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Title: The Transformative Power of Sexual Agency in Women

Abstract

A holistic viewpoint of development includes an embodied awareness of sexuality as an important aspect of being-ness in the self and in the world. Women have significant hurdles that have made attaining a healthy and agentic sex life a rebellion of going against the societal grain. When women reclaim themselves through their experience of sexuality it can be transformative and beneficial to their overall well-being. Genuine empowerment can derive from the discovery of one's sexual desires and projection of will. Sexuality is an inward and outward expression of sexual beingness. Agency is the way in which one enacts one's personal will. Sexual agency is how the sexual self presents in active consideration and practice through the expression of desires, personal empowerment, and choice. This article encapsulates the reasoning behind a need for change regarding sexuality and why it is important specifically for people who were socialized female to prioritize sexual agency as part of their development. In a hermeneutic, qualitative pilot study of 7 cis-gendered women included semi-structured interviews regarding participants sexual awakenings and the aftereffects. The results indicated that prioritization of sexual agency is a catalyst towards the prioritization of sexual agency. There also arose two distinct personality types in the participants, and extensive effects in the totality of life. In this article, there will be a fundamental focus on the transformational process that has occurred in the subject's lives, around the discovery and practice of sexual agency.

Keywords

Sexual agency, sexuality, embodiment, women, empowerment, transformation, autonomy, sex-positivity, catalyst, consent, sexual desire, spirituality, sexual expression

Introduction

Adapting the way, one sees a particular factor of their existence is life-altering. Fortunately, the ability to expand into a holistic and integrated way of being-in-the-world becomes easier as one evolves one's thinking. Being an integrated person includes awareness of one's sexuality and sexual expression with others. This concept can be explored when one considers that sexuality is a

dynamic force in the emergence of one's true self and with this attitude it is within grasp to become the architects of one's own life. Malkemus and Romer (2012) eloquently use their research to lead into a feeling of sexuality as an important part of being-ness as a primal part of the self which puts one in tune with the nature of human experience.

If one welcomes this essential quality of sexuality into one's life, one becomes simply but truly human, thereby fostering the incarnation of one's potential as a human being. Because sexuality, in this sense, is linked to the deep and dynamic rhythms of life, it offers the possibility of not becoming calcified into a fixed and rigid identity, but rather the opportunity to be continually shaped by a cyclical flow of clean life energy that keeps one dynamically alive as a human being. It awakens the verb in living by connecting one to life's continuous dance. With this flow, one moves toward a life that is at once meaningful, profound, and essentially human. (p. 36)

Considering the intrinsic essence of sexuality, it is important to include a conversation around autonomy and consent, and how it relates to agency. According to the Psychological Dictionary (2015), autonomy is an internal compass of independence, and agency is the way one uses their autonomy inner desires and psychological focus in the world; agency is the action one takes in response to their specific will. Consent is a way of practicing one's agency with others. All three of these –consent, autonomy, and agency—are pieces of the same pie in terms of investigating healthy and agentic sexuality. When a person is attempting to integrate the qualities that contribute towards healthy and agentic sexuality, there will be effects of these practices in other areas of life. When people are able to know themselves, act on that knowledge, and respect another's boundaries, there is potential for healthy and self-serving relationships.

One of the issues that women have encountered when attempting to claim their sexuality, are negative perceptions that are interwoven into every aspect of society revolving around women being sexually empowered. The need for this sexual empowerment is explained by Schick et al. (2008) who showed that women that adopt a perspective that is not based in sexual objectification, guilt, shame, etc., tend to have conversations with sexual partners that indicate that they are empowered to make choices that align with their inner yearnings and internal compass. They are more likely to feel empowered in those conversations to require condom use, which requires communication skills that lend to sexual selfhood and awareness around wants and needs. Through Schick's et al. research it is apparent that sexual empowerment is a critical element of having a healthy sex life. However, clarifying other explanations of psychological agency is helpful to understanding how sexual agency can affect agency in other areas of life.

Frie (2008) addressed the issue of psychological agency through the lenses of phenomenology, the study of the neuroscience, and psychotherapy and how agency relates to being embodied. There is a distinction between agency as a concept of rational thought and how it interacts with the body and the subconscious. When explored through these lenses it is apparent that psychological agency is more than decisions; it is an intricate system of interactions between the

self, relationships, and the world. Psychological agency moves beyond base level decisions into what has been conditioned to formulate a specific response or ideology. Those conditioned responses drive people to make the decisions that they do, in life, relationships, and in sexuality. When one is self-aware of their own conditioned responses, there is potential for discovering what it is that one genuinely wants.

