The women in this study did not
focus on behavioural aspects of sexualities. Rather they focused on the general experience of sexualities, and often had difficulty identifying specific behavioural experiences. Their descriptions of sexual experiences often did not include actual sexual intercourse, but rather sexualized relationships and contexts. This is congruent with feminist theorist’s contention that women’s sexualities also contain mental, emotional, and spiritual components (e.g. Daniluk, 1998; Ogden, 1994).

An important feminist sexological document, *The Hite Report* (Hite, 1976) emphasized that intimacy was the primary source of pleasure for women in sexualities. Hite also highlighted how power imbalances in heterosexual relationships create a context ripe for sexual interactions lacking mutual respect and in which women have no sexual agency or control. She saw agency and control as necessary for women to achieve orgasm, which she held as the goal of sexual intercourse. The results of this study support her focus on intimacy, however the women in this study emphasized that mutual sexual pleasure is an indicator for them of both respect and intimacy. The women talked about the importance of having sexual choice rather than having their male partners initiate and control their sexual encounters. They perceived mutual responsibility for each other’s sexual pleasure as an indicator of respect and love. The women wanted a sense of generous and mutual giving.

The women did mention orgasm, however, contrary to Hite, this was not the focus for them in their experiences of self-affirming sexualities. Rather, orgasm was a part of sexual pleasure that, together with their sense of celebration and connection, was important during sexual experiences. Thus, the women both contradicted and supported Hite’s contention that women need sexual agency in order to achieve sexual pleasure with sexual pleasure being
defined by Hite as orgasm. Sexual agency allowed them to create sexual experiences that were affirming, whether or not they included orgasm.

Ogden’s (1994) postulations about women’s sexuality based on her experience as a sex therapist were generally supported by the present study. Specifically, the findings supported her belief that for women, sex is more than physical. My results were consistent with Ogden’s contention that sex can be an “opening of vital energy,” and involve “a sense of wholeness, a connection of body, mind and soul,” and “a sense of oneness with one’s partners, with the universe” (p. 1). These three statements seem strongly related to the themes strength of self, integrity, and connection, respectively. There was consistency regarding sex as a source of connectedness, health, personal power, and a route to ecstasy. Her “system-shifting facts and insights” (p. 24) were supported as well. However, she refers to “sexual ecstasy” as a woman-defined alternative to the male discourse of sexual pleasure, and the present study would not support such a simplistic alternative. The key difference between Ogden’s model of women’s sexualities and that expressed by the women in the present study is that Ogden seems to focus on ecstatic union and emotional involvement with another, while the young women studied were able to cherish their sexual self as an independent experience as well as an interrelational experience.

Jordan (1997) described her own sexual pleasure as an intense sensate experience, joy in joining, fun, mutual enjoyment, abandon, and a synergistic, mutual surrender to a larger union. Here again this description is similar to that given by the women in the present study. However, it misses the elements of agency, integrity of self, and intentionality that seemed to move the women in the present study out of the role of sexual object into that of sexual subjectivity.
Daniluk’s (1993) study of the meaning and experience of women’s sexualities revealed positive elements of women’s experiences of sexualities very similar to those described in the present study. Although Daniluk’s study was comprised of a sample of women aged 30 to 66, for a few of the women in her study, sexual expression involved experiences of connection, mutuality, and pleasure. The young women in the present study also described a sense of connection through sexualities. They described mutuality and intimacy as important aspects of connection. As well, pleasure was central to the young women’s descriptions of feeling good in their experience of celebration in sexuality.

Participants in Daniluk’s (1993) study described positive early sexual experiences characterized by respect and caring, or of being involved in mutually enabling relationships. Within these relationships, Daniluk’s participants felt trust, harmony, joy, validation, and integration of the self. All of these characteristics and feelings where expressed by the young women in the present study. The sub-theme respecting me involved the women’s experiences of mutual care and respect in relationships. This mutual respect was part of the participant’s descriptions of mutually enabling relationships. Of note, one of the factors that the women attributed their success in overcoming sexual aggression to was mutually enabling relationships. However, Daniluk’s participants spoke about their experiences related to reproduction, which are notably absent from the present study, perhaps because none of the participants were had born children.

Daniluk’s (1993) participants came to experience an integration and wholeness later in life. In mutually enabling relationships they acquired a sense of bodily acceptance, self-acceptance, and self-love. The young women in the present study described having already achieved these experiences by the age 25 through 30. Both groups of participants also
highlighted how the absence of appropriate language is an impediment women face when trying to find their sexual voice. Although the participants in Daniluk’s study pointed to the importance of celebrating the uniqueness of women’s’ sexuality, the women in the present study simply wanted to celebrate their sexuality, not necessarily as unique. Overall, Daniluk’s research identified three of the same themes identified by the present study; integrity of self, connection, and celebration. However, her participants did not talk about finding a sense of agency through sexuality in the same way as the participants in the current study. This may be attributed to the age of the cohort and their having been born since the sexual revolution or it may be attributed to the difference in focus of the research. The present study adds to Daniluk’s research in that it provides more detail and cohort specific information about women’s experiences of self-affirming sexualities.

Socher’s (1999) research explored the correlates of sexual satisfaction in women. She defined sexual satisfaction as a steady state of mind about one’s own sexuality, reached in a process of bio-psycho-sociological sensations of sexual-self that tend to be positive. Although this definition is consistent with a positive focus on women’s sexualities, all the women in the present study described their experiences of self-affirming sexualities as fluctuating. They sensed knowing that their sexualities were positive and they appreciated how their sexualities contributed to their development of self, but they felt that it was not a “steady state of mind.”

