

EMBODIMENT OF SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY

**EMBODIMENT OF SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY: WOMEN'S LIVED
EXPERIENCE OF RESILIENCE TO SEXUAL SHAME**

by

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ABSTRACT

Due to the prevalence of sexual shame among Christian women, this study was designed to better understand the lived experiences of sexual shame resilience and embodiment. Five young, married women were selected for inclusion based on their immersion in Christian culture during adolescence and for their experiences of working through sexual shame. In order to understand the meaning of these women's experiences, a hermeneutic phenomenological method was employed. Through participant's narratives, four categories of themes emerged (religious messaging around sexuality, experiences of sexual shame, healing experiences, and experiences of embodied sexuality). When participants were able to work through their sexual shame, they were able to embrace and find freedom in their sexuality. This study's findings are consistent with Brown's (2006) Shame Resilience Theory. The clinical implications of these findings are discussed in terms of the need to provide appropriate support for women struggling with sexual shame.

Keywords: Sexual shame, resilience to shame, integration of spirituality and sexuality, embodiment, religion, hermeneutic phenomenology, Christian women, sexuality, spirituality

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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

As the World Health Organization’s definition of sexuality suggests, sexuality is about much more than genital stimulation or orgasm. Sexuality involves the physical, emotional, intellectual, relational and spiritual selves; sexuality encompasses the whole person. If sex involves the whole person, then no one aspect of life can comprise the whole meaning of sexuality (Ogden, 2006). Sex, according to Hunt and Jung (2009) is “delightful, safe, responsible, and community enhancing” (p. 161). Though there is no universal definition of human sexuality (MacKnee, 1997), for the purposes of this study, Wittstock’s (2009) definition of human sexuality will serve as the demarcation of the concept of human sexuality for this study: “that physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual energy that permeates, influences, and colors our entire being and personality in its quest for love, communion, friendship, wholeness, self-perpetuation, and self-transcendence” (p. 27). Though this is a very broad definition, it speaks to the complex and multifaceted nature of human sexuality.

Sexuality and spirituality are inseparable aspects of being, complementary and interdependent with one another (Daniluk & Browne, 2008). Thus, growth in one’s spiritual life may shift their experiences of sexuality, and vice versa. There is an interconnected relationship between sexuality and spirituality, as they both speak to the mysterious and transcendent nature of human experience (Mahoney, 2008). Interestingly, neurological research has indicated that similar changes in the brain occur during prayer and meditation as well as during sexual activity,

suggesting that sexuality and spirituality share a common connection in the body (Horn et al., 2005; Newberg & d'Aquili, 2008). Newberg and d'Aquili (2008) suggest that the “neurological machinery of transcendence” may have developed in the same neural circuitry of the mating and sexual experiences (p. 125). This, they imply, is not entirely surprising, given mystics have used analogous expressive terms (e.g. bliss, rapture, ecstasy) when speaking about their spiritually transcendent experiences. Given this close relationship between spirituality and sexuality, it is important to understand the ways in which religion and spirituality can impact sexuality and vice versa.

Though spiritual and sexual integration result in a greater wholeness, many researchers argue that religious teachings are harmful, and potentially are a source of sexual shame (Cowden & Bradshaw, 2007; Daniluk & Browne, 2008; Murray, Ciarrocchi, & Murray-Swank, 2007; Ogden, 2012). Religion can serve as a regulatory function for sexual expression and behaviour; rules and restrictions around what is considered to be “good sex” can limit the way in which an individual expresses his or her sexuality. Moreover, the dualistic framework for understanding the body as a distinct (or even oppositional) entity from the soul or the person can result in a disembodied sexuality. This separation of the “flesh” from the spirit, and the prevailing Christian religious belief that the body is sinful while the spirit is pure, perpetuates the notion that sexuality is inherently corrupt (Daniluk & Browne, 2008; MacKnee, 1997; McClintock, 2001; Nelson, 1978). Furthermore, the reinforcement of patriarchy by some religious institutions places women, and women’s sexuality, in a secondary position, thereby limiting the embrace of women’s embodied sexuality and inhibiting women’s pleasure (Hunt & Jung, 2009). Though there have been meaningful shifts in the way that many religious institutions construct sexuality, these dualistic and restrictive scripts still play a pervasive role in influencing religious people’s

beliefs and experiences around their bodies and their sexuality.

As a regulator of sexual expression, religion can be a contributor to the development of women's sexual shame. Shame, as defined by Brown (2006), is "an intensely painful [and universal] feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance or belonging (p. 45)." Shame develops when an individual perceives herself or himself as failing to meet socio-cultural expectations of the ideal self (Tagney & Dearing, 2002). Therefore, if an individual feels that she or he is unable to meet the narrowly defined religious expectations about their sexual experiences, thoughts, feelings, and/or fantasies, sexual shame can develop. The experience of sexual shame can have a marked impact on how individuals experience their sexuality and their relationship with their intimate partners, therefore, this is an issue that needs to be addressed (Kauffman, 1989; Lichtenberg, 2001; Lutwak, Parrish, & Ferrari, 2003; Moore & Davidson, 1997; Woo, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2011).

So far, however, there has been limited research about the process of overcoming sexual shame that results from narrow or rigid religious ideologies around sexuality (Brown, 2006; Daniluk & Browne, 2008; Kyle, 2013). The extant literature does not speak specifically to how sexual shame resilience is developed; this makes it difficult for clinicians and mental health professionals to assist men and women who struggle with such experiences. In contrast with the experiences of shame induced by religion, some research findings pertaining to the embodiment and the integration of sexuality and spirituality highlights instances where spirituality has enhanced and transformed women's sexual experience (Macknee, 1997; Mahoney, 2000; Ogden, 2007; Wade, 2000). For example, those who experienced such integration have described sexual experiences such as freedom, transcendence and connection with self, others and the Divine (Macknee, 1997). Religion, therefore, seems to have a twofold impact on women's sexuality; it

can be both shaming, and a source of resiliency to shame. The embracing of the spiritual and sexual self may serve as a potential buffer against, or a solution for the experience of sexual shame. Hearing the narratives and lived experiences of religious and spiritual women who have developed shame resilience (and embodiment) in relation to their sexuality may be helpful in beginning to learn how to best serve those who are struggling with sexual shame.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“The absence of sexual joy in so many women’s lives is in part a consequence of the way ‘good sex’ has been constructed in Christian moral traditions. While there is some room for women’s sexual delight along the fringes of this sacred canopy, it is not highlighted under the big tent.” (Jung, 2000, p. 33)

In order to better understand how sexual shame resilience is experienced, specifically as it relates to religion and spirituality, I will review the relevant literature.¹ I will begin by briefly addressing women’s sexuality as an area of research. Following this, I will focus on the constructs of religion and spirituality, and how they are measured in the literature. Next, I will examine how the integration of spirituality, religiosity and sexuality can benefit an individual on multiple levels. I will briefly outline the concept of sexual embodiment, and how this relates to integration. Following this, I will highlight the literature on the lived experience of sexual and spiritual integration. Then I will outline the potential negative influence that religious ideologies may have on women’s sexuality, including the experience of sexual shame. Subsequently, I will outline how shame impacts sexuality, and present research that has been conducted on developing resilience around shame. Finally, I will offer the rationale and purpose for this study.

Women’s Sexuality as a Research Area

This section is meant to be a brief contextual overview of research on women’s sexuality in order to set the stage for this research. Traditionally, research on women’s sexuality has focused on the purely physical functioning or behavioural aspects of women’s sexuality (Kinsey et al., 1953; Masters & Johnson, 1950). The problematizing of women’s sexual functioning in the research reinforces the idea that women lack sexual interest and ability (Laumann et al.,

¹ I am intentionally using first person here to indicate my own voice in this research. In accordance with the hermeneutic phenomenological method, I embrace the philosophy that the experiences, knowledge, opinions, beliefs, and the existing body of knowledge predisposes the me to interpret the nature of a phenomenon in a particular way. As a researcher, I am implicated in how I view research. From this standpoint, I will personally engage with the experiences of the women who I will interview. In other words, I make no intention of remaining an objective writer/researcher, rather, I allow myself to be moved by the research.

2005). Dishearteningly little has been written on how women's sexuality develops, or how women experience their sexual bodies (Daniluk, 1993). This narrow focus of literature neglects to explore the deeper psychological, spiritual, emotional and relational aspects of women's sexuality, which, for both men and women is just as, if not more, important than the genital aspects of sex. In the literature, however, religiosity and spirituality emerges as a salient aspect in understanding women's sexual experiences (Mahoney, 2008). In order to have a fuller picture of what it means to be both a woman and a sexual being, it is important that researchers begin to move beyond biological/physical functioning and honour the whole person.

Religion and Spirituality: Conceptual Delineations

The impact of religiosity and spirituality on sexuality has a fairly substantial research base in terms of how religious beliefs impact sexual behaviour (e.g., Adamczyk & Felson, 2006; Burris, Smith, & Carlson, 2009; Ellis-Gowdy, 2006; Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005), sexual attitudes (e.g., Beckwith & Morrow, 2005; Davidson, Moore, Earle, & Davis, 2008; Lefkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, & Boone, 2004) and sexual satisfaction (Davidson, Darling, & Norton, 1995). Additionally, in recent years researchers have taken steps to understand the benefit that spirituality and religion can have for sexuality (rather than just focusing on the oppressive or inhibiting nature of religious ideologies). Finally, increasing attention has been paid to how religious constructions of women's sexuality can impact women's thoughts, feelings, experiences and behaviours around their sexuality. Studies addressing these developments are outlined below.

Traditionally, religiosity has been narrowly measured by "global religiousness," namely, church attendance and affiliation, and level of importance of religion; however, more recent literature addresses the multi-dimensionality of religion as a construct (Murray, Ciarrocchi &

Murray-Swank, 2007). Furthermore, in much of the more recent literature around sexuality, religiosity and spirituality have been polarized, with authors highlighting the “oppressive” nature of religious teachings on sexuality and the freedom that spirituality can provide (e.g. Daniluk & Brown, 2005; Ogden, 2002a). This dualistic framework of religiosity and spirituality, Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) argue, hinders research in the areas of religion and spirituality for several reasons. First, this assumption, they argue, impedes inquiry and obscures important features of the phenomena in question. Importantly, they point out that this understanding also does not reflect empirical findings that consistently demonstrate that when asked about their self-perceptions of spiritual and religiosity, the majority of respondents identify themselves as both religious and spiritual (Corrigan, McCorkle, Schell, & Kidder, 2003; Freitas, 2008; Shahabi et al., 2002; Zinnbauer et al., 1997, as cited in Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). This finding was consistent with Murray, Ciarrocchi, and Murray-Swank’s (2007) study on spirituality, religion and sexuality, which found that spirituality and religiosity were highly correlated (.57), but not redundant. That being said, Murray, Ciarrocchi, and Murray-Swank (2007) point out that although there is evidence that suggests that there is overlap between religious and spiritual dimensions, they also correlate differently to psychosocial outcomes, including sexual expression.

Throughout the literature, spirituality and religion are often defined quite differently, which can significantly impact research outcomes. Pargament (2005) defines spirituality as “a search for the sacred” (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005, pg. 36); he refers to religiousness as “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005, p. 36). In this way, Pargament (2005) argues, spirituality “is the heart and soul of religiousness, the core function of religious life (pg. 37).” Religion and spirituality are often constructed as a false

binary. While spirituality and religion are not mutually exclusive, the simplistic academic polarization of “negative religion versus positive spirituality” fails to recognize the potentially harmful and helpful aspects of both constructs (Hill & Pargament, 2008).