Agency can be experienced as the link between the person and what surrounds them. Imagine that autonomy or being-ness in the self, self-awareness, and who one is when no one is watching, is a boat. Society is the water, the waves, the currents, and the tides, even the storm on the horizon or the still, glassy sea. The helm is how an individual steers and interacts with that water, this is agency. Sexual agency is the way in which we move through the water. It is about interaction, but it is also about the relationship between the boat and the water or how we interact and respond to our societal conditions.

The way in which one interacts with social conditioning also effects the relationship within the person and how they view their own body. Chmielewsk's et al. (2020) study broke down the roles of embodiment and how it contributes to attaining sexual agency, yet they made the point that there needs to be more detailed research that addresses embodiment sexually, not merely the idea of being physically aware. Autonomy in the body, or more specifically, self-aware embodiment, is based in discovery of the sexual self. Knowing how one feels, and their level of body acceptance are only the first steps; sexual self-awareness, which can be articulated, is critical in the relationship between the self and actualizing in the world. One cannot ask for what they want if they do not know how to understand what it is that they desire. The inquiry process connects thought and form and allows it to be translated into action. According to Chmielewski et al., embodiment does not necessarily lead to sexual agency, yet people who practice sexual agency are most likely embodied.

Another consideration is how objectification based social structures affect women's bodily autonomy and sexual agency. Tolman (2012) aimed to fill the gap between sexual agency and the inconsistency in females being objectified. In considering "sexual subjectivity" or the ability to discover one's sexual identity on an intrinsic level, without the influence of what others require or expect, the possibility of sexual agency is allowed. By not confining research to base physical desire or what one fantasizes about, but an elaborate self-knowledge, there lies opportunity for embodiment that permits the disclosure of a more holistic ideology, making sense of the complexities of girls becoming women who are authentic in their sexual desire and how they express it to others.

It is possible for women to find a balance between becoming sexually agentic individuals, who find genuine empowerment and transformation in their sexual interactions and eliminating their active role in the objectification of women in society. The first step to change is recognition of circumstance. Baumeister and Twenge (2002) wrote about cultural repression of women's sexuality.

Countless women have grown up and lived their lives with far less sexual pleasure than they would have enjoyed in the absence of this large-scale suppression. Socializing influences such as parents, schools, peer groups, and legal forces have cooperated to alienate women from their own sexual desires and transform their (supposedly and relatively) sexually voracious appetites into a subdued remnant. (p. 166)

The repression of women's sexuality makes it much more difficult for women to feel comfortable exploring their sexuality in a way that doesn't fit into the social standards that they have learned is acceptable. This is precisely why it is important to address this issue. Women deserve to have fulfilled sex lives that emulate what satisfies them as unique individuals.

Women's Experience

Women have not been socialized to have sexual agency. Research has shown that the American social structure has not supported a shame-free, explorative, or expressive environment for women's sexual pleasure. Mijares (2016), make a clear point about the issues women face with their sexuality:

Woman's bodies became a vehicle for men's pleasure and control. Female sexuality was no longer revered, and woman lost control over their own bodies. Spirituality was separated from physical life, and sexuality became associated with lust and sin ---We must relearn and obtain a healthy acceptance of natural eroticism and sexuality. Human sexuality and spirituality can be in positive relationship. (pp. 53-54)

Women's sexuality has been a powerful tool in this mechanism of authority. This one distinct social outlook of women's positions through history was meant to keep the patriarchal structure in power. There have been substantial motivations for keeping women out of an equal position. Karras (1996) discussed some of these reasons:

The particular attribution of lust to women was in part an effort to displace onto them the responsibility for the sins of men who could not control their own temptations. The placing of blame also indicated a real fear of women—that they would disrupt the established order of things by leading men astray, by causing bastards to inherit, by destroying clerical celibacy, by polluting the nunnery. (p.108)

Religion has reflected the social structure and the patriarchy has been propped up on the stilts of religious reasoning. Shame has surrounded women's sexuality far into current times, even after women were given public autonomy from male ownership.

According to Baumeister and Twenge (2002), women's sexuality has been suppressed as a method of patriarchal control, leading to the advancement of male privilege. Throughout history men have held collective power over politics, economics, and resources. This has shackled women to their gender roles and has been carried down through generations from mother to daughter.