Similar to Socher’s (1999) results, the present study suggests that women who are more accepting of their own sexualities feel comfortable communicating their needs, and therefore experience more genital pleasure. However, Socher’s statement of causality is not supported, because some women described becoming more accepting of their sexualities as a
result of positive sexual interactions involving sexual pleasure, rather than the other way around. Also, Socher proposed that, for women, satisfactory relationships influence the quality of sexual experiences, not the other way around. The participant’s in the present study did not support this unidirectional contention in their phenomenological descriptions.

Socher’s (1999) definition of sexual affirmation as a combination of openness, assertiveness, and honest acceptance of one’s own and one’s partner’s sexual feelings is supported by the present research. The women in my study described a journey towards self-affirming sexualities, which supports Socher’s contention that, “sexual satisfaction is rather an art to be reached and that extensive learnings are required to attain it” (Socher, 1999, p. 141). Socher’s reference to Roger’s (1961) concept of self-actualization is also a good fit with the results of the present study. She proposed that self-actualization is how women come to experience sexual satisfaction despite their socialization. The present study demonstrated Socher’s theory that women who experience sexual satisfaction see less satisfying experiences as opportunities to grow rather than as a source of devastation.

The participants in the present study might be considered of the same cohort as Thompson’s (1990) ‘pleasure narrators.’ Thompson’s narrative research, drawing on 400 interviews with teenage girls regarding their sexual initiations, included a subsection of participants she called the ‘pleasure narrators.’ These teenage girls seemed to take sexual subjectivity for granted. The women in the present study appear to have a similar sense of subjectivity. However, this population is now 25 to 30 years old and these ‘pleasure narrators’ are challenged to maintain this sexual subjectivity in a society, and in relationships that often try to deny it.
In summary, there appears to be a great deal of congruency between the results of this study, and popular and academic literature on women's sexuality. Although, integrity of self has not been clearly identified by many researchers as key to self-affirming sexualities, the sub-theme self-acceptance has been identified as an aspect of self-affirming sexualities. However, the sub-themes self-awareness, self-love, and strength of self are notably absent. Agency in sexuality is similarly missing in the literature on women's sexualities. Respect has been identified as an important element of women's positive experiences of sexualities; however, intentionality and power through sexuality (the other two sub-themes of agency in sexuality) have either been ignored or unnoticed. The theme women's sense of connection through sexuality is well documented in the literature, as is the sub-theme intimacy. However, the sub-theme being myself is notably absent. Although celebration has not been identified specifically in the literature, the sub-themes feeling good and feeling alive both have been described, especially in popular literature. The sub-themes experiencing freedom and being seen do not seem to be as well recognized.

Therefore, this study has highlighted aspects of women's experiences of self-affirming sexualities previously unrecognized and/or ignored by researchers or theorists. These include the experience of integrity of self and the sub-themes self-awareness, self-love, and strength of self. A sense of agency in sexuality has been poorly recognized along with the experience of intentionality and power through sexuality. The sub-theme being myself in connection has not be recognized either. And finally, celebration in sexuality and the sub-themes freedom and being seen have also been missing in the literature on women's sexuality. Perhaps this lack of recognition can be attributed to these themes and sub-themes' incongruency with disempowering feminine gender norms.
Popular Culture

In addition to academic research, popular culture and the media have also portrayed young women as sexually free and unburdened of the sexual oppression that existed previous to the sexual revolution. The women in this study do not seem to be “freed” from sexual oppression as suggested in popular culture, but they do seem to have developed skills to deal with the general context of sexual oppression that they live within. In this way, they appear to be resisting oppressive aspects of sexualities. Wolf’s (1998) contention that, after the sexual revolution women’s sexual subjectivity was assumed although the social structures women lived within did not support this sexual subjectivity, was supported by the stories of the young women in this study. The women seemed to feel vulnerable in new sexual relationships, because they were faced with a societal context of sexual aggression. Also, the participants wanted the advantages that came with the power of being found beautiful (as an object), but they engaged in activities (such as dressing alternatively) in order to maintain their sense of sexual choice and agency.

The women experienced sexuality as naturally “healthy,” but it was a process of getting to know what they wanted and how to get it. They still had to work at both of these. The women talked about taking control and having choice and power in their sexual experiences. They experienced a contradiction between the public and private nature of sexual behaviour, and they resolved this contradiction by showing their sexual nature (i.e., being seen) without showing specific sexual relationships. Despite the focus on the physical aspects of sexualities found in the media (i.e., Cosmopolitan), the women in this study had maintained a focus on the emotional, mental, and spiritual meaning of sexualities as well. For them sexualities were related to love.
With regard to changing social norms, the women in this study focused on pleasurable and relational aspects of sexualities rather than on reproduction. The findings support the assumption that effective birth control has allowed women to focus on other aspects of sexual intercourse and sexual interactions, because the women did not talk about reproduction as an aspect of their sexualities.

**Developmental Issues**

The women conveyed the key role that their sexualities played in their development. Intimacy and development of self are key aspects of the developmental stage for women ages 25 through 30. Both intimacy and development of self are central to all of the themes and sub-themes identified in this study. The women’s descriptions of their experiences of integrity of self are congruent with Erickson’s (1968) ideas regarding the fusing of identity. Similarly the women supported Erickson’s model when they talked about breaking sexual taboos in order to establish their sense of sexual choice and therefore feel committed to what they had chosen sexually. Although, Erickson talks about loyalty as important at this stage, the women did not talk about loyalty in the context of their sexualities.