Historical and Contextual Perspectives

“Carl Jung once remarked that when people brought sexual questions to him they invariably turned out to be religious questions, and when they brought religious questions to him they always turned out to be sexual ones.” (Nelson, 1978, p. 14)

Historically, religion has functioned as a regulator of sexual behaviour, with both Western and Eastern religions tending to restrict procreative activity to marriage (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2013). Religious institutions have tended to prescribe or designate what is viewed as acceptable sexual behaviour; for example, most religions condemn premarital and extramarital sex as sinful (Cowden & Bradshaw, 2007). Western religions in particular continue to reinforce the idea that sexual urges should be repressed, and that sex is more about utility than pleasure (Murray, Ciarrocchi, & Murray-Swank, 2007). In some Christian communities, for example, sexual intercourse, within the context of a heterosexual marriage, is intended for procreation and bonding. Similarly, in the Judaic tradition, within a marriage, the purpose of sex is linked to sexual pleasure and procreation (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2013). In short, religion can provide the standards and guidelines from which an individual can judge their own sexual thoughts, urges, feelings, behaviours and fantasies (Burris, Smith, & Carlson, 2009). In this context, religion serves as a powerful mode of social influence in which a narrowly defined range of appropriate sexual behaviours restricts and constrains the sexual expressions of those who adhere to such traditions.

A more thorough exploration of major world religions, however, demonstrates that many teachings contradict the popular understanding that religion’s sole function is to inhibit or attach

shame to sexual expression (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2013). Contemporary religious discourse, rather, has attempted to emphasize the connection between spirituality and sexuality (Murray, Ciarrocchi, & Murray-Swank, 2007). For example, in many Christian denominations, marital sexuality is an expression of God's love and presence; sex is seen as sacred, uniting a couple to each other, and God (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2013). Moreover, some Eastern Religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism stress the intimate link between spirituality and sexuality. In Hinduism, for instance, the philosophies of the Kama Sutra highlight the state in which sexual love involves the whole self, including the senses, the spirit and the mind. Furthermore, many Buddhists see sexuality as a potential path towards spiritual growth and enlightenment (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2013). While a comprehensive examination of how religious institutions view sexuality is beyond the scope of this research, this brief overview illuminates the cultural context of this research. Though there are sometimes conflicting religious messages about sexuality, there have certainly been shifts towards a more affirming, holistic perspective of sexuality (MacKnee, 1997).

Sacred Sexuality

Sexuality and spirituality spring from the same vital life source and have the same end. They are both about relationship; loving and being loved; desiring and being desired; and being vulnerable, honest, and intimate. They both require growth in self-knowledge, including awareness of one's limitations and "shadow." They both involve the whole self, including body and emotions... These are not two different forces, nor are they in any way at odds with each other.

(Giblin, 2014, p. 79)

While much of the literature highlights the potential negative and sometimes oppressive impact of religion on sexuality (including the experience of sexual shame), other researchers demonstrate that integrating spirituality and sexuality can be a source of power, pleasure and transcendence. Yarhouse (2005) argued that the empirical literature on the intersection of

religion and sexuality lacks nuance or balance, with much of the literature focusing on the potential harm of religion. Mahoney and Hernandez (2009) voiced similar judgments, stating that research needs to go beyond solely reinforcing the notion that religion's only impact on sexuality is restrictive. While this likely has been the case in the past, in more recent years researchers are increasingly focusing on the potential benefits of embracing sexuality with one's whole self. This section will look beyond the perceived negative impacts of religion and spirituality on sexuality, and will focus on works that explore the potential transcendence and wholeness that can result from integrating one's spirituality and sexuality.

Gina Ogden (2002b), who writes extensively on the intersection of spirituality and sexuality, conducted the largest study to date on this spiritual and physical connection. Ogden states that in her sex therapy practice she has consistently found that some women experience their sexuality beyond the physical sensations and orgasm; women that she worked with described spiritual aspects such as connection and bonding on multiple levels (Ogden, 2007). Inspired by the narratives she heard, Ogden developed a large-scale survey in which she queried men and women ($n = 3810$) about their sexual experiences that were "more than physical," experiences involving the spirit or the Divine. She found that 86% of women reported that sex involves romance, love and mystical union; 67% said that sex needs to be spiritual to be satisfying; 59% said that their spiritual beliefs open them up to risk deeper intimacy with their partners; and 47% of women say they have experienced God during sexual intimacy. This landmark study provides evidence that this integration of sexuality and spirituality, for many women, is a reality that can be deeply moving. That being said, it should be noted that Ogden did not use survey questions that had been tested for reliability or validity, and only descriptive statistics were included in the analysis.

The integration of spirituality and sexuality is an interdependent, mutually informing and enriching harmony between sexuality and spirituality (Daniluk & Browne, 2008). People who are journeying towards integrating their sexuality and spirituality allow their spiritual lives to enrich their sexual lives, and vice versa (Wittstock, 2009). For example, rather than bracketing parts of oneself (including one's sexual or physical self), an integrated person can experience the Divine with their whole selves. Correspondingly, this integration would allow an individual to experience their sexuality with all of themselves, enhancing sexual intimacy and discouraging a purely biological experience and understanding of sexual expressions (Wittstock, 2009). Sexual embodiment, or the experiencing of one's whole self through sexual intimacy through and within one's body, may play a key role in understanding the integration of spirituality and sexuality.

Sexual and spiritual embodiment.

“Sex is the language of the body...oriented toward pleasure.” (Robb, 1996)

Embodiment, which is a key element of identity or a sense of self, is the experiencing of one's body in the world (Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2013). The experience of being embodied signifies a consciousness of the feelings and sensations within one's body, especially as it relates to the outer world. Embodiment is not just awareness of the body as an object; rather, it is awareness *as* a body. Sexual embodiment, then, is the felt experience or “in-touchness” with one's desire and connection to a physical state (Tolman, Bowman, & Fahs, 2013). Simply put, sexual embodiment is when, during sexual expressions, one is connected with their whole selves through and within their body.

Embodiment, specifically sexual embodiment, provides a solid framework through which we can understand the experience of spiritual and sexual embodiment. Reuniting and embodying one's sexuality with their spirituality, Townsend (2001) argues, plays a key role in women's

“capacity to know and experience God (p. 157).” Integrating one’s sexuality and spirituality allows an individual to experience themselves more fully or wholly, which could enrich personal and sexual well-being (Daniluk & Brown, 2008; MacKnee, 1997). Parsons (1991) outlined the experience of women’s sexual and spiritual embodiment, noting that they not only felt oneness within themselves (body and spirit), this wholeness and belonging was also experienced with others and the “universe” at large. For these women, this was a deep conversion experience in which they shifted from seeing themselves from the ideological lens of their religion, to knowing themselves deeply (Parsons, 1991).

Wittstock (2009) argued that the integration of sexuality with one’s whole self, including their spirituality, is a universal development for spiritual people. He suggested that this integration would benefit individuals in assisting them in the overall integration of self. Moreover, Wittstock (2009) stated that this integration would enhance one’s capacity to relate to, and love, God and others with their whole self. This integration is also hypothesized to improve one’s attitude towards the sexual body. To measure the extent to which an individual has integrated their sexuality and spirituality, Wittstock, Piedmont, and Ciarrocchi (2007) created the Sexual-Spiritual Integration Scale (SSIS). This scale can be a useful tool in aiding researchers and clinicians with a measure that addresses, specifically, this integration.

Sexuality and sanctification. In response to the scarcity of research on how embodiment theology may apply to sexuality, in recent years, the concept of sanctification as applied to sexuality has garnered more attention in scholarly literature (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011; Mahoney & Hernandez, 2009; Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Sanctification of sexuality refers to the perception that the sexual bond is sacred and spiritual, and that God can be experienced during sexual intimacy with one’s

sexual partner (Mahoney & Hernandez, 2009).

In the first study to address this construct, Murray-Swank, Pargament, and Mahoney (2005) sought to evaluate whether college students ($n = 151$) ascribed sacred or sanctified qualities to their sexuality and sexual experiences. To do so, participants completed a battery of measures, including a sanctification of sexual intercourse scale, manifestation of God in sexual intercourse scale, index of global religiousness, and a sexual behaviour history measure. Results indicated that students who saw sex as sacred were more satisfied with sexual intercourse in their loving relationships (Murray-Swank, Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Moreover, the belief that the Divine was a part of sexuality was associated with more positive affective reactions. Interestingly, no statistically significant relationship was found between sanctification of sex and global religiousness; the authors hypothesized that this may be because a cohort of the religious participants adhered to the dualistic perspective, whereas another group of highly religious participants embraced embodiment theology of sexuality (thereby a null association emerged). This study suggests that the way in which one conceptualizes their sexuality in relation to their religion can shift the way they feel about and experience their sexual selves.

To evaluate whether the belief that sexuality is sanctified has an impact on newlywed's relational quality, Hernandez, Mahoney, and Pargament (2011) assessed couples who had been married between 4 and 18 months on scales of global religiousness, sanctification of sexuality in marriage, marital and sexual satisfaction, and marital and sexual intimacy. It was found that the internalizing of the belief that sex is sanctified predicted increased marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, greater frequency of sexual activity, greater sexual intimacy and spiritual intimacy in heterosexual newlywed couples (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011). Specifically, after controlling for global religiousness, they found that this belief accounted for 9-14% of the

variation in relational quality. The authors hypothesize that those who attribute sacred qualities to their sexual and marital relations may invest more in their relationship. At a one-year follow up study, it was found that the strength of sanctification as a predictor of frequency of sexual intercourse, sexual and marital satisfaction remained stable (Mahoney & Hernandez, 2009).

Though this study had a small sample size ($n = 83$) and is a community sample (and therefore not generalizable), this preliminary study is a promising jumping off point for further exploration on how sexuality, spirituality and religion intersect for newlywed's relational well-being.

Experiences of religious, spiritual and sexual integration.

“It was like being touched by God. Not that my partner was God, but that the intensity of our lovemaking was proof that God existed, that only God could have created anything so powerful and positive.” (Ogden, 2013)

According to my review of the literature, there are only a handful of qualitative works that focus on lived experiences of sexual and spiritual integration (MacKnee, 2002; Mahoney, 2008; Ogden, 2007; Wade, 2000). Mahoney (2008) looked at 10 Christian women's experience of overcoming a conflict between their sexuality and spirituality that resulted in integration. Though Mahoney screened for this resolution and integration (via a telephone interview), during the interview it was clear that, for all women, there was a persistence of this internal conflict. Mahoney (2008) found that the women's conflict between their sexual and spiritual selves emerged in adolescence, as participants experienced a dissonance between their sexual behaviour or thoughts, and their Christian traditional ideologies. All but one of the women described the silence around sexuality in their Christian homes, which left them feeling ill-prepared to navigate their sexuality. Mahoney (2008) argued that silence and sex-negative discourse in Western Christianity around sexuality has perpetuated shame for both men and women. Most of these women had difficulty articulating their experiences of integration; this experience was described

as a “feeling” or an essence. This study speaks to the ongoing, difficult process of sexual and spiritual integration for some Christian women.

In another study on sexual and spiritual integration, Ogden (2007) found that six common themes emerged as women in her study were describing their peak sexual and spiritual experiences, including:

- a sense of oneness with self (a merging of body, mind, heart and soul), with one’s partner, nature and the Divine;
- the experience of embracing and heightening all of their senses;
- transcendence of time and space;
- increased the depth of love between partners;
- experiences of a flood of energy; “women described this variously, as a sense of wonder and self-esteem that lifts their hearts, rocks their bodies, and touches their souls” (p. v); and
- a profound experience of physical and spiritual ecstasy.

These themes speak to women’s potential to experience their sexuality beyond their physicality.

While in Mahoney’s (2008) study, women seemed to have difficulty recounting their experiences of integration, it is clear that the women in this study were able to speak, at length, about their embodied experiences.

To examine the lived experiences of transcendent experiences during sex, Wade (2000) applied a phenomenological methodology to interview eighty-six heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual men and women from a number of religious/spiritual backgrounds. She noted two distinct factors that differentiated “ordinary” sexual experiences from transcendent ones that consistently emerged from the narratives: First, she found that participants experienced an

altered state of consciousness that resulted from the union with one's partner during sex. Specifically, during this experience there seemed to be no time or space. Secondly, the participants experienced a "cosmic force" within the context of their relationship, which manifested itself in their sexual intimacy. For participants, these experiences resulted in new spiritual insights, conversion and deep personal transformation. Wade (2000) notes that although acceptance of embodied spirituality seems rare, sex can be a powerful way in which one can experience their spirituality; this, she argues, can heal feelings of shame associated with the body and the sexual self.