When the underlying challenges to female sexual agency have not been addressed, women perpetuate the problem, by shaming one another and teaching their daughters that they do not have a sexual voice or a right to pleasure. As the pendulum slowly swings towards equal rights, it is expected that women are suddenly empowered sexually as well. Which does not add up because there have been thousands of years of women's sexuality not being their own, and it takes strength, healing, and confidence to change the ideology towards an outlook that includes women expressing their sexuality freely.

Burkett and Hamilton's (2012) study show how social conditioning has normalized girls basing their pleasure as a reflection of their partner's desire. In Burkett and Hamilton's study the interviews with college-age women who said they were empowered sexually, also indicated that in their sexual experiences they were only responding to their partners' wants and needs, and not considering their own. There was also a sexual economy theme that surfaced, in the research, where women felt the expectation to participate in sexual interactions, whether they legitimately wanted to or not: hereby promoting a tit-for-tat ideology. The subjects had admissions that they are responsible for satisfying the people they sexually interact with if they felt like they had led them to believe they would have sexual relations; muddying the water if they change their mind, are manipulated, or persuaded to have sexual relations that they are not "into."

Sex Positivity

Another important facet to sexual development is personal power. When one feels in control of their body, freedom, and sexuality, they are more likely to experience sexuality in an embodied way. Meaning that they will feel more fully and be able to utilize their sexual expansion as a way in which they can become more expressive of their true self outside of the bedroom. In other words, sex positivity promotes open communication and non-judgment as a way of life. According to Gabosch (2014), sex-positivity is "an attitude towards human sexuality that regards all consensual sexual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable, encouraging sexual pleasure and experimentation" (para. 1). Both Gabosch and Kulystin (2019) explore sex positivity as a way of practicing healthy sexuality. Kulystin explained what they experience as healthy sexuality:

My sex positivity is focused on promoting body agency, autonomy, and personal sovereignty for everyone, within sexual encounters and beyond. This inherently includes being able to have any kind of consensual sexual experience that we want to have or to not have sexual experiences at all. (p. 110)

Sex positivity becoming more widely understood is a first step in our current society's development that moves us towards more gender equality and equity, as it eliminates judgement of the self and others around consensual sex (Carver, 2003; Nagoski, 2022; Schnarch, 1991; Tiefer, 2006).

Burnes et al. (2017) discussed the meaning and importance of sex positivity in counseling psychology. They claimed that sex positivity supports sexual health and satisfaction by promoting an open minded and non-judgmental attitude about consensual sex. Sex positivity is a philosophy that has become an infrastructure which brings together all aspects of the self being considered in one's sexuality. It is an affirming and constructive way of thinking that is based on consent, communication, self-awareness, responsibility, trust, and sexual agency. It also includes a holistic ideology that involves the physical, emotional, spiritual, and social components of sexual well-being. This healthy and agentic sexuality contributes to the overall wellness of the individual. This model deconstructs the notion of shame and the limited traditional gender norms around sex and attempts to normalize sexuality as a beneficial and expansive part of people's being.

Burnes et al. (2017) focused on the need to adapt this perspective in counseling psychology, yet the message is the same for all women who wish to find the transformative power of sexual agency. Sex positivity lends itself to metamorphosis from the boxed-in concepts of sexual norms to an explorative and self-accepting inquiry into the possibilities that sexual agency can present. "Sex positivity has become a framework that integrates the physical, somatic, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects of sexual practice and sexual being in positive, enriching ways" (Syme et al., 2013, as cited in Burnes et al., 2017, p. 471).

The Potential for Transformation

Malkemus and Romer (2012) dove into sexuality as a transformational path by saying, "While being profoundly interwoven within the flow of full-bodied living, each center reflects specific experientially discernable characteristics that are related to specific regions of the human form" (p. 34). By recognizing the components of the whole self, one can begin to practice an embodied principle. When understanding this principle one can see that there is no wholeness when there is something that is tucked away in the shadows. When all elements of one's being are accepted, one does not wrap the entirety of one's personality around one part of their character. Thereby, allowing more grace when they need work in an area. "If humans are holistic beings, understanding need not be reduced to one specific aspect of the whole identity" (Malkemus and Romer, 2012, p. 35).

Sexuality as a transformative process can in part be due to what happens to an individual in a sexual situation. Sex is one very distinct part of beingness that is based in relationships with an individual and others simultaneously. Sex brings one into a state of vulnerability, while presenting an opportunity to bring body, mind, and the Divine together in one single experience. In Wade's (2004) studies she unearthed a unique sexual connection to the transpersonal.