In the theme of connection, the women conveyed how sexualities contributed to their ability to know themselves and know others. In this way, sexualities have contributed to deeper understandings of self and others. The women also talked about sexuality as something fun to do, rather than as a source of social gain, which is congruent with this developmental stage (Stevens-Long & Commons, 1992). However, the women’s descriptions of their experience of self-affirming sexuality did not support Stevens-Long and Commons’ (1992) contention that the experience of competence is the most important validation at this stage. Except for one woman, none of the women talked about sexualities
in terms of competency. Also, in contradiction to many developmental models, the women did not speak of maternal instincts or reproduction during their interviews. This is very surprising considering that the focus of the interviews was sexualities, and sexualities for women (especially at this stage in development) have been assumed to focus primarily on reproduction (Stevens-Long & Commons, 1992).

In addition to traditional developmental models, the Stone Centre model of women’s development that theorizes that women’s identity formation occurs primarily as a result of “being-in-relation” was well supported by the phenomenological text (i.e. Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller, 1991). The women focused largely on their sexualities as they developed in their relationships with others, and how they learned about themselves through their sexual relationships. However, these women did not talk about a passive “being-in-relation” contributing to a sense of self that lacks agency, as Miller (1991) has suggested. Rather the women spoke about times in their teens when they subjugated their own sexual needs in order to maintain connections. However, this appears to be something they “grew out of” as they developed a sense of sexual agency. Also, the women had reframed their earlier experiences as active choices they made in order to maintain connections that they valued at the time.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) present five different perspectives from which women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge, and authority. These five perspectives are silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. Subjective knowledge is further broken down into two more specific perspectives: the inner voice, and the quest for self. Also,
procedural knowledge is broken down into the voice of reason, and separate and connected knowing.

Belenky et al. (1986) demonstrated that women's self concepts and ways of knowing are intertwined, moreover, they did not suggest that women proceed through these stages of self-development according to particular ages. Rather they posited that social organizations such as school and family support or impede women's progress toward agency in experiencing and knowing the world; as well as the awareness that different people can experience the world in different ways so that there may be multiple subjective truths. This highlights the major impact that life experience can play on how women experience and develop knowledge about their own sexuality.

Belenky et al.'s (1986) model for understanding women's experience of self and knowing is valuable in contextualizing how the women in this study had a sense of knowing their own sexual experiences. The personal histories of these women prepared and enabled them to develop their inner voice and to progress in their quest for self, and in this way acquire subjective knowledge of their own sexualities. When describing the theme connection, the women spoke about what Belenky et al. (1986) called "procedural knowledge through connected knowing." Common to this developmental stage is the women's conviction that the trustworthiest knowledge comes from personal experience rather than from pronouncements of authority. This conviction is evident in the women's experience of knowing about sexualities through their connections with others. Other common elements of this stage of knowing are also found in the experiences of the women in this study, such as their refusal to judge, a collaborative learning style, and the use of
personal knowledge. This stance goes beyond simple intuition to deliberately understanding positions that might have initially felt wrong or remote.

The final stage of knowing as described by Belenky et al. (1986) is "constructed knowledge." In the present study, many of the women spoke about their most affirming sexual experiences in a very similar manner as how constructive knowers talk about developing knowledge. This is through an open, mutual sharing of information that is aimed at fostering the growth of new ideas. In this way, we see that women's experiences of sexualities are directly influenced by and involved in how women come to develop knowledge about their world and themselves. This process is particularly salient in the sub-theme self-awareness and the theme integrity of self. Of note, it was Belenky et al.'s (1986) model of women's development of self, voice, and mind that provided the best developmental contextualization of the women's phenomenological experiences of sexualities. This highlights the absence of models of sexual development that are congruent with young women's experiences of sexualities.

Dominant Discourse of Women's Sexualities

It was expected that the results of this research would illuminate how young women's experiences of self-affirming sexualities reflect and/or resist the dominant discourse of women's sexualities. In 1980, Janeway stated there was no acceptable vision of a woman "self choosing, enjoying, directing and controlling her own pleasure" (p. 9). Feminist theorists have argued that there can be no emancipatory heterosexuality for women under conditions of patriarchy (e.g., Tiefer 1988, 1991, 1995), and Hollway (1995) asked whether feminism had neglected "an extra-discursive terrain" (p. 90). Hollway (1995) wanted to know to what extent individual practices and/or desires transcend dominant
discourses? She saw Foucault’s (1978) contention that discourse is the sole determinant of individual experience as too deterministic. Exceptions to the dominant discourse exist and she pointed to these as a source for future change in how we socially construct women’s sexualities. Similarly, Usher (1994) described how women resist and negotiate or accept discourse. She suggested considering women’s ‘true feelings’ as well as their behaviour. Also, Daniluk (1998) has argued that the dominant discourse has shaped young women’s sexual experience and expectations, and that some young women struggle to resist sexually oppressive discourses. Daniluk proposed that this resistance would occur individually and interpersonally in negotiating shared meaning in intimate interactions based on reciprocity, mutuality, and respect. This is largely supported by the stories of the young women in this study.

In this section, I review several dominant discourses and compare each one with the common themes of young women’s experiences of self-affirming sexualities. However, one must first acknowledge that the women’s experiences of self-affirming sexualities described in this study contradict the overarching oppressive and pathologizing dominant discourse of women’s sexualities. During the process of the second confirmation interview, all of the women spoke about how comforting and validating it was to realize that other women had such similar experiences to themselves. This highlights that young women are individually negotiating more positive constructions of women’s sexualities independently and may not realize that other women share their experiences of self-affirming sexualities.