In an existential-phenomenological study, MacKnee (2002) explored the experiences of and meaning of "profound sexual and spiritual encounters" described by ten Christian couples. Macknee analyzed the experiences of the participants and categorized the themes that emerged in two phases, including the descriptive themes of the encounter, then the aftereffects of these encounters. In phase one, the themes that emerged included: sense of wonder and amazement; emotional cleansing; God's presence was evident; intense union; euphoria; intense physical arousal; transcendence; holistic involvement [embodiment]; sense of blessing and giftedness; ineffable mystery; and sense of sacredness and worship. The themes derived from aftereffects of these sexual experiences were transformation and healing; empowerment and purpose; passionate awareness and connection; affirmation and Godly beliefs; great gratefulness; and a sense of gender equality. MacKnee (1997) suggests that these experiences represent a breakdown of dualism in all forms, and affirms that the body, soul and spirit can intersect, resulting in "ecstatic bonding at new and wondrous heights" (p. 241). This study suggests that the experience of integrating spirituality and sexuality breaks through the chains of patriarchy and shame, resulting in an embodied experience of wholeness and connection with self, others

and with the Divine.

The studies that outline the experience of integration indicate that embodied experiences and affirming sexual beliefs may protect against the potentially harmful and antiquated sexual scripts pertaining to women's sexuality. In the next section of this literature review, I will shift focus from spiritual and sexual integration, and outline the potentially negative impact that immersion in religious culture can have on women's sexuality.

Negative Impact of Religion on Women's Sexuality

In this section, I will outline the negative impact that religion can have on human sexuality. First, I will outline how religion often serves to regulate or shape sexual behaviour. Next, I will discuss how religion can reinforce mind-body dualism. Finally, I will outline how religion can perpetuate a patriarchy culture in which women's sexuality and sexual expressions are silenced and/or oppressed.

Religion as regulator/shaper of behaviour. Much of the of research that addresses the intersection of religiosity, spirituality and sexuality focuses on religion's role in regulating sexual behaviour (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2013). In a literature review of the empirical intersections between religion, spirituality, and sexuality, Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney (2005) found 40 studies that supported a link between greater religiousness and less premarital sexuality. Daniluk and Browne (2008) note that some religious teachings provide a oppressive framework from which those who adhere to that tradition judge the morality of their sexual feelings, behaviours and fantasies. Some argue that this inhibitory role of religion is detrimental to a wide range of sexual expressions (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2013; Sherry, Aldeman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010; Woo, Morshedean, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2012). The focus on personal and interpersonal sexual behaviour in some religious communities neglects to

recognize the importance of considering the emotional, spiritual, social and intellectual dimensions of sexuality (Hunt & Jung, 2009). Rather than highlighting how sexuality and spirituality can be integrated, some religious institutions continue to emphasize the “rules” around sexuality, which can potentially be shaming for both men and women. Individuals who perceive themselves as failing to meet their faith community’s expectations regarding their sexuality may be more likely to experience sexual shame (Sherry, Aldeman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010). Members of the LGBT community, for example, are especially prone to intolerance or criticism when it comes to the ways in which their sexuality is expressed. In a study that queried the experience of 373 LGBT individuals in religious communities, 29% of participants converted to a more affirming religious community, while 12% of the sample stated that they continued to attend their original faith community, but experienced shame and guilt (Sherry, Aldeman, Whilde, & Quick, 2010). Participants, however, felt less shame when they were raised with more liberal religious beliefs. That is to say, those who have been immersed in a religious environment where the discourse around sexuality was less regulatory, and more embodied, may experience less sexual shame.

Religion and mind-body dualism. Many scholars have outlined how some religious doctrines and institutions have reinforced a more dualistic separation of mind and body, or sexuality and spirituality (Daniluk & Browne, 2008; MacKnee, 1997; McClintock, 2001; Nelson, 1978). The body or the “flesh,” at times, has been constructed as worldly or, in extreme cases, evil, and as something to be controlled or monitored. For both men and women, this fragmentation of self can come at a great cost. McClintock (2001) argues “fear of the flesh and denial of sexual impulses have left us with a disembodied theology and a great deal of shame. History reveals the deep chasms that have characterized spirituality and sexuality in Christianity”

(p. 28). This dualistic perspective can have a dehumanizing effect on how one perceives their own, and others' bodies. As Nelson (1978) argued:

The alienated body produces a mind detached from the depth of feelings. It becomes narrow and controlling, machine-like in observation and calculation... If the mind is alienated from the body, so also is the body from the mind. The depersonalization of one's sexuality, in some form or degree, inevitably follows. The body becomes a physical object possessed and used by the self (p. 38).

This objectification of one's body strips sexuality from depth of meaning, or experiencing sexuality with all of one's self; as a result, sex becomes merely about genitals and orgasm rather than connection and wholeness. While this has certainly been a predominate message in Christian culture, there are dissenting voices who affirm the goodness of materiality or physicality. Rohr (2009), for example, argues "the revelation of Christianity is that the spiritual and material coexist, that the human and divine coexist, that the physical and transcendent are one and the same, that the hiding place of God, the revelation place of God is our physicality (22:30)." There is hope that voices, such as Rohr's, will be embraced in the future by faith communities who are dissatisfied with the current state of sexual discourse.

Patriarchy and religion. Nelson (1978) argued that it was the pervasive religious ideology of dualism, which separates mind and spirit from body, and man from woman, that holds men in a position of superiority, and reinforces silencing of women's sexual experiences. Though Hunt and Jung (2009) point out that feminist scholars have worked to deconstruct and provide alternatives to religious-patriarchal assumptions about women's sexuality, religious sexual scripts remain a powerfully influential force that impacts perceptions of what "good sex" is. Rather than nurturing and embracing women's sexual well-being, most patriarchal religions

continue to reinforce beliefs that silence and oppress women, placing them in secondary positions to men (Jung & Hunt, 2009). Women's sexuality, through this lens, then, is to serve men and to procreate, rather than to embody pleasure and experience themselves fully. The privileging of male sexuality, Daniluk (1993) argues, makes it difficult for women to experience a sense of sexual agency, which potentially impedes a woman's ability to explore her sexuality with freedom from guilt or shame. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet (1969) addressed the role that patriarchy plays in sexual relations, noting:

The large quantity of guilt attached to sexuality in patriarchy is overwhelmingly placed upon the female, who is, culturally speaking, held to be the culpable or the more culpable party in nearly any sexual liaison, whatever the extenuating circumstances... Even where this has been partly amended the cumulative effect of religion and custom is still very powerful and has enormous psychological consequences. (Millet, 2000, p. 54)

This is not to say that there have not been shifts in the way sexuality has been constructed in mainstream religions; however, it has been argued that historically, sexual norms were designed to restrict and control women's sexuality (Nelson, 1992). Given that relationships of subordination and/or domination are inherently shaming, it follows that patriarchy reinforces women's experiences of sexual shame (Herman, 2011). This legacy continues to have an impact on how sexuality is understood in religious institutions.

Religion as a Source of Sexual Shame

In a recent survey, 32% of women reported that their sexual desire was a source of sexual guilt, and 28% of women reported experiencing shame around their bodies (Ogden, 2008). Given the prevalence of guilt and shame around sexuality, I believe it is important to address how this relates to religion and spirituality. First, however, I will define and operationalize the

concepts of shame and sexual shame.

Shame and sexual shame. As defined above, shame is described as “an intensely painful [and universal] feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance or belonging” (Brown, 2007, p. 5). According to Kyle (2013), sexual shame is this above experience as a reaction to one’s current or past sexual thoughts, behaviours, or experiences. Judith Herman (2006), a prolific researcher of shame and trauma, highlights that when experiencing shame the self is passive and “split,” as one imagines themselves in the eyes of the other. In this way shame occurs when an individual believes he or she fails to meet the cultural or social expectations that they have internalized.

Shame can be deeply protective. It can “signal trouble” in our relationships and regulate social distance. It can also teach us about boundaries and about what is considered to be socially acceptable behaviour (Herman, 2006). Shame can also be incredibly painful, sometimes resulting in fragmentation, disorganization and isolation. Though guilt and shame are often used interchangeably, the experience of guilt and shame can be quite different. For example, while guilt is about a specific behaviour, shame involves the global self. Guilt involves the internal sense that “I did something bad,” whereas shame is the experience that “I am bad.” As Tagney (2000) underscored, “feelings of shame involve a painful scrutiny of the entire self-a feeling that ‘I am an unworthy, incompetent or bad person’” (p. 267).

According to Bradshaw (2005), “no other aspect of human activity has been as dysfunctionally shamed as much as our sexuality” (p. 80). Tagney and Beaing (2002) point out that, for women, the dualistic and conflicting sexual ideals placed on women’s sexuality is difficult to reconcile. The socio-religious value or expectation that women are to be virginal and “pure” is in direct opposition with dominant socio-cultural expectations that women are to be

seductive, “perfect,” sexual objects. Failure to meet one, or, more likely, both of these ideals, can evoke great shame for women. Importantly, as Brown (2006) points out, shame is a social construct; in this way, shame often occurs in relation to one another on micro and macrolevels. The construct of “sexual guilt,” which was defined as “a generalized expectancy for self-mediated punishment for violating or for anticipating violating standards of proper sexual conduct.” (Mosher & Cross, 1971, p. 27, as cited in Woo, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2011), appears to closely mirror the concept of sexual shame, as it is self-directed (rather than about the action), and is experienced when the individual violates cultural expectations around sexuality. Given this definition, I will use their findings related to “sexual guilt” interchangeably with sexual shame.

Sexual shame and religion. Daniluk and Browne (2008) note that after a quarter-century of researching sexuality, they have found that for many women the legacy of religious teachings and ideology about their sexuality has resulted in “debilitating feelings of shame and guilt” (p. 136). These feelings are, they argue, associated with their sexual bodies, their thoughts, behaviours and feelings around their sexuality that do not fit within the narrow constraints circumscribed by religious teachings. Though many researchers and clinicians examining the intersection of religion and sexuality note that internalized religious ideologies around women’s sexuality can be shame-provoking, very little research has been conducted to highlight this experience (Daniluk & Browne, 2008; Murray, Ciarrocchi, & Murray-Swank, 2007; Ogden, 2012). Research that *has* identified a connection between religion with the experience of sexual guilt and shame proposes that this experience may stem from one’s perception of the image of God (Wittstock, 2009). For example, if a person believes that God is punitive, harsh and critical, they are more likely to have critical evaluations of their sexuality. This is a very significant

finding, especially considering one's perspective of God is not typically measured in academic research when measuring one's religiosity. Additionally, Murray, Ciarrocchi, and Murray-Swank (2007) found that those who experienced a sense of alienation or disconnection from God accounted for a 47% increase in predicting one's experience of shame and guilt around their sexuality. In other words, one's ability to embody sexuality and spirituality may be related to how one experiences or perceives the Divine.

In another study that examined how religion impacts "sexual concerns," including negative affect towards sexuality, Cowden and Bradshaw (2007) found that the different religious practices that one ascribed to impacted their attitudes towards their sexual lives. Extrinsic religiosity and intrinsic religiosity both related to overall sexual concerns as well as self-reported levels of sex guilt and masturbation discomfort. In contrast, religion as "quest," an open-ended pursuit of existential questions, was associated with lower levels of sexual guilt and masturbation discomfort (Cowden & Bradshaw, 2007). Again, this study speaks to the way one experiences religion and spirituality may impact the way they experience their sexual selves.

Gravel, Young, Olavarria-Turner, and Lee (2011) conducted another study that looks at religiosity's role in predicting sexual guilt. They found that great participation in religiosity was also associated with greater sexual guilt. That being said, the 10-item measure used to determine religiosity may be an insufficient instrument to assess a construct as complex as religiosity. Finally, it was found that for Euro-Canadian women, sex guilt mediated the relationship between spirituality and sexual desire, and between fundamentalism and sexual desire (Woo, Morshedian, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2012). These findings suggest that the internalizing of particular religious beliefs (specifically those that are more regulatory around sexuality in general) may play a role in the development of sexual shame and guilt. All of these findings speak to the necessity to

reconstruct the religious sexual scripts around women's sexuality, which would hopefully result in a more embodied and empowering sexuality.