Sex binds our awareness to our bodies through high levels of activity, sensation, and arousal. Yet it can also send people into transports, rapturous travels through space unconfined by the body's limitations. Transcendent sex can bend and even break the boundaries of normal spatial reality. (p. 112)

Transformation is inevitable when we become more self-aware and self-actualized. Agency and self-actualization walk hand in hand as each rests in the way one walks in the world. When they pay attention to what they carry in their complete being, the process of discerning what is true within, begins.

When a woman can emulate interior autonomy in her body, and project agency in her sexuality, it can be transformative to the entirety of her selfhood and relationships. The facets that are included in sex positivity, are keys to the empowerment that women are discovering when doing conscious work around their sexuality, as it frees them from the confines of sexual expectation and restrictions (Barnett et al., 2019; Calogero et al., 2011; Hayes et al., 2008; Liss et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2017).

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The methods used for this qualitative research project were based in a hermeneutic outlined intuitive interview style, because it was the goal for me as the researcher to extract the participants' knowledge, experience, and insights from the interview as an interpersonal experience. A group of 7 cis-gendered women ages 37 to 56, who claim and have been observed as sexually empowered, spiritually minded, and self-aware were interviewed for a pilot study regarding the transformative power of sexual agency, specifically in women who were socialized female due to the commonalities in social conditioning and experience.

Interviewees were recruited from social media and through interpersonal relationships with the researcher; the women chosen for this study were always treated with reverence for their sacred experience and unique journey. I met with each woman individually, either online or in person to discuss what the interviews would entail and the basis for this study, this was also a time where they were able to address concerns and ask questions. This process established relationships of trust with each participant prior to their interview. A cultivated relationship that began before the interviews assisted in developing an open and rich exchange which provided plentiful insight into the transformational process.

Interviews were conducted either in person or via video call. Each interview lasted anywhere from 75 to 175 minutes. The participants received a basic outline of the questions via email before the interview and were given the opportunity to write answers if they chose or to, at the least, get clear on their thoughts around the questions. The questions were accompanied by a description of sexual agency, autonomy, and the focus on the transformational aspect of the study. The questions included the request for detailed experiences of personal emotional/spiritual breakthroughs that sparked the prioritization of sexual agency, correlation between sexual agency and self-confidence in life, specific mindsets that contributed to sexual empowerment, consent and sex-positivity, relationships, process of transformation, overall well-being, personal freedom and expression, advice for their younger selves, differences after transformation, determination of

desires and self-expression, transpersonal and spiritual correlations and connections to the Divine through sexuality. During the interviews, the participants were asked more detailed questions around these topics, while I as the interviewer clarified what was meant by questions as needed.

The women each signed an informed consent document to participate in the study and gave permission for the information gained through the interviews to be utilized in further work. The women were given a choice to whether they would like their real names used in order to give them intellectual credit or to be anonymous. Each participant's race will be included as an attempt to show cultural diversity. A single letter was used to refer to each subject. The specific participants for this study will be described as follows:

H (56, Indian born and raised) prefers to stay fully anonymous. S (44, Panama Latina, first generation) prefers to stay fully anonymous. A (37, Chinese American, first generation) prefers to stay fully anonymous. L (51, Caucasian American) Prefers to be known by full name, Leah Soenke Ruona. M (37, Caucasian American) Prefers to be known by full name, Meghann McCormick. K (45, Caucasian American) Prefers to be known by professional name, Kathleen Ashford. W (41, Brazilian Latina born and raised) Prefers to be known by chosen name, Aisha Waduda.

Each interview was conducted from the original questions, yet the process remained fluid through intuitive listening and further questions. This process allowed participants to dive deeper into answers that brought forth expanded information and specific directions that I as the researcher deemed important during the conversations. Each participant made it known that they felt extremely comfortable in the interview process and felt freedom to express themselves without judgement or fear. Interviews were recorded through the transcription tool, Otter.AI. Finally, the second draft of the transcripts were analyzed and recorded through writing. Common themes arose including three or more participants.

Results

The Seekers and the Rebels

The research showed that there were two personality types of women: Seekers and rebels. The seekers show initial difficulty in understanding their base needs and desires sexually or otherwise. However, all of these women eventually figured out what they desired, through discovery of themselves and exposure to diverse types of sexual expression. The rebels know who they are from an incredibly early age, yet their desires evolved and developed over time, exposure, and availability.

Three of the women fit into the category of seekers, M, W, A. The seekers had no initial idea what they wanted their sexual relationships to look like when they realized something was wrong. These women were all socially deemed "good kids," having sex later and fitting family modeling until they could not do it any longer. They have needed to develop their sexual desires, because in

the beginning they do not even know what to ask for. Their exploration needed to be initialized by something or someone.