Perhaps the most obvious and prevalent discourse of sexualities is the heterosexuality as the norm discourse. Nicolson (1993b) conceptualizes heterosexuality as including female and male roles and their inherent power relations, and she highlights “the centrality to
heterosexual relationships of penetration of the vagina by the penis” (p. 198), which she sees as perpetuating sexual power imbalances. Within this discourse, women are portrayed as passive, responsive, and submissive, and men as active and dominant. Central to this discourse is man as subject and woman as object, in which man is portrayed as having sexual need, and woman’s pleasure is a reaction to him and for him. From this we learn that women do not apparently enjoy heterosexual intercourse as ‘naturally’ as they should.

In relation to heterosexuality, many of the women in this study had experimented with same-sex sexual interactions, although the majority of the women were in heterosexual relationships. Bisexuality seemed to be an accepted option for most of the women interviewed. Perhaps the women sought to explore other possibilities besides those “inherent” to heterosexuality, and through their same-sex experiences had learned new possibilities to apply to their heterosexual relationships. Certainly the women spoke about many sexual interactions that did not involve the penetration of the vagina by the penis, which indicates that vaginal penetration is not central to their experiences of sexualities as the dominant discourse might dictate. Hence, the phenomenological experiences of the women seemed to resist the dominant discourse of heterosexuality, whereas their behaviour seemed to reflect it.

The key concept, woman as object and man as subject, was directly spoken about by the women interviewed. They seemed to consciously want to rebel against this cultural imperative. The women both spoke about and demonstrated that they were active subjects in their sexual experiences. However, the women still relished the attention and power they experienced as a result of their role as sexual object. They all spoke about a time in their teens when they felt vulnerable in their role as sexual object. They also spoke about
negotiating new ways of being beautiful and sexually desirable that did not disempower them. The women had turned this discourse on its head by being active and dominant in using the power they derived from being perceived as sexual objects to achieve their own goals and intentions. The women said that media portrayals of sexual intercourse very often did not reflect their experience of being in control in sexual interactions. In this way, the women acknowledged their experience of the discourse of woman as object and man as subject, but rejected oppressive aspects of it and took advantage of its empowering qualities.

Another identified discourse is sexuality is a ‘natural’ instinct or drive. Another name for it is the biological drive discourse (Tiefer, 1995), and it proscribes that sex involves partners of the opposite sex, and includes vaginal intercourse. The women seemed to agree that sexuality was a natural instinct or drive that they had from an early age. However, they did not feel that it was something that was biologically determined. They seemed to feel that their sexualities were a drive that was shaped by their life experiences and social context. Sex did not always include vaginal intercourse for the women, and sex could happen between people of the same sex. Here, again the women’s accounts reflected the sexuality is a natural instinct or drive discourse, but altered it in a way that allowed them to feel good about their sexualities.

The man’s sexuality as the norm discourse perpetuates the idea that women’s sexualities are complimentary, secondary, and different from men’s sexuality. This discourse has a genital and reproductive focus, and supports a phallocentric view that denies the importance of female arousal. It includes other discourses such as orgasm as goal, and centrality of vaginal intercourse that are assumed to privilege male sexual pleasure. Nicolson (1993a) suggested that many women still expect the ultimate orgasm through
vaginal penetration alone, thus allowing themselves to be conquered through the act of penetration.

The women in my study did not focus on sexual behaviours (e.g., vaginal penetration), so much as the context and meaning of particular sexual experiences. Although orgasm was mentioned as a criterion for determining mutual enjoyment within sexual relationships, it was not the sole goal of sexual intercourse. Similarly, the reproductive aspects of sexualities were barely mentioned by the women. Contrary to the dominant discourse, the women had found lovers whom they knew valued women’s sexual arousal as much as their own. The women talked about the importance of mutuality in a way that acknowledged that men and women’s sexualities are different, but that they can be compatible in caring and respectful relationships. Thus, the women seemed to have resisted the man’s sexuality as the norm discourse, and persevered in valuing their own sexual experiences.

The double standard discourse pertains to women and men having different rules to regulate their sexualities. Generally, men who have sex are good and women who have sex are bad. One aspect of this is the man with uncontrollable sexual desire discourse, which proscribes that men cannot be held accountable if they lose control when provoked by women. The other aspect is woman as gatekeeper, which proscribes that women are responsible to activate, respond to, and regulate men’s sexual desire. However, women are also expected to resist because women who have sex are bad. Usher (1994) described the ‘permissive discourse’ in which men are expected to act on sexual drive and women are expected to act out of their need for love. The women in my study thought that generally women are more sexual than men, and have a stronger sex drive than men. They spoke about
"surrendering" and "letting go," but they spoke about letting go of their inhibitions and surrendering to their sexual desires rather than surrendering to a man.

Rape and sexually aggressive behaviour on the part of men is often attributed to the *man with uncontrollable sexual desire* discourse. Although many of the women had experienced some form of sexual aggression, they were more likely to attribute this to ignorance and immaturity on the boy/man's part. They did convey that they had felt vulnerable in sexual interactions, but this seemed to be more about emotional danger than sexual/physical danger. The women did not see aggressive sexual behaviour as natural to men, because they had known men who were not sexually aggressive, and had experienced their own sexual drive that did not involve overpowering others. Thus, the women seemed to resist the dominant discourse of *man with uncontrollable sexual desire* and *woman as gatekeeper* because they expected sexual equality in their sexual relationships.