Impact of shame on sexuality. The experience of shame can have significant consequences for one's physical and relational experiences of sexuality (Woo, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2011). Interestingly, Hastings (1998) argued that shame underlies most negative sexual symptoms. Kauffman (1989) concurred, stating that shame is said to be the most critical affect to the development of sexual dysfunction. Sexual shame can dull sexual initiative and limit interest-excitement, resulting in decreased arousal and sexual engagement (Lichtenberg, 2001). In addition to sexual arousability, shame can potentially impact sexual pleasure; body shame seems to increase sexual self-consciousness during intimacy and decreases sexual pleasure (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2006). Sexual guilt has been found to lower sexual desire in women (Woo, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2011) and results in greater sexual dissatisfaction (Moore & Davidson, 1997). In her study on the meaning and experience of female sexuality, Daniluk (1993) found that for all participants ($n = 10$), themes around shame and self-blame emerged; these feelings, she stated, served to impair women's emotional and sexual development.

Sexual shame not only impacts one's sexual fulfillment, it can also affect one's sense of connection and relationship to their partners. Hartling, Rosen, Walker, and Jordan (2000) provide a relational understanding of shame, arguing that shame is an "intense, enduring experience, involving one's *whole being in relationship* (p. 2)." Shame is described as "the master emotion" that signals trouble in a relationship (Herman, 2006). When one experiences shame, Harling et al. (2000) argue that humans employ strategies of disconnection (in relation to others) to help cope with the painful experience of shame. These strategies include moving away (withdrawing, hiding, silencing, and keeping secrets), moving towards (attempting to earn

connection, people-pleasing and appeasing), or moving against (powering over others, shaming, aggression). While all of these strategies are meant to be protective, they result in greater disconnection and isolation (which, in turn, can reinforce shame). When one is experiencing sexual shame, then, it is clear that they may respond to their sexual partners in ways that decrease connection and increase loneliness.

Shame is related to poor interpersonal skills and is said to inhibit empathetic responses to one's intimate partner (Brown, 2006; Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007), which can result in increased emotional disconnection. Additionally, within a relationship, sexual shame can incite other-directed anger, hostility, and blame (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). In other words, shame serves as a barrier, not only to sexual intimacy, but also to emotional and spiritual intimacy (Armstrong, 2006). In a study that investigated the role of shame in perceptions of marital equality, intimacy and competency, Blavier and Glenn (1995) explored the differences between shame and self esteem. They found that shame differed significantly from low self-esteem; shame was found to be more significant in perceptions of the marital relationship than self-esteem. Their study also revealed that for women, shame was more often associated with intimacy, while for men shame was associated with competency.

Overcoming sexual shame. Given the potential harmful outcomes that sexual shame can elicit, I believe that it is imperative to understand and develop ways in which both men and women can manage and overcome these experiences. Though shame is a universal human emotion, surprisingly little scholarly research has been conducted on how one can work towards overcoming feelings of shame. In this section, I will review some of the works that *have* explored ways in which individuals can become more resilient to shame, in general, and sexual shame, specifically.

Shame resilience, according to Brown (2012b), is the capacity to practice authenticity when shame is experienced, and to move through this experience while still maintaining personal values. When working through this shame experience, Brown notes that one can emerge with more courage, compassion and connection. In her study on shame resilience, Brown (2006) interviewed women ($n = 215$) to understand their experience of shame, and the strategies they employed to develop resilience to shame. When discussing their experiences of shame, participants in the study described feelings of powerlessness, isolation and feeling trapped. Brown (2006) argues that the complex and sometimes conflicting socio-cultural (including religious institutional) expectations about how women are “supposed to be,” which are often reinforced on a micro and macro-level can result in experiences of shame. She notes that there is not one universal “shame trigger,” however, she found common themes around body image and appearance, sexuality and religion (Brown, 2006).

Shame resilience theory (SRT) conceptualizes feelings of shame and empathy on a continuum (Brown, 2006). In other words, the farther away from shame (and therefore closer to empathy) one falls, the more “shame resilience” an individual has developed. This theory is consistent with Jordan’s (2001) relational conceptualization of shame; Jordan argues that empathy serves our basic desire for connection and relationship. Furthermore, Jordan states that when we feel shame we experience a loss of empathic attunement. Empathy, Jordan (2001) stresses, is the antidote to shame; to heal from shame one must develop empathy with themselves and others. In Brown’s SRT, where an individual falls on the shame-empathy continuum is based on four separate continuums:

- a) the ability to recognize and accept personal vulnerabilities to shame; b) the level of critical awareness regarding social/cultural expectations; c) the ability to form mutually

empathic relationships that facilitate reaching out to others; and d) the ability to “speak shame” or possess the language and emotional competence to discuss and deconstruct the experience of shame. (Brown, 2006, p. 47-48)

A shame resilient person is not someone who rarely experiences shame; a shame resilient person is someone that recognizes their experiences of shame and is able to move through it in constructive ways that allows them to grow from such experiences while maintaining their authenticity (Brown, 2006).

Scholars who have identified shame as a very real and destructive experience in relation to sexuality point to similar strategies in terms of overcoming sexual shame. Daniluk and Browne, for example, (2008) note that once sexual shame is recognized, examining and identifying one’s beliefs and assumptions around women’s sexuality (which, they argue are shaped by religious ideologies) is an important first step. Similarly, Jung (2000) has argued that reconstructing moral and theological beliefs about women’s sexuality to a more affirming and sex-positive understanding of sexual expression is imperative to “good sex.” Schermer Sellers (2012) echoes this, arguing that space needs to be made for a new “grace-filled” dialogue that highlights God’s gift of sexual intimacy and desire. Working with women to conceptualize a more empowering connection between sexuality and spirituality is recognized as an important thread in moving through sexual shame (Daniluk & Browne, 2008). Furthermore, in Kyle’s (2013) pilot study on facilitating a group therapy for sexual shame, participants noted that “recognizing myself in others’ experiences,” “knowing everyone has felt sexual shame and I’m not an outsider” and “being able to share my story out loud and talk openly about the shame” (p. 32) were among the most helpful aspects of their experience. This speaks to the continuums that Brown (2006) refers to as reaching out and speaking about shame as necessary for the development of shame

resilience.

Although it seems that the integration of spirituality and sexuality may be a protective factor in reducing sexual shame, guilt and shame around sexuality may also be what prevents this integration from occurring. In her study on spiritual and sexual integration, Ogden (2008) found that 32% of women ($n = 3810$) reported that their sexual desire had been a source of guilt, and 28% stated that their bodies had been a source of shame. These women stated that negative feelings, such as shame, fear, judgment, disembodiment and the conflicting messages about what women's sexual ideals consisted of, explained their resistance to connect their sexuality and spirituality (Ogden, 2008). Developing resilience to sexual shame, then, may serve as a stepping stone on the path to a more embodied sexuality.

Summary

It is clear that in understanding the intersection between religion, spirituality and sexuality, scholars need to critically examine religious sexual scripts. These scripts can play a role in the fragmentation of self and the development of harmful negative affect, including sexual shame (Murray, Ciarrocchi, & Muarry-Swank, 2007). Recognizing harmful religious ideas around the body and sexuality, and constructing alternatives scripts or beliefs may be a powerful tool in assisting both men and women overcome sexual shame. A more empowering perspective of how religion, spirituality and sexuality can be integrated to benefit the psychological, emotional, physical and sexual well-being of the person.

While there is an abundance of empirical information pertaining to some aspects of human sexuality in relation to spirituality and religion, there are certainly gaps or limitations in the literature. First, Hernandez, Mahoney, and Pargament (2013) point out that there is a scarcity of work that focuses on adults and/or marital sexuality. Most of the literature around sexuality,

they point out, looks at adolescents, college students, or relies on adult's retrospective reports of extramarital or premarital sexual behaviour. In addition, the majority of literature around sexuality has been quantitative in nature, focusing on how religion impacts sexual attitudes, behaviours, and frequency of sexual activities; there is a dearth of literature on the lived experiences of sexuality of how religion and spirituality impact sexuality. While many researchers cite the importance in recognizing how religious ideology can be shame provoking, very few works have focused on this empirically (Kyle, 2013; Murray, Ciarrocchi, & Murray-Swank, 2007; Ogden, 2012). Even fewer works, then, address how one is able to overcome this shame around sexuality as it relates to their religion (Kyle, 2013; McClintock, 2001). Finally, as a research community we know very little about the process of or shifts towards sexual and spiritual embodiment, and how this relates to protection from experiences of sexual shame.

Rationale of This Study

In light of the gaps in the literature, as outlined above, this study seeks to understand how married women who have been immersed in a religious Christian culture have made meaningful shifts towards overcoming sexual shame. As I have demonstrated in the literature review, sexual shame, which is often experienced as a result of religious ideologies, is a very real and painful phenomenon. The literature that looks at the intersection of religion, spirituality and sexuality is largely dedicated to unpacking the negative influences that religion has on sexuality. In their review of the literature on the interaction between religion and sexuality, Hernandez, Mahoney, and Pargament (2013) outline the need to move beyond the global markers of religion and sexuality to capture a more comprehensive picture that illustrates how religious and spiritual views can serve as a potential resource. I believe that there needs to be a shift of focus from what is harming or hindering women's sexuality, to what is helping spiritual women thrive in

their bodies. This is consistent with the positive psychology movement, which focuses on exploring and enriching human growth and thriving (Simonton & Baumeister, 2005). It is important to understand how women are flourishing in order to speak to how we can help those who are silenced by sexual shame. It is also important to hear the stories of women who have been able to embrace their sexuality with their whole selves, and have been able to develop resilience to sexual shame. This knowledge can serve as a guidepost to assisting this process for women who are struggling to integrate or reconcile their sexual and spiritual selves.

The implicated researcher. As a researcher, I am implicated in how I view research. Experiences, assumptions, biases and knowledge impact how I will interpret the experiences of others. Van Manen (1997) suggests that researchers reflect on the following question prior to phenomenological inquiry, “What human experience do I feel called upon to make topical for my investigation?” (p. 41). In this section, I will reflect on my personal connections with this project.

As a child, I yearned for, and delighted in, being touched. When I was touched, I felt safe, like I was loved and belonged. When I attended extended family gatherings, while all my cousins were playing, I recall preferring to sit in front of an uncle or aunt while they would rub my back or play with my hair, until they were fatigued. I would then shift over to the next person in line, and wait to be touched. Even now as I think about this, I feel warmth and connection to those family members. I believe we are all hard-wired for touch and connection, both as children, and as adults. To me, sex is the epitome of this felt connection—a physical, spiritual and emotional expression of oneness. It is an experience, at times, of harmony and wholeness, with myself, others and with God. To arrive at this place was a long and difficult journey.

Growing up in a religious community that, generally, only spoke about sexuality in terms of regulation of behaviour, I quickly internalized the ideas that my sexuality was “dirty” and only to be acknowledged in the context of a marital relationship. To me, the silence around my sexuality in my faith community was deafening. When I did hear about sexuality, it was typically framed from a place of fear. When I was thirteen, my grandpa had learned that I “became a woman” at my first menses. While away on a camping trip, he pulled me aside and, before saying any words, he began to weep. When I asked him what was wrong, he declared, “I don’t want you to get pregnant like some of the other girls at church.” That summer, I was also told that my “kisses were like a rose” and that every time I kissed someone I would lose a petal. The individual who shared this suggested that my future husband would probably prefer not to receive “just a measly stem.” The messages (or silence) I heard and experienced around my sexuality permeated and shaped the way I saw myself and my body. As an adolescent, I felt shame as my body developed, as I experienced desire, as I expressed my sexuality in ways that I felt were conflicting with the messages I heard. I felt excruciatingly alone in my shame, as I manifested the silence I had experienced. It was only when I got married that I felt like I had permission to explore my body, my sexuality and my shame. The eventual spiritual shift in understanding that parts of my self were not prioritized—that my body was just as valuable as my heart, mind and spirit—allowed me to work towards embracing my sexuality as an affirmation of being in the world.