These participants tended to hit a wall where they had to find a way to express sexual freedom. They did not know their desires, yet they chose to do things that were outside social expectations of relationship integrity in a way that they did not make a large social statement; this meant taking actions that were a little rebellious, such as cheating on a current partner or sleeping with a married person. In every case, these women became so uncomfortable in the situation that they were in, that they felt immense urgency to change their life. They expressed that they “felt like something was missing and that they were not a whole person.”

It was common that the seekers came from a very rigid background, culturally, socially, and familial, with expectations of what relationships are “supposed” to look like. They knew something was not right but did not have any idea of what another option was. Each had a female friend or mentor that gave them a shame free container where they did not feel judged and could talk about the potential exploration of their sexuality. M, W, and A felt a deep desire for freedom from what they had been taught and had realizations that old ideas of the way things were supposed to be did not match what they actually needed inside. All three experienced the precipice to change after having a child and each said they felt visceral pain that they couldn’t explain, tracing it back to their individual sexual blocks.

Four of the women interviewed had a specific mentality that was more rebellious throughout their lives, S, H, K, and L. The rebels all had an ardent desire for freedom from early on. Each was in constant search for self-expression and had a sense of sexual self-identity at an early age. They tended to explore on their own and were looking for ways to express their desires. What held them back from actualizing their sexual yearnings was circumstance, partner’s needs, and what was deemed socially acceptable in their surroundings.

The rebels had experiences early in life between ages 8 and 11 where they understood that sexuality was something that they needed to pay attention to; either that their body had some kind of power over people, or that men in their lives sexualized them and made it clear that their bodies were significant for desire. They saw early on that societal standards around women’s sexuality were wrong for them and they rebelled against it. L was called a “slut” in eighth grade and decided that she needed two boyfriends in her early teen years; one for her public persona and one who she could be her true self with. She said she knew that her sexuality had to be hidden from the world and that if she were to be sexually agentic, she would have to maintain two identities. H flat out refused to be in an arranged marriage and moved away from home to “do as she pleased.” She married someone “less culturally stringent who she could be open with.” K went into being an exotic dancer in her early 20s, then became a professional dominatrix when she found her sexual agency. She made it clear that this was her way of taking control of her life. S discovered kink through reading a BDSM novel and always had a drive to explore that part of herself.

The rebels all had the commonality of being exposed to some kind of porn in their teen years. L and K both had situations where their mothers had sex with their boyfriends while in their teens. Each of the rebellious women eventually found their way to the sex positive community and decided to attend sex clubs discover more clearly what their desires could be. S specifically said that there, “should be a prescription to go to a sex club for every person.” However, S also said that it can be difficult to feel a part of that community at first. All of these women found extensive freedom in the BDSM communities, however none of the seekers were attracted to BDSM. The rebels each expressed that they simply needed to find the right scenarios to actualize their sexual agency.

The Catalyst to Change

Although the rebels always had a sense of sexual agency, they each hit a point where there was a catalyst to change towards expressing their sexual identity into the world from a more wholistic standpoint. The seekers also felt a deep need for change. All the women felt discomfort in their bodies, minds, and their emotional beings, feeling like they could not restrict themselves any longer. “Something had to give.” 4 women experienced depression, mood changes, and feelings of isolation; for those with children, the gender role ideas around being a mother started to feel unsettling. The experience of motherhood put a flashlight on gender biases that they had not previously been as aware of.

The breaking point for the mothers was a sense that they had no time for self-care, and they began to get angry that they could not meet their own needs. T and M experienced their husbands trying to have sex with them without considering their emotional exhaustion and this experience shut them down sexually; here was born the desire to reclaim the self. The seekers each had an elder woman who validated their unique path without judgement, since other women had taught them to be ashamed just as often as men had perpetuated it. All the women had a challenging time asserting themselves around sexuality before they fully discovered their sexual agency. M’s advice to other women was, “Embrace the dark night of the soul, get sick enough of your own shit you have to do something.”

Going on a Journey

M’s husband slept with someone else in their home, then slept with her, at this point she left her body and had a faun and freeze response where she just did what she was expected and shut down emotionally. She had always been a people pleaser and was tied financially to her husband; she could not leave. She experienced tightening and restriction in her body and could not feel pleasure around sex for years. This had all been triggered by losing trust and it caused her to abandon her sexuality. She then entered a state of judgment of herself that she wasn’t feeling sexual as she was going into mid-thirties because she was “supposed to have sexual peak.” M started a jade egg practice to attempt to regain her sense of sexuality. She realized that her whole life she had felt like men had a right to her sexuality and that she felt obligation to share it with

her partners because of her conditioning. When M started working with sexual energetics, she started to prioritize claiming the self and her sexuality and became linked with spirituality. M explained that as her “sexuality opened, her spirituality became imminent.”