Another dominant discourse is what Socher (1999) refers to as the *double message* discourse and Usher (1994) refers to as the *Madonna/whore* discourse. On the one hand women are expected to be passive and submissive, and on the other hand women are expected to be sexually voracious. Sexual desire becomes dangerous, because it contradicts the passive discourse. Daniluk (1998) highlights how the paradox between 'sex as powerful' and 'sex as bad and sinful' makes it difficult for most young women to develop and maintain positive sexual self-perceptions.

Many of the women in the study struggled with this dilemma. They did not experience themselves as sexually voracious, but they worried about being judged for their overt sexuality. One woman talked about hearing her mother's voice telling her that if she had sex with a man he would not want her afterward. However, the women seemed
conscious and aware of their struggle to resist the Madonna/whore discourse. They knew that sex was not bad, but they still lived in a society that calls women “sluts” if they have “too many” sexual partners. Media portrayals of sexually active women seemed to mitigate the ‘sex is bad’ message, so that the women could focus on creating more rewarding sexual interactions, and thus experience agency. By being intentional in their sexual choices the women seemed to feel comfortable being active in their sexualities. In this way, they negotiated the bind involved in the double message discourse.

Finally, there is the sexual pleasure discourse. Since the sexual revolution there is a clear definition of sexual pleasure that women must adhere to: sexual pleasure achieved through loving relationships, sexual pleasure achieved through being the object of desire, and sexual pleasure achieved through orgasm (Nicolson, 1994). The women seemed to embrace all three of these definitions of sexual pleasure, however, they also went beyond these possibilities. For example the relational discourse makes it clear that women cannot enjoy sex for its own sake. One might interpret the phenomenological theme of connection as verification that the women have internalized the relational discourse. However, connection is only part of the picture. The women spoke about enjoying sexual intercourse outside of long-term relationships as well. Here, the women valued sexual pleasure for its own sake. Furthermore, the women took pleasure in being both object and subject in their sexual interactions. The women expected their lovers to know or to learn how to pleasure them sexually. In some cases, the women felt that their lovers had taught them how to take sexual pleasure for themselves instead of focusing on their partner’s pleasure. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding that there must be a mutual give and take, in terms of giving and receiving pleasure. The women’s experiences of self-affirming sexualities did
reflect the sexual pleasure discourse, however, once again these women seemed to transform the dominant discourse so that it enabled them to feel good and experience sexualities as positives in their lives.

The women’s sexual histories certainly reflected the dominant sexual discourse, but the choices the women made and the way they experienced their sexualities were not congruent with the dominant sexual discourse. The women had not completely accepted the oppressive discourse of women’s sexualities, but neither had they rejected it in full. These women’s stories illuminate how they lived in a social reality that privileges the dominant discourse. Their stories also demonstrate how women can resist and negotiate these discourses so that there is room for women to experiences self-affirming sexualities. When the women started to value and trust themselves, and to feel that they knew what was good or bad for them, they seemed to be able to adapt the oppressive social messages they received about sexualities to their own individual and intimate interpersonal experiences.

Limitations of the Study

In this section, I review the potential limitations of this study. First, the quality of the data, and hence the study, was high because the women in this study recalled and expressed their experiences with self-awareness and insight. The level of rapport and trust that developed between myself and participants also seemed high because the women self-disclosed freely and they engaged in deep exploration. My skills as a counsellor supported the women to go deeper into describing their private experiences. Language seemed to be a limitation as participants attempted to describe physical sensory experiences, relational experiences, and spiritual experiences that they had no language for. Limited time and resources restricted the depth of exploration in this research. One in-depth interview and a
follow-up interview provided only enough information for a basic phenomenological exploration.

A second consideration in relation to the limitations of any research is social desirability bias. This bias occurs when participants answer questions with an aim of gaining approval from the researcher rather than with the aim of expressing their own experience. Given that sexuality is often a topic that women feel judged in relation to, it was important that I convey genuine curiosity without the possibility of judgement. I made my intention to focus on understanding and to avoid judgement explicit in the orientating statement, and reiterated this intention in all following interviews. Furthermore, I conveyed an attitude of non-judgement, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard throughout all interviews in order to mitigate the possibility of social desirability bias. It seemed that I was able to avoid social desirability bias as many of the women wanted to begin their interview with an exploration of negative sexual experiences they had in the past. Also, many of the women spoke about experiences that they felt were taboo, apparently without fear of being judged.

Third, the retrospective nature of the phenomenological data could be perceived as a limitation to the positivist researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Van Manen, 1994). Within this epistemological worldview there is one objective reality that can be measured, an objective reality that may potentially be misconstrued when recollected from the past. However, from a constructivist perspective the qualitative researcher believes that reality is socially constructed by the interpretations of individuals in social contexts, and is thus impermanent and subjective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I endeavoured to illuminate the “internal meaning structures” (Van Manen, 1994, p. 10) of the lived experience through
phenomenological methodology. Hence, the retrospective nature of the data was not a limitation in the context of the research question.

Fourth, the influence of personal bias is often considered a threat to research's "trustworthiness" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Hence, Osborne (1990) and Colaizzi (1978) insist on the practice of "bracketing" as I have observed above. Sword (1999) indicates the importance of making explicit the significant influence of the self in the process of inquiry and discovery. She writes that self "is essential for establishing a context within which others can appreciate the evolving search for new understanding and creation of a final research product" (p. 270). As a social constructivist researcher, I conveyed the personal involvement demanded of me as the "research instrument" (Sword, 1999, p. 277), and as a co-constructor of new discourses. Additionally, the second interview was intended to guard against my undue skewing of the results, by having the participants check my interpretation against their own experience. The second interviews confirmed that I had remained true to the participant's experiences as they all expressed feeling validated and affirmed, as well as a strong sense of resonance with the results as they read them.