This experience is not unique to me; I have spent hours talking with religious women about the shame they felt in experiencing and expressing their sexuality. I wondered how other women, who were perhaps indoctrinated to believe that their sexuality is “of the flesh” or, in someway, sinful, were able to then experience meaningful, fulfilling, pleasurable, connective

sexual relationships? What was their journey like? What lessons did they learn? How, if needed, did their healing take place? My hope is that, by answering some of these questions, I will have more understanding as a friend, a counsellor, and a member of a faith community, about how to help women reclaim their sexuality with their whole selves.

Purpose of the study and research question. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of women who have been immersed in a Christian religious culture, and have been able to develop resilience to sexual shame. It also seeks to understand whether or not embodiment and/or the integration of spirituality and sexuality plays a role in this resilience. To do so, this study will be guided by the following research question: What are Christian women's experiences of overcoming shame in relation to their sexuality?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

“To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that a lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal.”
(van Manen, 1997, p. 18)

As the previous two chapters have outlined, the purpose of this study is explore women’s lived experiences of resilience to sexual shame. In the following section, I provide the paradigmatic and philosophical backgrounds of hermeneutic phenomenology, my chosen method. I will then describe the research method of this study including participant recruitment, and screening strategies. Next, I outline van Manen’s (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological method, including the process of data collection and analysis. Finally, I will describe how I evaluated the methodological rigour of this study.

Research Methodology

“Phenomenological research has, as its ultimate aim, the fulfillment of our human nature: to become more fully who we are.”
(van Manen, 1997, p. 12)

Research paradigm. The philosophy of scientific inquiry, at a basic level, makes a number of presumptions about fundamental issues such as what “knowing” or “knowledge” is (epistemology), and the nature of truth (ontology) (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (2000) argue that though some researchers tend to ignore these assumptions, they comprise a critical aspect of a paradigm. Paradigms are comprehensive belief systems that are utilized to guide the practice of research in a specific field (in this case, psychology). Each paradigm carries its own set of assumptions that guide the research process. According to Creswell (2007), good research requires a researcher to make explicit the paradigmatic assumptions that shape the study. Hermeneutic phenomenology falls within the interpretive or constructivist paradigm,

which assumes that human beings construct meanings in unique ways. These constructions are contingent on a human's socio-cultural and historical context and personal framework as they engage with and in the world they are interpreting (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Interpretive researchers reject the notion that the scientific method is a way of objectively learning about the world (Willis, Jost, & Nilakanta, 2007), rather, they seek to understand the subjective meaning that participants ascribe to their world. Based on the ontological assumption that there are multiple realities, and that many social realities exist (due to people's unique experiences), interpretivists hold that the purpose of research is to discover how people make sense of their social worlds (Thomas, 2010). While interpretivists are relativists in that they propose that there is no absolute truth that can be measured, my worldview affirms that there is an absolute truth. This being said, my epistemological assumption is that in scientific observation a researcher has a specific lens and set of expectations that shades the way one views data; in this way, a researcher can come closer to truth, but will never fully encounter it. Interpreting the meaning of human experience or events creates knowledge; findings emerge in a dialogue between the participant and the researcher.

It is argued that people tend to impose order in attempts to find or make meaning; this is often heavily influenced by their historical, political and social context (Creswell, 2012). Rather than reducing a phenomenon so that it can be studied objectively (as in postpositivism), interpretivist researchers attempt to unpack the complexity of the views of participant(s) to reconstruct the meaning attributed (Creswell, 2012). Importantly, in the interpretive approach, the investigator does not stand outside of the research; rather, the researcher is an active participant-observer who discerns the meanings of actions as they are expressed within specific contexts (Thomas, 2010). In this way, the interpretivist research paradigm is holistic.

Recognizing the transactional relationship between the researcher and the participants (that they each influence the other), interpretivists tend to be more personal with their data (Mertens, 2010). Because of this, the researcher makes their values explicit and recognizes that their findings are interpreted through the lens of these values. Interpretivist research tends to be qualitative in nature, focusing on phenomenology, hermeneutics and dialectical exchange.

Qualitative Research

This qualitative study was designed to explore the lived experience of Christian women who are resilient to sexual shame. A qualitative investigation enables me to do justice to the inherent complexity of a lived experience. While quantitative research methods focus on control, prediction and measurement, qualitative research, according to Mertens (2010), emphasizes complexity, discovery, exploration and description. Historically, adherence to empirical or quantitative methods of inquiry in the realm of human and social sciences was prioritized, with much of the research focusing exclusively on what was observable (Laverty, 2004). In more recent years, however, there has been growing recognition that it is difficult to capture the complexity of human experience using a detached and controlled research methodology (Laverty, 2003). Thus, there has been an increase in the use of qualitative research methodologies, including hermeneutic phenomenology. In qualitative research, investigators attempt to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in a natural setting, and discover the meaning people bring to these phenomena (Mertens, 2010). By doing so, the researcher generates rich or deep descriptions that increase understanding about human experiences and realities (Creswell, 2002). These descriptions bring us closer to understanding what it means to be in the world. A qualitative research approach was chosen for this research study in order to develop greater insight into the meaning of the lived experience of resilience to sexual shame.

Phenomenology. Among methods that fall into the qualitative paradigm is the study of phenomenology. Phenomenology is derived from the Greek word “phenomenon,” which means, “to show itself” (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 279). Essentially, phenomenology seeks to “show” the everyday, lived experience of a particular phenomenon as it appears to the consciousness of a person (Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 1997). In other words, phenomenology seeks to gain insightful descriptions of the core or “essence” of an experience in the world. Rather than explaining a phenomenon, the descriptive nature of phenomenological research seeks to enhance one’s understanding of an experience. This offers the possibility of offering insights that bring us in closer contact with what it means to be human.

Foundations of phenomenology. Phenomenology is historically rooted in early twentieth century European philosophy, in particular, the philosophical principles of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Husserl (1859-1938), who is credited as the founder of modern day phenomenology, developed transcendental phenomenology. Husserl challenged positivist assumptions that an objective truth can be found outside of the individual (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). To Husserl, phenomenology is the study of “objective subjectivity” (Moran, 2013). Husserl believed that knowledge cannot be achieved without consciousness or awareness (Moran, 2013). The only certainty in the world, he argued, is derived from the immediate experience as realized through one’s consciousness. Through consciousness, the world is made manifest (Dowling, 2007). Through intentionality, a process where one’s consciousness is directed towards an object of a phenomenon, one can develop a rich description of a reality (Lavery, 2003).

Transcendental phenomenology is called such, because the research attempts to “transcend the phenomena and meanings being investigated to take a global view of the essences

discovered...This meant that there was an objectivization of the meanings of human experience” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 1294). In other words, Husserl adhered to the notion that one must transcend their experience to discover and describe reality or the ‘lived world’. To avoid letting pre-conceptions or biases get in the way, Husserl developed the notion of “phenomenological reduction,” wherein the researcher “brackets” their assumptions of a phenomenon in order to describe an essential understanding of a phenomenon (Dowling, 2007).

One of the first to methodize phenomenological philosophy for research, Amedeo Giorgi (b. 1931), played a key role in bringing phenomenology to North America (Giorgi, 2009). Heavily influenced by Husserl’s work, Giorgi sought to integrate transcendental phenomenology and science, and to develop a method of research that was applicable to psychology (Giorgi, 2010). In doing so, Giorgi proposed a five-step method that examines an individual’s lifeworld in attempt to understand personal meaning and perceptions of specific phenomena.

Hermeneutic phenomenology. Heidegger (1889-1976), a German philosopher, was also influenced by Husserl’s work. Like Husserl, Heidegger was interested in the study of lived experience; however, while Husserl focused on description, Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology concentrates on the importance of interpretation (Dowling, 2007). Rather than tracing all phenomena back to human consciousness (transcendental subjectivity), Heidegger saw the state of “being” as a more fundamental concern (Palmer, 1969). Heidegger believed that “meaning does not stem from one’s consciousness, but from the essential finitude of being human” (Johnson, 2000, p. 135). Heidegger sought to see beyond everyday meanings to see the large meaning in ‘being’ and to uncover meanings that are hidden (Dowling, 2012). Thus, while Husserl sought to answer the question, “What is this experience like?”, Heidegger’s primary question was “What is the meaning of being?” (Lavery, 2003).

One of the primary differences between Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology is how one comes to understanding. While Husserl argued that truth was accessed through phenomenological reduction, Heidegger believed that truth was accessed through hermeneutic interpretation. Experience and interpretation, Heidegger believed, cannot exist without one another; in this way, reality is constructed from a person's experiences of being (Lavery, 2003). To Heidegger, "meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences" (Lavery, 2003. p. 8). Therefore, hermeneutic phenomenologists reject Husserl's principle of bracketing, arguing that one's background and experiences cannot be eliminated. Rather, this background, which is embedded in a being, is implicated in the interpretation process (Dowling, 2012).

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) extended Heidegger's work on hermeneutic phenomenology (Dowling, 2013). Guided by the question, "how is understanding possible?," Gadamer identified the conditions within which understanding takes place (Fleming, Gaidys & Robb, 2002). Gadamer saw language as the universal medium through which understanding occurs (Lavery, 2003). Like Heidegger, Gadamer saw language and understanding as inseparable structural aspects of being (Lavery, 2003). To Gadamer (1997), the aim of hermeneutic phenomenology is to, "reveal a totality of meaning in all its relations" (p. 471) through the interpretation of language. This interpretation is an ever-evolving process that occurs through relationship with the researcher and the participant (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Rather than bracketing their "horizons" (pre-understandings), a deepened understanding is found through the fusion of their own horizon with the viewpoint of another (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). In other words, Gadamer believed that one makes sense of the world based on one's own

history, and in dialogue with one another.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Method

Max van Manen (1997), a Canadian phenomenologist, developed a hermeneutic phenomenological research method that combines both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology (Dowling, 2007). It is the study of both the human experience and the meanings of the experience; it is a study of “being in the world.” The focus of this research is to highlight “seemingly trivial aspects” of an experience, with an intention of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding about a phenomena (Lavery, 2003). Consistent with Gadamer’s philosophy, van Manen’s approach underscores the importance of language in that it reveals being within a historical and cultural context. To come to a greater understanding of an experience as it is lived, the researcher undertakes an interpretive process. According to van Manen (2002), in hermeneutic phenomenology the researcher seeks to capture a picture of a phenomenon that is “holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (p. 39). With an attitude of openness, in hermeneutic phenomenology the researcher directs attention to the lived experience of interest (with an emphasis on person who experiences a phenomenon). Interpretation is believed to be critical component to understanding. Influenced by one’s background, interpretation, Heidegger argued, is involved in every human encounter (Lavery, 2003). In research, the interpretation process includes isolating themes and making manifest that which is hidden. This involves seeing beyond what is directly transparent through reading, reflection and imagination (van Manen, 2006). Rather than providing theory for generalization or prediction of phenomena, this methodology increases sensitivity to humans’ way of being-in-the-world.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is used to understand the structures of the human

“lifeworld.” The concept of lifeworld was described by Husserl as, “the world of immediate experience” (van Manen, 2006, p. 182). In van Manen’s (1990) own words, “to do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that a lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (p. 18). The four fundamental lifeworld themes (“existentials”) include lived space (spatiality), lived time (temporality), lived body (corporality) and lived relations (relationality) (van Manen, 2006). Lived space, or “felt space” represents the way we experience spatial dimensions of everyday existence (van Manen, 2006). Similarly, lived time is the temporal way of being in the world; it is the way the past, present and future is experienced. Lived body is the way in which one experiences their body. Finally, the lived relations represents the way in which a person relates to others. In this research, I endeavoured to undertake this task; I was be guided by the four existentials of lifeworld to facilitate an understanding of the lived experience of Christian women who have resilience to sexual shame.

Rationale for Choosing Hermeneutic Phenomenology

A hermeneutic phenomenological method was used for this study because it allowed me to come to a greater understanding of what it means to uniquely live the experience of resilience to sexual shame within the contemporary sociocultural and historical Christian religious tradition. Additionally, this method was selected because it is interpretive and because it highlights a dialogical process between the participant and reflection on their experience. It also emphasizes openness, a non-judgmental attitude, sensitivity and use of intuition. Furthermore, it engages empathy and relevant experience to aid in the interpretation of meaning; as a counsellor, this method seems like a natural fit. The quest of this research was not to provide answers,

rather, it is to “invite readers to make their own journey...and to listen for the call of their own thinking” (Smythe et al., 2008, p. 1393).