M and A are both seekers who went through a journey of self-discovery. This type of journey is beautifully told by A who expressed her imagery of her sexual revelation as a story about the wise wolf woman. This story helped her in her investigative phase towards her need for sexual self-expression.

My wise wolf woman started to sing my song and I went on a journey to collect my bones. The Navajo have a story of the wise wolf woman. She walks through the desert collecting the bones from all the wolves and animals that have perished. She then brings them to a cave and lights a fire. She begins to put the bones back together very carefully, one by one. As the night goes on and the fire crackles as it warms up the cave, she sings over the bones. As she sings the ligaments form, and the organs reformed the muscles grow. Then the fur comes back. As she sings the breath and love into them, she breathes life back into them.

All of the women experienced a deconstructive phase that was remanent of a sacred journey of stripping themselves of the life they thought they were supposed to lead and discovering the life they wanted to have. A made it clear that it is “important to determine what is true and what is socially and culturally conditioned.” She realized, as did every participant in the study, she needed to “become the driver of her own life.”

Prioritizing Sexuality: Discovery, Exposure, and Exploration

All the women that participated in the study agreed that determining relationships, practicing discernment, and self-awareness are priorities in discovering sexual desires. M made a strong statement around her reasoning for making sexual agency a priority:

Sexuality is really important because it’s a common block for most women. It’s a catalyst for female empowerment. Sexuality is critical for development. It’s important because it has been so repressed, it’s not more important it’s just been seriously downplayed throughout history.

The participants brought forth the issue that there was fear around exploring sexuality. Being sexually empowered forced them to question whether they would they be judged publicly, lose their partner and/or would their family fall apart? But each realized that “finding their joy was something they had to do.” When they made their sexuality a priority, they found empowerment that had nothing to do with other people’s ideas of what they should do.

Safety was a key term for all the women, they needed to feel safe to explore or change the relationship dynamic or look for the types of relationships where they could express their sexual agency. Embracing curiosity was another theme that came across all the participants. This was an active part of the transformational experience. They all agreed that exposure and education

helped them to discover or evolve their desires, empowering them to state what they wanted regarding their sexuality (this also bled into every aspect of their lives).

The women that were interviewed explored classes, books, community, sex clubs, and erotic or neo-tantric events. 6 participants explored polyamory or ethical non-monogamy, 4 women explored Kundalini practices and other sexual spiritual practices, and 4 participants became involved in Kink, BDSM, and explorative sexuality. W found her sexual agency through sexological body work or what is termed a Daka- a one-sided sexual healing. W's experience with a sexological body worker who was male helped her to experience a man who apologized for all those that did not allow her expression of sexual agency in her life. Being celebrated by a man for her sexual being was revolutionary to her emotional healing. She needed someone who took time to get to know her body and he did so by honoring and making her body sacred and magical. This made sexuality energetic and spiritual for her, allowing her to find personal freedom and a way to embody receiving touch.

Sex, Spirituality, and Divinity

In all cases the women agreed that practicing sexual agency helped them to maintain integrity by contributing to having healthy and honest relationships, consent, and sex positivity, and a do no harm attitude. 6 of the women claimed that sexual agency makes life richer, not easier.

4 of the women experienced transpersonal peak experiences during sex after they found sexual agency. 3 the women explained the sensation during a spiritually oriented orgasm as a "feeling of the chakras changing through the body," had a visceral feeling of specific chakras opening and clearing stagnant energy during orgasm; they described it as eliminating sexual and sensual blockages that they had felt within their bodies. They described a feeling of sexual alignment, as well: one woman said, "imagine an energy field melded with and pulsating at the same frequency with the other person, no physical barrier between two beings," encapsulating what it felt like to experience a sense of non-duality during sex. A said that her Buddhist practices helped to have better sex by helping to be present during sex, which contributed to her being more absorbed in the experience.

The participants explained orgasm as "a space of transformation," "sexual energy," "a life force moving through the body," and "a feeling of expansiveness." K spoke of her spiritual experiences and what had led her and was required for her to have transpersonal or spiritual altered states of consciousness during orgasm.