Fifth, the lack of generalizability in research with small sample sizes is often cited as a limitation of phenomenological research. Instead, I suggest that "empathic generalizability" has been achieved when the reader is able to personally relate to the essence of the participant's experiences (Osborne, 1994). For example, during the second interviews the women expressed feeling that they were described "perfectly" and that they often were surprised that other women's experiences were so similar to their own. They said that when reading the quotes they were not always certain if the quote was their own or not. Van Manen's (1994) suggestion that "the tendency to generalize may prevent us from
developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of human experience” (p. 22) is particularly relevant to this research, which seeks exceptions to the dominant discourse. As demonstrated above, this study was able to illuminate many unique exceptions to the dominant discourse, and to convey the full essence of each woman’s experiences.

**Implications for Future Research**

Little research has been done in the areas of woman-defined sexualities, women’s experiences of self-affirming sexualities, and young women’s sexualities. The findings of this study provide an exploratory beginning to research in the area of self-affirming sexualities for young women. A consideration of previous research and theory, together with the results and limitations of the current study provide implications for future research.

Previous research has focussed on the negative aspects of women’s sexualities (e.g., Nicolson, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Tiefer, 1988, 1991, 1995; Usher, 1993). It was the intention of this study to examine women’s sexualities from a positive perspective in order to better understand how women experience self-affirming sexualities. Research including a larger sample size would be useful in further developing and refining the themes identified here, as well as determining the prevalence of experiences of self-affirming sexualities in women. Furthermore, this study was limited in terms of the age, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status of the women studied. Future research with a broader range of participants would be useful in further illuminating women’s experiences of self-affirming sexualities. For example, the one woman whose interview was excluded based on her vague responses to the questions was Chinese Canadian and the youngest in the group. Future research might use purposeful sampling based on age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and cultural contexts to clarify the different roles that sexualities play in women’s lives and development.
All of the women in the current study were childless. Considering the emphasis on motherhood in most sexual development literature for women, research on self-affirming sexualities in young mothers would be valuable. Related to this is the general need for developmental models and sexual developmental models that are based solely on women. Specifically, developmental research is needed for women who choose not to have children or who have children late in life. With regards to Belenky et al.'s (1986) model of women's development of self, voice, and mind, research is needed to determine the relationship between development of self and sexual development. The current study clearly indicates an important relationship between these, and raises questions about how women who do not have a strong sense of self experience their sexualities.

My research indicates that young women resist and negotiate the dominant discourse of women's sexualities. This raises the question of how women resist and negotiate the dominant discourse? The women in this study talked about the importance of positive sexual experiences, positive sexual role models, and positive messages about women's sexualities in the media (e.g., pop songs). Pop singers do seem to effect young women's construction of sexualities. For example, a couple of the women spoke about the positive influence Madonna had on them. Perhaps, because of the multitude of media representations available some women choose representations that support them in their journey toward sexual self-actualization. Future research might investigate other factors that mitigate the negative impact of the dominant discourse. Also, research is needed regarding the process of resistance.

Considering that all of the women in this study had experienced forms of sexual oppression or violence, it would be important for future research to explore the unique
characteristics of these women that allowed them to overcome these negative experiences. Although my study illuminated a journey towards self-affirming sexuality, future research might focus specifically on this process in order to help women who have not been able to overcome the negative impact of sexual violence.

**Implications for Counselling**

Given the integral role that sexualities play in our society and culture, the implications for this study are potentially far reaching. In this section, I consider several of the implications of this study for counselling.

Many of the women reflected on how beneficial the research process was for them and how validated and affirmed they felt as a result of the process. The women said that being asked to share their experience as experts on the phenomenon, and being asked to focus on the positive aspects of their sexuality was empowering and inspiring. By being encouraged to speak about sexuality from their own perspective they felt validated and free to develop their own sexual definitions and meanings, and the opportunity to speak about their sexualities in depth provided novel opportunities for insight. This aspect is similar to what Daniluk (1998) describes as “discovering self-defined sexuality” (p. 123). Daniluk highlights the importance for women, especially young women, to learn to differentiate between their own experience of sexualities and their sexual partner’s experience of sexualities. This indicates that in-depth explorations of women’s own sexual experiences may elicit what Daniluk refers to as “self-defined sexuality.”

Simply having the opportunity to talk about their own experiences seemed therapeutic for the women involved in this study. Fine (1992) has described the potential emancipatory outcomes that develop out of women taking back our voices. The women
talked about how exciting and empowering it was to talk openly and meaningfully about their sexual experiences. It is valuable to take away the code of silence women experience regarding talking about the intimate and meaningful aspects of sexualities rather than focusing on only physical aspects. Beyond the code of silence, Daniluk (1998) has highlighted how the absence of appropriate language is an impediment women face when trying to find their sexual voices. Taking the time to find the words to describe their own experiences although difficult, was fruitful for the women in this study. They all had moments of personal insight during the interviews as a result of struggling to express experiences that they previously had not put into words.

It also seems to be important to support clients in their attempts to create their own definition of sexualities. For example, the women in this study spoke about the importance of integrity and connection in sexualities in a manner that contradicts the DSM IV’s (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) focus on segmented psychophysiological functioning. Also, the women’s experiences of intimacy and being themselves were not only experienced within a traditionally narrow definition of sexualities that focuses on the act of sex, but were also experienced more broadly by these women in their everyday lives. It seemed that transcending limiting definitions of sexualities contributed to the women’s experiences of self-affirming sexuality, and may potentially assist other women on their journey toward self-affirming sexualities. Again, this is similar to Daniluk’s (1998) suggestions to help women understand how social messages about sexualities impact their beliefs and so that they can begin to free themselves from these constricting pressures.