Applying an Hermeneutic Phenomenological Method

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a research method that seeks to answer the question, “what does it mean to be human?” (van Manen, 1990). It is applied to study a phenomena with attention to concrete, experiential detail with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of shared understanding (Lavery, 2003). Seeking to understand the historical, social, cultural and situational contexts of the lived experience, hermeneutic phenomenological research considers how the whole person is moved by an experience (Lavery, 2003). Van Manen (1990) states that hermeneutic phenomenology is used to “transform lived experience into a textual expression – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which the reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience” (p. 36).

Steps of hermeneutic phenomenology. While there is no clear step-by-step method or procedure, van Manen (1997) proposed a methodical structure to serve as a guideline or outline for researchers utilizing hermeneutic phenomenological research methods. This was a dynamic interplay between the following research activities:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it (data collection);
3. reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. maintaining a strong, oriented stance toward the question; and

6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (van Manen, 1997, p. 30-31).

These steps served as a roadmap for how I conducted this research, which sought to answer the question: “What are Christian women’s lived experiences of resilience to sexual shame?”

Step one: Turning to a phenomenon. The first step of van Manen’s (1997) hermeneutic phenomenology is turning towards a phenomenon. After reflecting on what human experience the researcher feels called upon to investigate, the researcher essentially forms a research question. In addition to this, at this stage, the researcher is to unpack their “pre-understandings” about their phenomena of interest. Pre-understandings are what is known or understood about a lived experience prior to the interpretation of the research; pre-understandings stem from the researchers past experiences (Lavery, 2003).

One of the key issues in employing a phenomenological research is the stance one takes towards these pre-understandings. To review, bracketing is the process of identifying one’s assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and biases about the phenomenon of interest, and of setting these assumptions aside to see their research more accurately (Osborne, 1994). Suspending these beliefs prior to collecting data, Husserl argued, is a way to preserve “objectivity” in phenomenological method (Dowling, 2007). Heidegger, however, rejected the notion that it is possible to eliminate one’s pre-understandings, stating it is impossible for researchers to detach themselves and their views from their own experiences (Lavery, 2003). In other words, the experiences, knowledge, opinions, beliefs, and the existing body of knowledge predisposes the researcher to interpret the nature of a phenomenon in a particular way. Van Manen (1990) agrees, suggesting that, “if we simply try to forget or ignore what we already “know,” we may find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections (p. 46).” Alternatively,

he proposes that the researcher make explicit their beliefs, understandings and biases about the phenomena of study; one's biases and assumptions are embedded and essential to the interpretive process. As a researcher, I also reject the idea of temporarily suspending my assumptions, values and beliefs about a phenomenon; as a whole person, I cannot separate parts of myself from the whole. Please see the section entitled "the implicated researcher" in the literature review for how my story fits into this research.

Step two: Data collection. The second step of van Manen's (1997) Hermeneutic Phenomenological structure is investigating the experience as it is lived. In Hermeneutic Phenomenology, the data gathering typically consists of open, deep interviews carried out in a dialogical manner (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi 2012). Interviews are thought of as a process of co-creation between researcher and participant; the researcher and the participant work together to bring life to the experience being explored (Lavery, 2003).

After each participant was confirmed eligible for the study, were informed and gave consent to the process, each participant was interviewed. In Hermeneutic Phenomenology, ideally, the interview is an energetic conversation held in an environment of safety and trust, and takes place within the context of a relationship (Lavery, 2003). I, therefore, believed it was imperative to build rapport with each participant prior to the interview. I asked the participants to describe their experiences in regards to overcoming shame and sexuality to stay as close to the lived experiences as possible (Lavery, 2003). Throughout this time, I listened to and attempted to remain open to what the participants were saying, continually wondering what the words meant and how this person has formed her particular point of view. Van Manen (2002, as cited in Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012) argues that this method represents an "attitude or disposition of sensitivity and openness: it is a matter of openness to everyday, experienced

meanings as opposed to theoretical ones” (p. 1). During this time, it was my goal to place myself in the participant’s situation to try to understand their perspective and experience (Gadamer, 1975). The interview itself is not just about the collection of data. Much like the alliance that a therapist develops with their client, it was my hope that through our dialogue an alliance was created. Through our connection, it was my hope that the distance between myself and the participant was diminished (Gadamer, 1975). [Please see Appendix D for a list of interview questions].

Overview of Steps 3-6: Data Analysis

Following the data collection process, I transcribed the interviews. To transcribe the interviews, I listened to the audio-recordings of the interviews, and wrote verbatim what both the researcher and the participant said. Following this process, I listened to the audio-recordings again, to ensure accuracy of the data. This aided me in coming in closer contact with the experiences of the participants. I then collaborated with a research team to analyze the data (transcribed interviews). The research time included counselling psychology graduate students who had been trained in research methods. It should be noted that I also collaborated with the interview participants to analyze the data by inviting them to review the interpretations (i.e. analysis) I made about their experiences, and provide feedback on how it resonated with them. This was done either by face-to-face interactions or via email (whatever was most preferable for each participant), and required approximately 1-2 hours of their time, depending on how long they chose to invest in this process.

In hermeneutic phenomenology, all interpretations are tentative and open to change. This requires openness to discovery, and an ability to use one’s intuition to see beyond what is close at hand (Laverty, 2003). In the data analysis process I followed steps three through six of van

Manen's (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological method. Though the steps are sequential, there was also a back and forth movement between the steps throughout the analysis process. The unfolding of the interpretation occurred as the data was read and reread, and as the analyzers reflected on, examined and considered the meaning. In other words, in the steps, there was no beginning or end; analysis took place in a circular process.

Step three: Isolation of themes. The third step of van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological structure is the isolation of key themes of the data and working to capture the essential meaning of the lived experience that is investigated. In order to isolate the thematic statements in the data, van Manen (1990) suggested three methods, including:

- 1) A detailed reading approach; this includes looking at each sentence or cluster of sentences while asking, "What does this sentence, or sentence cluster, reveal about the phenomenon?" (p. 93).
- 2) The selective or highlighting approach; this includes inquiring which notable statement is most illuminating about the phenomenon in question.
- 3) A holistic reading approach; this includes looking at the interviews as a whole, and asking which significant statement captures the essential meaning of the text.

According to van Manen (1997), the themes that surface through this process serve as the framework around which to create a text; this text seeks to illuminate the fundamental meanings of the phenomenon that emerge within the data. All three approaches were used during the data analysis of this research.

Step four: Describing through writing and rewriting. In the fourth step of van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic phenomenological structure, the art of writing and rewriting in the analytic phase is emphasized. Writing is not only the result of the research project, but is also

part of the process. Through this process, the researcher highlights the feelings, thoughts, attitudes and experiences of the interviewees. According to van Manen (1997), this descriptive writing “strives for precision and exactness by aiming for interpretive descriptions that exact fullness and completeness of detail, and that explore to a degree of perfection, the fundamental nature of the notion being addressed in the text” (p.17). Van Manen stresses that it is during this stage that the researcher is to express the experiences of the participants precisely as they were shown. Only by writing and rewriting will the true description of a phenomenon begin to show the heart and meaning of the experience. In this way, throughout this step, I aimed to describe the experiences of resilience towards sexual shame in a way that reflects how these experiences were revealed to me. I used a research journal, as suggested by van Manen (1997) to record reflections, thoughts and insights about the experiences of the participants.

Step five: Maintaining a strong, oriented stance toward the question. In this step, van Manen (1997) stresses the importance of striving to remain focused on the research question. Rather than settling for a superficial analysis, or becoming sidetracked, the researcher must establish a strong relation with a particular phenomenon. In the case of this research, I sought to interpret the meaning of the lived experience of resilience to sexual shame. The research journal aided in this process.

Step six: Considering the parts and the whole. Finally, the sixth and final step of hermeneutic phenomenology is to consider the parts and the whole (van Manen, 1997). This is when a researcher is asked to “constantly measure the overall design of the study/text, against the significance that the parts must play in the total textual structure” (1997, p. 33). During the data analysis process, the research participant and the researcher work together in an ongoing conversation to bring life to the experience being explored as they engage in a hermeneutic circle

of understanding (Lavery, 2003). The hermeneutic circle is a metaphor that illustrates how, during interpretation or analysis of the data, there is dynamic movement between the parts and the whole of the text to increase the depth of engagement with, and understanding of the texts (Lavery, 2003). Throughout this process, the researcher moves in and out of this metaphorical circle, connecting with the parts, then the whole, then the parts again, and so on, each time their understanding of the phenomenon of interest is increased (van Manen, 1997). Accordingly, the interpretation of the interviews is discovered within the context from which they are viewed, and this context is continually changing throughout the analysis. This process includes the use of reading, reflective writing, imagination and intuition (Lavery, 2003). When the researcher senses that a “sensible meaning, free of inner contradictions, for the moment” has been made, spiraling through the hermeneutic circle has been complete (Lavery, 2003, p. 9).

Sampling and Recruitment

“Phenomenological research is “always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human experience.”

(van Manen, 1990, p. 31)

In this section, I will be outlining the attributes of the population that I have selected for the study. I will then outline my specific criteria I used for sampling, focusing on exclusion and inclusion criteria. Next, I will provide an overview of a screening tool that I created which consists of a demographic survey, and questions reflecting Brown’s (2006) continuum of shame resiliency and Ogden’s integration of spirituality and sexuality scale. Finally, I will outline the sampling strategies I utilized and the recruitment process.

Participants. Participants selected for this study were five women between the ages of 25 and 30. All of the women selected were recently married (2 to 3 years). Interestingly, though it was not screened for, during the interviews, all participants shared that the first time they had

sexual intercourse was on their wedding nights. Each woman self-identified as having been immersed in a religious Christian culture as a youth and young adult. Three of five of the women attended private, Christian high schools, and all five of the women attended Christian post-secondary institutions. Each participant identified herself as Christian (3 non-denominational and two identified with the renewal denomination). All the participants were selected to participate based on their experiences of working through sexual shame, which was initially self-identified, and later confirmed through a semi-structured interview. At the time the study was conducted, two of the participants were stay-at-home moms, two were counsellors, and one was pursuing graduate studies in counselling psychology.

Participants chosen for the study were able to provide detailed, thoughtful reflections about their experience of working through sexual shame. As mentioned in the literature review, a shame resilient person is not someone who rarely experiences shame; a shame resilient person is someone that recognizes their experiences of shame and is able to move through it in constructive ways that allows them to grow from their experiences while maintaining their authenticity (Brown, 2006). I was not looking to interview someone who had never experienced sexual shame, rather, I was hoping to speak with women who have been able to experience shifts in their journey with sexual shame in a way that has enhanced their connection with themselves and others. Below, I will break down how I described and defined these criteria and discuss my rationale for exclusion/inclusion criteria.

Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria

In this section, I will describe participant criteria related to marital status, religious experience and resiliency to shame.

Marriage. First, I chose to screen for women who have been married in the past 3

years. As shame is an inherently relational affect, exploring this resilience to shame in the context of a long-term committed relationship is of interest. As discussed in my literature review, there is very little research that focuses on adult and/or marital sexuality (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2013). Sexuality, in and out of marriage, is an important aspect of being human. As previously outlined, the way in which one thinks about sexuality in relation to their spirituality in their first years of marriage has a significant impact on their relational satisfaction with their partners (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011). In this sample, I was not just interested in the initial beliefs about, and experiences of sexuality in marriage, rather, I was also interested in the working through of this. This is why I chose to attach a broader window in terms of the length that a prospective participant has been married for.