It takes vulnerability and trust that my partner and I know that how I would like to feel. I ask myself; how do I want to feel? I need to know that my partner has trust, I know how to express my no. A lot of people don't want to deny their partner, but it's important to be able to say no so you can trust their yes. If I could do anything in this moment, what would it be? Then I see how it goes. Try it. Stay present, fluid and not attached to anything. It has to be ok to totally screw up in bed.

K also discussed about how she has learned and instructed other women about embracing the lack of control, by finding ways to sexualize it. All the women expressed experiencing during orgasm a feeling that “everything is connected,” “nothing is separate,” feeling it fully through their whole being, “radiating sexual energy,” flowing through and around them with an ability to “orchestrate that energy.” They describe it as raw, “tapping into the creative energy.” M felt like she was “accessing divine source,” she started doing “sex magic,” by controlling sexual energy through orgasm. She explained it as “opening” but also about “harnessing the energy to do things with it.” Claiming that orgasmic state, and that power as her own. While unblocking whatever it is that is blocked in her body and energetically.

All participants said that the experience of being free to be themselves is really what connects them to the spiritual aspect of sex. When exploring sexuality, they said it felt like “that is the state they are supposed to be in.” This way of feeling the “presence of divinity,” “other realms,” “spiritual seeds,” “feeling God, that God is everywhere,” that they can “experience and become the divine, because they are so open in those moments.”

H experienced a sense of “blissful pleasure” when in sexual embrace and in orgasm, she said that at one point she “transcended the physical body, there was so much pleasure that it took me to a different dimension, disconnected, and connected to body, part of the whole but divine in myself.” L experienced that when she stated her sexual needs and importance to prioritize sexual desires, within a few days had “Kundalini awakening.” She had a couple of emotional days of struggles with her husband where she decided to express her sexual needs and feelings. And suddenly when she was alone going through her closet, she had an “overwhelming feeling of love for husband, friends, life, thinking about all the positive things that were happening.” L described that at that moment the energy started rising through her, she started to have “visions and an overwhelming feeling of connection.” L said she felt like she was “at her truest essence” during this experience. Several different feelings came upon her, “oneness, love, a sense of powerful emotion” over taking her heart, body, and mind. A day later she started breathing during sex and could feel the energy rising again, this time starting in their belly. Consciously aware that she could “control it and shouldn’t let it dissipate.” This time the “energy shot out of her forehead.” “Light so bright” that she “thought needed to shut her eyes, but her eyes were already shut.” L expressed that these experiences felt like they “were the orgasm.” She expressed that she thinks all of us have this capability, “we just need to awaken to it.”

Discussion

This research has uncovered that there is a specific process that women go through when they start exploring sexual agency. Often there is a more extreme exploration where the pendulum

swings from not expressing the sexual self to expressing the sexual self abundantly. All the subjects talked about after that initial fire has dimmed a little bit, and they discovered that sexuality can be about more than orgasm. Numerous women placed more importance in their “erotic energy” and not the “end point energy” (orgasm). Those who had gone through or at least started perimenopause recognized that the hormone shifts can diminish sex drive. The older women expressed that this is when they started to value “quality over quantity,” and that “different relationship access different parts of the self.” The participants explained that as one gets older there becomes a desire to, “release expectations and embrace curiosity.” Every subject concluded that “sexual maturity does not mean less sexual agency,” agency can mean “living in your no.” It can mean discernment between what it is that one wants to focus on. The subjects presented that one develops an “internal barometer” that is not about a preset method where one “has lots of sex with multiple people. Although it can be that too, at any age.”

This study showed that settling into sexual agency can be very “overwhelming,” described by participants as “energy that can flow so easily, that it can be unbalancing,” and 5 of the women needed to “learn to contain it.” 6 the subjects said that they recognized that it is a “journey not a destination.” They all emphasized that it, “it takes practice to create boundaries and self-awareness.”

3 of the women said that they had “experienced more judgement from other women who are not sexually empowered,” since they found their agency. 4 of the participants encountered less “tolerance for small talk” which led towards feelings of loneliness if one “doesn’t find likeminded community.” It can also be an “adjustment to letting go of old relationships that no longer align with their current empowered state,” that 6 of the women embodied after finding sexual agency. They all made it clear that “learning how to live in this world as a sex positive woman can be tricky” M shared an insight about what she has learned about the transformative process of attaining sexual agency, with this statement:

I think a mindset of desire and curiosity allows for sexual agency. Desire lubricates the brain to be open to what we want and don't want. Curiosity allows for experimentation, to stretch the edge and not just conform to what we were conditioned to be and do in connection. Often our stories and beliefs around sex and connection are just passed down by our parents or our culture - this does not allow for our own spiritual flourishing.