The participants expressed a great deal of joy, comfort, and surprise after reading the results of this study. One aspect of this was that it normalized their experiences. This
highlights how important it is to normalize sexuality, and to position sexuality as healthy and normal in its many different forms. Daniluk (1998) noted the enhancing aspects of “sharing female experiences and energy” (p. 66). The women in her research expressed that celebration of the feminine through female-centred spirituality and greater connection to female knowledge, culture, and wisdom was an antidote to the shame they felt around their sexuality. They felt that the celebration of the uniqueness of women’s experience was central to positive experiences of sexuality. Daniluk repeatedly states the heightened benefits of doing therapeutic group work with women on sexual topics, because it provides a much needed opportunity for women to have their experiences of sexualities normalized.

For women in this study the act of being involved in a research project was a public and political act. They experienced this as empowering. The slogan “the personal is political” has not become redundant, especially in the case of sexualities (Tiefer, 1995). Positioning women as the subject in their sexualities rather than as an object of desire was a primary goal and outcome for this research. For some women getting involved in a project that involves a public recognition of women’s sexualities may be an important part of developing self-affirming sexualities. Furthermore, providing diverse narratives of positive sexualities and opening the dialogue on female sexual pleasure is an important part of encouraging future women’s development.

The journey or process of developing self-affirming sexuality that was illuminated by this research provides valuable insights for counsellors working with women on issues related to their sexualities. First, counsellors can frame sexuality as a dynamic journey so that clients do not feel they must strive toward some static ideal of perfect sexuality. Women can be encouraged to create a narrative of their own journey of sexuality.
Second, the contexts of these women’s lives played a large role in their journeys. Counsellors can assist women in identifying the various contexts that impact their sexual development. For example, the high incidence of sexual aggression still present in our society impacts women’s sexual freedom (Wyatt et al., 1993). Daniluk (1998) provides many explicit example of how this work can be done therapeutically. It is important to acknowledge these societal pressures so that women do not blame themselves for perceived inadequacies that may be the best response to a bad situation.

Third, the women’s journeys toward self-affirming sexualities were affected by their ability to create safe contexts in which they could freely express their sexuality. This study, as well as others (e.g., Socher, 1999), has demonstrated that safety, comfort, and respect in sexual interactions are important precursors to women’s experiences of self-affirming sexualities. Contrary to cognitive behavioural approaches to sex therapy that focus on physiology and beliefs, the women in this study described barriers related to negative experiences in the past. They described their need to build their own self-esteem and their sense of safety with sexual partners. This non-physiological phenomenological approach is congruent with Daniluk’s (1998) insistence that therapists help women understand the contexts in which they are attempting to experience and express their sexualities.

Sexual aggression is a reality in the lives of many women, and survivors of sexual aggression are frequently predisposed to both short-term and long-term sexual and psychological problems (Socher, 1999; Wyatt et al., 1993). Almost all of the women in this study had experienced some form of sexual aggression. However, these experiences, such as rape and sexual abuse had been formative in these women’s sense of sexual agency and choice. This indicates that for some women the process of healing from sexual aggression
can give them an enhanced sense of personal strength and agency. This knowledge is particularly useful for therapists working with clients in the later stages of recovery from sexual abuse.

In Daniluk’s (1998) thorough treatment of counselling women in the area of sexualities, she makes specific suggestions that are supported by this research. For example, Daniluk advises giving women permission to explore their sexualities with a sense of freedom. The women in this study highlighted the importance of this sense of sexual freedom. Daniluk also promotes the use of guided imagery to help women engage their fantasy world as a safe milieu in which to explore their sexual desires and feelings, and many of the women in this study shared important experiences of sexual fantasy. The women in this study talked about the importance of “self love” and Daniluk proposes that training in masturbation might be indicated for women who have not been able to access this independent source of sexual pleasure. Daniluk also suggests the importance of conducting a thorough review of a woman’s sexual history before engaging in any work that may trigger negative sexual memories from the past. For many of the women in this study, they felt it was necessary to tell me about their negative experiences before they could tell me about their affirming experiences. Finally, Daniluk advises that therapists critically examine their own sexual assumptions and biases before and while engaging in this therapeutic work. I found that this critical examination of my own assumptions allowed me to remain open to the participant’s experiences and provide a non-judgmental atmosphere in which they could explore the experiences of sexualities without constraint.

Within the clinical context, this study provides positive sexual narratives for clinicians to reflect on when serving clients with sexual concerns, and may encourage
clinicians to view their female clients as subjects in their sexual lives, rather than objects of desire. The results of this study provide subtleties that are conspicuously absent in the media’s portrayal of the sexually assertive young woman. This examination of young women’s experiences of self-affirming sexualities may enable clinicians to better conceptualize the role that affirming sexualities can play as young women navigate this important stage of life. Furthermore, these results can contribute to and guide practice in sexual health education by providing a more descriptive portrayal of how women experience positive aspects of their own sexualities.