Immersion in Christian culture. Secondly, I chose to screen for women who have been immersed in Christian culture during adolescence and/or young adulthood. I screened for individuals who were exposed to the regulatory religious perspectives on sexuality, and potentially shaming messages around their sexuality. As adolescence and young adulthood are key developmental periods for an individual's sexual development, the messages that one receives at these times may be particularly impactful (Deutsch, 2011). This was screened for in a demographic survey created by the researcher [Appendix M]. The aim of this demographic was not to measure the degree to which the participants were religious or spiritual, rather, it was to assess the participants' historical involvement in Christian faith communities.

Resilience to sexual shame. To determine if the women expressing interest in participating in this study had experienced the phenomenon of interest (the experience of moving through sexual shame), I created a survey that mirrored Brené Brown's (2006) theory of shame resilience. Recall from the literature review, shame resilience is the ability to practice

authenticity when shame is experienced, and to move through this experience while still maintaining personal values. As mentioned, Brown (2006) conceptualized feelings of shame and empathy on a continuum; where an individual falls on this continuum is based on four separate continuums. I created a screening tool that reflects the continuums that Brown outlined, and applied the questions to the specific context of sexual shame. Respondents completed this survey online using surveymonkey.com. Responses were on a 5-point likert scale, ranging from Completely disagree (1) to Complete Agree (5). This survey was merely a screening tool to get a sense of women's experiences, thus it was not scored. If participants answered affirmative to over 75% of the items (ex. 4 or 5 on a likert scale), they were considered for the telephone screening interview.

The first continuum, "the ability to recognize and accept personal vulnerabilities to shame," (Brown, 2006, p. 47), was reflected in survey items such as, "in the past I have experienced sexual shame," or, "I recognize that there are specific experiences that 'trigger' my sexual shame." The second continuum, "the level of critical awareness regarding social/cultural expectations" (Brown, 2006, p. 48), was gauged using items such as, "there are messages about my sexuality should look like." Brown (2006) states that when people are able to be aware of the critical messages, their experiences of shame are normalized; therefore, I also included questions like "I believe it is normal to experience sexual shame." Moreover, here, I also asked questions about whether or not religion played a specific role in terms of impacting their sexuality, like, "Religion has shaped the way I experience my sexuality." The third continuum, "the ability to form mutually empathic relationships that facilitate reaching out to others" (Brown, 2006, p. 48) was represented by items like, "I feel like sexuality is an inappropriate subject for conversation," or, "I have been able to talk with people about their experiences of sexual shame." Finally, the

fourth continuum, “the ability to “speak shame” or possess the language and emotional competence to discuss and deconstruct shame” (Brown, 2006, p. 48), was signified by items like, “I am able to recognize when I am experiencing sexual shame” or “When I have had sex, I have been flooded by overwhelming, negative emotions.”

In this survey, I also asked a limited number of broader questions that connected spirituality to sexuality to get a sense of the participants’ experiences. These questions were closely aligned with Ogden’s (2006) integration of sexuality and spirituality survey. For example, survey questions included, “Sex is more than physical,” or “My sexuality is influenced by my spirituality” (and vice versa). For this, Gina Ogden granted me permission to use her survey questions (see Appendix L).

This survey only served as a preliminary screening tool. Following the completion of this survey, I conducted semi-structured telephone interviews (for script see Appendix C) to gauge whether or not the participants were able to describe, in-detail, their experiences within their faith communities, and their experiences of sexuality. As stressed above, it should be noted that I was not screening for people who have never experienced sexual shame, rather, I was hoping to hear the experiences of women who had shame around their sexuality at one point, and who have had the experience of working through this shame.

Sampling Strategies

The aim of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to cultivate a rich description of the phenomenon being examined in a specific context (van Manen, 1997). Purposeful sampling, according to Patton (2014), “focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the question under study” (p. 264). Consistent with interpretive paradigmatic research, I utilized purposive sampling to identify women who were able to speak, at depth,

about their personal experiences. Intensity sampling, a form of purposive sampling, was employed to choose individuals who strongly represent the phenomenon of interest (Mertens, 2010). In phenomenological research, the investigator must ask him or herself, “do you have the experience that I am looking for?” to determine if a participant is a good fit for the study (Englander, 2012). In this case, I asked myself whether this is a woman who was immersed in Christian culture, has experienced and worked towards overcoming sexual shame.

I was able to recruit individuals for this study with relative ease. This was not a surprise to me. I wholeheartedly believed that there were women who have been immersed in Christian faith communities who have been able to embrace their sexuality. My own personal experiences (as highlighted in the literature review), and the experiences of women with whom I have conversed with, suggested that the phenomena of interest to me exists.

Recruitment

To recruit participants I used online advertisements through social media. In this phase of recruitment I also utilized chain sampling; I asked colleagues and friends to pass on the details of the study to women they thought fit the inclusion criteria. All of the women who expressed interest in the study were screened according to above the inclusion/exclusion criteria.

Informed consent and confidentiality. Participants were first asked to review the informed consent form on the Survey Monkey website [See Appendix B for online informed consent]. The screen for this survey contained information about the study, and the criteria necessary for participation. If upon completion of these screening tool participants were deemed suitable for participation, they were contacted via telephone, at which time any questions they had were answered. During this telephone interview I queried whether prospective participants had experienced sexual trauma. If answered affirmatively, we discussed the potential that they

may be “triggered” by the research content. If the trauma felt resolved to the potential participant, and if they desired to engage in the research they were welcomed to continue on to the interview process. Individuals with unprocessed trauma were excluded from this study, as they may have been vulnerable to being adversely impacted by participating in this research. Before commencing the interview, each participant was emailed a copy of the consent form and was asked to review it prior to the interview [see Appendix B for informed consent]. The participants were invited to contact me with any questions she may have about the research process. At the time of the interview, I again, reviewed the informed consent and answered any outstanding questions. Furthermore, participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout the process. I conducted semi-structured interviews at a private and convenient time and location for my participants, like the participants’ homes. Data generated from the online survey were discarded once participant results were identified as either appropriate for their participation or not. Hard copies of interviewer notes and consent forms were kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's locked office, until final approval of the thesis, when they will be shredded to ensure confidentiality. Audio files and digital copies of the transcripts were kept in an encrypted, password-protected file on the researcher’s computer. I will destroy the files (by deleting all copies) following the completion of the research. To ensure anonymity, participants were given the opportunity to choose their pseudonym for the study. In addition, each participant was given my contact information, and the contact information of my research supervisor.

Methodological Rigour

In hermeneutic phenomenological studies, the application of generic qualitative criteria for validation is often applied. This, according to de Witt and Ploeg (2006), is problematic as

these criteria can be incongruent with the philosophical underpinnings of hermeneutic phenomenology. In response to this inconsistency, de Witt and Ploeg (2006) drew upon the works of van Manen and others, and proposed a framework for interpretive phenomenological methodological rigour. This proposed criteria includes five expressions: openness, balancing integration, concreteness, resonance and actualization. In this section I will define each of these alternative criteria for validation, and will discuss how I adopted this framework to ensure the integrity of my research.

Openness. The concept of openness relates to a process in which the research is explicit and systematic about accounting for the multiple decisions that they make throughout the process of research (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). For example, I made explicit how I came to choose this topic, how I determined screening criteria and how I discerned who the participants were in the study. In addition, particularly in hermeneutic phenomenology, tracking the shifts and evolutions in the interpretations made is of great importance. Because of this, as mentioned above, I kept a thorough research journal in order to make explicit my process of decision-making and interpretation. This, according to de Witt and Ploeg (2006), is consistent with step one of van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological method in which the researcher attunes and orients themselves to a specific phenomenon, and continuously turns back towards this phenomena throughout the research process.

Balancing integration. Balancing integration represents the weaving of philosophical concepts in the study methods and findings, and striking a balance between the voices of study participants and the potential explanations. Additionally, de Witt and Ploeg (2006) suggest that the reflections and interpretations of the researcher, and the underlying philosophical underpinnings, must be accounted for in the interpretation. During the research process, I was,

therefore, mindful of intertwining my personal responses, the narratives of the participants and the works of authors and works to come to a richer understanding of the experience of working through sexual shame.

Concreteness. Concreteness, simply put, is the usefulness for practice of study findings (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). This refers to providing concrete details from the researcher's own lifeworld, and from the stories of the participants in order to situate the reader to the historical and cultural context of the phenomenon. This concept closely parallels two expressions of rigour proposed by van Manen (2006), 'lived throughness' and contextuality. Lived throughness represents the way in which the researcher connects the reader to the phenomenon in the context of everyday life. Similarly, contextuality refers to the history and culture within which the research is conducted is highlighted, in order to provide the reader with a context from which to understand the work. Providing rich, thick descriptions of the participants and their experiences allows the reader to determine whether the findings can be transferred to their lives. I provided much contextual, historical, cultural and experiential detail of my own and the participants' experiences in order to enhance the usefulness of my findings.

Resonance. Resonance relates to the experiential or felt effect of reading study findings upon the reader (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). This occurs when the reader is struck deeply, moved by the "rich textual expression" of the participants' experiences (van Manen, 2006). While this criterion may be more difficult to ensure, I attempted to use my intuition and write in such a way in which the heart and soul of the participants are seen. It is my assumption that when this is revealed, this will be a connective and moving experience in which the reader can experience the lifeworld of the participant. I will include extended narratives of the participants' voices, in order for the reader to have a sense of each participant. Moreover, I argue that it is important

that the researcher allows themselves to be open to being deeply moved by the research. I have sought to allow myself to be open to personal transformation and enter into intensified self-awareness throughout this process.

Actualization. Finally, actualization encompasses the future realization of resonance of study findings (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). This means that the interpretive process does not end once the research is complete, rather, these criteria calls for a continual interpretation of the experiences. Rather than stressing the “correctness” of my interpretations of the phenomenon, I invite the reader to engage in their own interpretative process.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study was designed to understand and capture the meaning of Christian women's experiences of sexual shame, and the process of healing that they engaged in. This is important, given that Ogden (2008) has found that approximately one third of women surveyed said that their experience of sexual guilt and shame holds them back from integrating their sexuality and their spirituality. A hermeneutic phenomenological method allowed me to come into closer contact with what it means to be a woman who has journeyed towards sexual shame resilience. This method also allowed me to relate personally and be moved deeply in relation to the women's stories, strengths and struggles. My interpretations of the participants' stories are not an end; rather, I invite the reader to continue to understand and interpret these women's experiences as they engage with their stories. To analyze the data, first the co-researchers and I focussed exclusively on the phenomenology or the experiencing of the phenomena. For the sake of coherence, I then integrated my own comments and theory into the results section. To be clear, in this section, I integrate both the description of the women's stories, and my interpretation of their experiences.

Through immersing ourselves in the participant's stories, four categories of themes were exposed. Themes that emerged are presented in a way that follows the journey of the women who participated in the study. First, themes related to the messaging that women exposed to in their faith communities are highlighted. Next, themes related to the women's lived experiences of sexual shame are outlined. Subsequently, I illuminate the women's experiences of healing. And finally, women's experiences of embodiment are revealed. Within the messaging category, themes of silence, dualism, gendered messages (including subthemes of modesty, dual-responsibility and sex is for men), messages about sexual behaviour (including subthemes of sex

is bad, black and white, condemnation and grace) and unanswered questions were found. In the category of sexual shame experiences, themes of bodily experiencing, sexual shame as inhibiting sexuality, self-experiencing (including body hatred, fragmentation and internalized other), and relational-experiencing (including moving towards, moving against and moving away from partner, others and God) were revealed. In the category of the road to healing, themes that emerged were: Self-awareness and discovery, responses to messages (including subthemes of resistance and embracing redemptive messages), partnered relationships (including subthemes of open and honest communication, love and affirmation, and empathy and attunement), community (with subthemes of discernment, empowerment and sharing in the struggle), and spiritual transformation (with subthemes of spiritual receptivity, love and God's loving voice). Finally, in the category of experiences of embodiment, themes captured were safety, agency/freedom, pleasure, oneness/connectedness, wholeness and sexuality as revealing God's character (with subthemes of God as fun, Sex as God's gift, God's longing for connection and Openness of the Trinity). In this chapter, I will briefly share each of the participant's stories. I will then describe each of these themes and subthemes, providing examples and descriptions of the women's experiences.