The Transformative Effects on Life

The women who participated in this study had powerful transformative experiences; they also saw effects in the other areas of their being in the world. They experienced “certainty,” “confidence,” “being more grounded,” “present, and stronger in life.” 4 of the participants discussed how the “types of relationships” they have with friends, family, and partners “may fundamentally change, becoming deeper and more expansive.” They expressed that they were “more likely to choose quality people and experiences.” 6 of the women said they “experienced a

feeling of safety that came with being centered in the body” after they became solid in their sexual agency. All of the women began to live in “a place of personal power” (feeling like a powerhouse) and 3 no longer needing to be “people pleaser personality types.” The participants “no longer feel the need to rebel,” after feeling like small rebellions were the only way they felt free earlier in life. They all expressed feeling “driven” and reported becoming “better at manifesting the lives they desire,” emphasizing “a feeling of abundance.” The women also said that they now feel more “open to living their dreams and are creatively open.” They now maintain “an inner knowledge of what they are capable of” and that they can “claim themselves” at any time. A strong feeling of “interconnectedness” was significant to the transformative process for 4 of the women. They all claimed to feel “less judgement” now towards other women and acknowledge the “inherent power in sexual agency.”

Summary

This qualitative pilot study unearthed a wealth of insight, experiences, and information that has the potential to help many women achieve their own sexual agency. These women’s stories offer a tried-and-true field guide to sexual self-discovery and actualization. Not every part will fit with every woman’s experience, yet the information these women volunteered may assist others in finding their own pathway towards sexual agency. The open-ended conversations that ensued within these interviews created an opportunity to mine material that seldom, if ever is discussed on a transpersonal and clinical psychology forum. These women were chosen for the wealth of material they had to contribute to the theory that sexual agency is transformative.

Sexuality is a piece of being human, whether or not it is utilized. This piece of our unique totality cannot be ignored. This study attempts to show that when women observe the constrictions they feel around their sexuality, they begin the process of wholistic self-knowledge. As women break down the truth and falsehood of those feelings, they are able to keep what serves them and release what does not. When they allow the release of outdated ideas, shame, social conditioning, fear, or whatever else that keeps them from being truly themselves, they open to a new paradigm of personal freedom. That freedom is not about what they do with a sex partner or the number of people they have sex with; it is a freedom in their spirit that leads them into the sacredness of a part of their core being.

Unveiling potency in the body, they listened to the wisdom of the heart. This is where the Divine feminine finds the self and scorches the social impediments and expectations that have weighed them down throughout the lifetimes of them and their sisters. The women in this study felt what it is to play with their limbs in the world, to dance and to move with the beat of the universal drum. Taking the tips of their fingers and tracing the faces of those they have loved. Their muscle memory allows them to skip the parts that don’t serve them anymore. Their bodies are their reflection of their spirit in this world. When their bodies become the messenger instead of a thing to be owned or battled, they are finding their place on the throne.

Since the dawn of society, women's bodies have been owned. They were a commodity, not a celebrated source of the great wellspring of the Divine. However, even within these circumstances, the women in this study have been the outliers of this conditioned response. They have taken the reins of their own bodies and their own sexuality, in order to bring them into divinity. I believe it is possible for all women to get to this point. Yet, self-awareness is the key that will unlock this potential.

When women start to recognize that they get to choose agency, or what they do with their bodies, they can move towards a more sex-positive mindset. Opening the doors to freedom to be who they choose in themselves and in the world, becoming empowered in every aspect of their lives.

Next Steps

The conglomeration of the information and insight attained through this original research study, in combination with the wealth of literary resources on previous studies and ideologies, have directed my future work as a researcher on my dissertation project, which will be a workshop that will test the discoveries through real life teachings to other women who have a desire to develop their own sexual agency. Transformation and overall outlook towards whole beingness will be measured and documented from a perspective of evaluating the applicability of the information that was mined through this pilot study. It is my inclination as a researcher to do further studies that bring in a clinical perspective, by gaining information from sex and intimacy therapists about what they have learned regarding working with women who are attempting to develop sexual agency. This research that I have planned will be done through a quantitative survey.

In the future it would be considered prudent to offer public workshops and provide further literary work on these subjects, including the study results in this article and more details ascertained in the research data. More detailed articles will be written on the seeker and the rebel, the catalyst phase, and the far-reaching transformative effects of practicing sexual agency. I find this subject momentous and eminent for the transpersonal and clinical areas of psychology.

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