The results of this study indicate that it is important to recognize the affirming nature of sexualities, because sexualities can be a potentially self-affirming aspect of women’s lives. Simply by asking the women to express their own experience this research has achieved an important outcome, beginning to represent women’s, and especially young women’s experiences of their sexualities.
References


APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

Understanding Young Women’s Experience of Self-Affirming Sexuality

Purpose of this study:

R. Joss Hurtig-Mitchell, under the supervision of Dr. Bonita Long, PhD, is conducting research into the phenomena of young women’s self-affirming sexuality. The purpose of this research is to provide descriptions of young women’s self-affirming sexuality and to discover and understand the nature of this experience. This research is part of the requirements for a Masters degree in Counselling Psychology at UBC.

Procedures:

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to:

1. participate in a maximum of two interviews, with a maximum time commitment of four hours total. During these interviews you will be asked to describe your experience of sexuality as it contributes to your positive sense of self.
2. agree to having all interviews audiotape recorded. All interviews will be conducted at your convenience by pre-arranged appointments to meet at the University or at a field location more convenient for you.

Confidentiality:

Portions of your interview may be included in the final write-up of the research, but you will not be identified. All information you give will remain anonymous and confidential. You will be identified by a pseudonym that you choose. Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed by a professional transcriber who will hear tapes without any identifying information on them. These materials will be kept in a locked file at all times, and only the investigator and her supervisor will have access to these materials. The transcripts without any identifying information will be destroyed within 5 years, and the audiotapes will be erased when the research is concluded.

Risks:

There are certain topics that may arise that are distressing to recall or to talk about. You are free to decline to respond to any question, and you may stop the interview at any time without negative consequences of any kind.

Benefits:

There will be no direct benefit to you as a result of participating in this research. However, you may find the process of discussing self-affirming sexuality to be beneficial
APPENDIX C

Orienting Statement

The researcher will read the following statement to all participants at the beginning of the first interview:

Before we start the interview I would like to give you some background for this research so that you will understand how it evolved and why I am interested in this topic.

There has been a great deal of research on human sexuality, and women’s sexuality in particular. Much of this research was done by male researchers, from a fairly masculine perspective, and often focussed on the reproductive or genital aspects of sexuality. The theories produced often show women in a negative light. More recently, feminist researchers have taken up the topic, but again from a relatively negative perspective.

I have experienced my sexuality as a positive and self-affirming aspect of my life, and I was curious that this aspect has been missing in the research. I am interested in learning what self-affirming sexuality means to you and how it is that you experience self-affirming sexuality. When I say self-affirming I mean experiences that validate you, confirm your sense of self, or just feel positive for you. I am curious about how you have experienced self-affirming sexuality over the course of your life so far. Feel free to take your time to reflect if you need to and to talk for as long as you need to in order to describe this experience in detail. You may want to focus on particular examples of experiences or you may feel more comfortable thinking about your experiences of self-affirming sexuality as a story with a beginning, middle, and end.

During the interview I may ask you to clarify what you mean or ask for a little more information so that I am clear that I understand your experience. If any of my questions feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. I would like you to tell me about your experience of self-affirming sexuality. This could involve a wide range of feelings and behaviours, and there is no “correct” answer. Does this sound okay for you? Do you have any questions for me before we begin?
APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

First Interview

Following an orienting statement in which I introduce the purpose and anticipated format of the interview, all participants will be asked the question:

*When I talk about sexuality contributing to your positive sense of self, what sort of things come up for you?*

After this question has been discussed, I will ask the following question:

*I would like you to think for a moment, and see if a particular experience comes up for you where your sexuality contributed to your positive sense of self. Please tell me about it so that I can understand how it was for you as you experienced it.*

Possible probes:
1. How did it happen that...?
2. How are you able to...?
3. What did you do...?
4. What did you see...?
5. How did you feel about...?
6. Please tell me more about...?
7. You mentioned ___________ . Could you please say more about that?
8. What do you mean by ___?
9. What did that mean to you?
10. Is there anything more that you would like to add about that?

Then I will ask for another example, one that is different from the first.

I will also ask:

*Do you remember when you first became aware of your experience of sexuality as enhancing your positive sense of self? Can you tell me about that experience?*

And,

*How are you able to experience sexuality as contributing to your positive feelings about yourself?*

I will conclude the conversation by asking:

*Is there anything else that you would like to say about your experience of sexuality as it contributes and enhances your positive sense of self?*
Second Interview

During this interview I will present my preliminary analysis of the themes from the participant’s interviews and ask them for their feedback. Participants will be asked if the themes I identified fit with their experience, and if they feel that I missed anything that was important for them. Participants will also be given an opportunity to review their biosynopses and edit any information that I may have gotten wrong.
APPENDIX E

Letter for Second Interview

Dear Research Participant,

I hope this package finds you well. Quite a lot of time has past since our initial interview. Your life may have changed much or little during the past year and a half.

This package includes four components: this introductory letter, the transcript of your interview held in May of 2002, a copy of your brief bio-synopsis, and a copy of the results section of my thesis. I send you this package in preparation for our second and last interview. This interview is intended as an opportunity for you to tell me if my analysis of all the interviews together fits with your experience. It is important to remember that your experience may be different now than it was at the time of the interview, but that my findings will be based on your experience as you expressed it a year and a half ago.

I realize that there is quite a lot to read here. It may take you some time. Please feel free to mark any of the documents as you read. Remember that none of what you will read has been published yet, and this is your opportunity to let me know if you want me to change any details in your bio-synopsis or if you feel that your experience does not fit with the themes as I have outlined them in the results section.

I will contact you soon to set up a mutually agreeable time for our second interview. Please consider how much time you will need before the last interview, (to read this material and to be prepared to give feedback on the results) so that we can set a time that allows you to fully consider my results.

Once again thank you for your time, and I hope you find this material as inspiring as I have. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Sincerely,

Joss Hurtig