Women's Stories

To remind the reader, participants selected for this study were five women between the ages of 25 and 30. All of the women selected were recently married (2 to 3 years). Each woman had been immersed in a religious Christian culture as a youth and young adult. All of the women identified herself as Christian (3 non-denominational and two identified with the renewal denomination). Two of the participants are stay-at-home moms, two are counsellors, and one was pursuing graduate studies in counselling psychology.

Kari.² Kari's story is one of incredible transformation and growth, shifting from profound self-silencing and disconnection towards embodiment and wholeness. As Kari shared her story she was expressive and articulate. When reflecting on her childhood, she describes a pervasive silence around sexuality in her household, stating that her parents never talked about sexuality, nor expressed any affection towards each other in her presence. The youngest of three girls, when Kari did hear about sex from her sisters, it was in a "tormenting way." She recalls being locked in a room, and pinned down by her sisters as they described the difference between girls and boys. Kari's initial encounters with sexuality were ones of disempowered knowing, in which she was given information that terrified her. Yet, she had the sense that her family might reject her if they heard her talking or even thinking about sex.

Having not been informed about puberty or her changing body, she remembers her sisters pointing out the changes they saw in her and laughing at her. Kari expressed feeling confused, awkward and silenced as her body changed. She tells a sad story in which she noticed her breasts developing, but was too embarrassed to say "bra" in front of her mother or sisters, so she silently hoped that someone would speak up on her behalf. One day, she found a new bra on her bed, and she still doesn't know who put it there. This story illuminates a family system in which there is deep silence and shame; a system where there was no place for sexuality.

Because her body and her sexuality were forbidden topics (leaving no space for them in her external reality), Kari describes a process of internalizing her sexual thoughts and transforming them into a rich fantasy world. In her words, at the time, sexual thoughts were "viewed as a sin, because it's lustful thoughts... so I would have compartmentalized them, shut them down." So, as Kari became a teenager she struggled with severe anorexia, which she said was, "an effort to keep my body childish. To eliminate breasts and curves and thighs." She was

² All individuals named in this thesis have been given pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

able to connect this to her sexuality, stating, “you bury it down and then you take it out against your body without conscious thought.”

The topic of sex was similarly “hush hush” in her church. She recalls in small group settings at youth group talking about purity, waiting for your husband is “wonderful” and “God’s plan.” Still, Kari states that she was left feeling confused about what to do with her sex drive until then. Kari did not know how to make sense of her sexuality, so she felt like she had to put it in a box and bury it deep inside of her, and then imagined that she would flip a switch when she met “Prince Charming” and got married. In fact, Kari was so in the dark about sex and sexuality, she shared that she did not know what masturbation was until her first year of university! Kari’s experience and attitude towards sex and sexuality seemed to shift slowly as she was growing and healing in other areas of her life during university.

Because Kari had experienced so much silence in her family and judgment in her church community around sexuality, Kari noted that this left no internal “space for grace” for others. As a teenager she recalled feeling critical, for example, towards another teenager who was pregnant. Moreover, at university she had a difficult time reconciling how Christians could show cleavage or advocate for masturbation. Her spiritual and sexual journey, however, has now opened her mind to experience other’s sexual expressions differently.

When Kari began dating and became engaged to Owen her first boyfriend, her now husband, she was living with a group of women, one of whom was her best friend. Kari’s best friend was dating Owen’s friend, so they would naturally spend a considerable amount of time together. At this point Kari was beginning to experience her sexuality in a “healthier way” (by being more open) and dressing in a way that expressed her newfound confidence and sensuality. Kari was very shocked and shamed when her best friend accused her of “trying to seduce her

fiancé,” and became very critical of the way she dressed and her body language. Sadly, Kari learnt implicitly that her sexuality was threatening to relationship, as she stated, “it [my sexuality] cost me a best friend.” Because of this, Kari said, “my little tiny flame of sex drive being allowed to emerge in my life was like harsh shut down and shamed through that experience.” Thereafter, she began to view sexuality more as an action rather than an emotional, spiritual and relational experience when she was close to Owen.

When Owen and Kari were on their honeymoon, she shared that she was “a little shy, but pretty confident” and “able to enjoy sex.” At the time, Kari thought, in her own words, “This is wonderful, this is the healing that happens when I’m in love, and somebody loves my body, and isn’t rejecting it, and isn’t saying that I have to be 80 pounds to be beautiful!” Curiously, there was an incident during their honeymoon when Kari was on the beach and injured her foot and the island surgeon had to come help her. Mysteriously, after this incident, Kari felt like her “sex drive just turned off,” and she was left wondering if she, once again, internalized the message that sex was threatening. She asked herself:

How could something last week that was exciting, and new, and celebratory, and now I am so disinterested and not wanting to be connected in that way, and kind of grossed out, and just, all the old thought patterns. This is animalistic and it’s gross. We’re like primates.

Why do people want to do this stuff?

Though there have certainly been shifts in the way that Kari sees sexuality now, Kari still hopes that her sex life will get back to the place that it had been at the beginning of their honeymoon.

When asked about how she experiences her sexuality currently, Kari laughed and said, “two distinct ways still. Adult and child.” Kari recognizes that at times, she feels more connected to a “younger, fearful part” of herself that resists sexual intimacy. That being said, she shared that

there is another part of her that feels sexy in lingerie and is incredibly motivated to find healing and integration.

Kari's inspiring engagement with her healing journey has opened doors to loving herself and her sexuality in different ways. Kari has spoken with her therapist about issues pertaining to her sexuality, and the therapist has provided her with invaluable psychoeducation and tools for connecting with her sexuality on a deeper level. Furthermore, Kari has educated herself about sexuality and her own body. She has reflected on the messages that she was exposed to, critically examined them, and has differentiated herself from them. Experiencing her spirituality in remarkably different ways has shifted the way she sees sexuality. Interestingly, Kari has also found that engaging more openly and actively with her sexuality has impacted her spirituality in terms of awakening parts of herself that were not present before. Furthermore, Kari's relationship with her husband and with other women has been a significant source of strength. Her husband's attunement and care for her has given her increasing permission to be present in moments of shame. Women have spoken into her life and her sexuality in different ways. While, as described above, in the past women had shamed Kari in her sexuality, some women, like Kari's work supervisor, her counsellor and her close friends become a source of resilience. At the interview, when asked about how she sees her sexuality now, she said, "as a work in progress." Then, Kari describes visualizing a garden with purple flowers and an arbor. Kari thought this might represent her growth and blooming; other words like beauty and life also come to mind.

Jennifer. Jennifer's profound capacity to reflect on the goodness of sexuality is incredibly inspiring, especially given she was so silenced in this area while growing up. Jennifer shares that her parents never talked about sex, except when they said, "It was between a man and

a woman, and only when you get married.” Because there was no space for conversation beyond this, and because her mother took measures to ensure that Jennifer did not attend any sex education classes at school, Jennifer believed very early on that sex was “dirty.” Jennifer cannot recall ever seeing her parents show affection towards one another, which further reinforced this belief. Since the topic became a dark secret, when others would talk about sex it felt “grimy” and forbidden. Jennifer got the impression that sex was “of the flesh,” which meant that it was sinful.

For many years, the perception that the “flesh” or the body was sinful and tainted was one that became deeply ingrained in the way that Jennifer saw herself. So, when Jennifer’s body began to change during puberty, she was left feeling confused and intensely ashamed. She recalled hating and feeling disgusted with her body, “ashamed” about having breasts; these feelings resulted in attempts for Jennifer to “control” her body. A deeply sensitive and aware girl, Jennifer recognized early on how mainstream culture objectifies and devalues women; this only deepened her body-hatred to the point in which Jennifer “seriously wanted to be a guy.” At this time, she demonstrated resilience in that she was able to question and reject the cultural messaging, however, the only embodied solution then, was to desexualize herself, or become a man. In light of all of these acutely painful thoughts and feelings, Jennifer silenced her body and her desires well into university. Throughout this time, Jennifer intensely longed and searched for intimacy, connection, and a “kindred spirit.” Because she did not find this type of friendship, she recalls feeling “really super alone” during her childhood and adolescence.

As an adolescent, Jennifer recalls a demonstration at her Church’s youth group in which each person glued a piece of paper together, representing the act of sex, and then attempted to pull them apart. This was very powerful for Jennifer; she recalled resonating with the idea that

sex is deeply bonding and connecting. She also, however, started to see herself as that piece of paper and wanted to make sure that she did not “have things taken away, or take away from someone else.” Jennifer, therefore, avoided any sexual thoughts and “shut down” any guys who seemed to feel attracted to her, believing that they were only interested in sex. One time, in high school, however, Jennifer started dating a guy whom she had been “head over heels” for, for at least two or three years. After only a week of dating, this boy said to her, “It’s not going to work, I’m not attracted to you.” Because of this excruciating experience, Jennifer found herself distancing herself from cross-gender relationships, thereby protecting herself from men.

It was only a year into dating her now husband, Walter, that Jennifer found some internal space to think more about her sexuality. Jennifer and Walter met at a Christian University. Jennifer recalls feeling very guarded and distrustful of Walter’s motives for quite some time. Given these feelings, Jennifer made sure that their relationship focused on “spiritual stuff, connecting with another, and working through our [other emotional] struggle[s] together.” Here, and throughout Jennifer’s story, we can see another form of dualism playing out, in which Jennifer devalued and rejected the body and idealized her spirit. If Jennifer and Walter were kissing or engaging in other sexual activity she would feel very ashamed and an intense sense of “I am awful, I allowed myself to get to this place, and feeling things that I shouldn’t be feeling.” This self-condemnation and shame seemed to invade Jennifer’s whole self; so, during these times, Jennifer would find herself distancing herself from God.

When Jennifer and Walter got married, Jennifer experienced much ambivalence about sex and sexuality; on one hand, sex had been “bad” and shameful for so long, but on the other hand, it was now supposed to be “good.” Jennifer recalls feeling scared at first, because, she says: “I didn’t know my own body. I didn’t know anything. I was kind of confused.” She was

struggling with regret and shame about the sexual activities that they had done before marriage, and expressed that they had now lost their essence. Moreover, Jennifer felt that sex had become more about pleasuring Walter's body, rather than thinking about herself, and her own desires. She recalls: "So in that sense I didn't know what it meant—I knew that sex was supposed to be this amazing spiritual, deep connection. But at the same time this was really just physical pleasure, and I think I was disappointed." Rather than sex being a means to connection, Jennifer saw sex as an expression of her and Walter's emotional and spiritual connection. As a very deep woman, who searches for meaning and connection everywhere, it seems that Jennifer was searching for more, and perhaps missed out on the inherent meaning in pleasure, or of being fully in one's body. Because of this, it seems that Jennifer could not initially fully embrace the fulfillment and joy of her sexuality.

Jennifer's relationship with Walter has come to be a deeply transformative agent in her life. Jennifer's struggle with body-hatred extended into their marriage, and at times, became a source of disconnection between her and Walter. Walter, however, persistently loved Jennifer, and empathized with her pain and self-hatred. Jennifer began to see that when she was torturing her body, she was hurting her husband, and was able to shift from disconnection to fuller connection with herself and Walter. By being completely seen in her beauty and her brokenness, Jennifer was able to finally receive Walter's love for her and start feeling ok in her body. This kind of love, she says, reflects the depth of love that God has for her. Now, instead of sex being objectifying, Jennifer has come to experience that through and within her body, she can be deeply known. Moreover, rather than her body being in conflict with her spirit, she now sees that she can experience her spirituality with her body. This experience will be described in more depth in the "empathy and attunement" theme below.

Jennifer's healing journey has brought her to a place of deep recognition that she has been yearning for connection all along. In her words:

I need, I want someone to be there with me. To understand me, and to be known. And to know them, in like I think that deep connection influenced what I think for sex, and with my connection with God. That I can be known by Him, and know Him... And being in a committed relationship with someone who understands me and we have had those experiences of deep connection with one another.

Here, we can see that Jennifer is moving towards herself, to others and to God. The safety and commitment she has with Walter has helped her to see God's heart for her. Jennifer feels much more integrated in her body and her spirit. Now, she delights in being seen. She says, "I think before I was definitely hiding myself, and now it's like, "Here I am!" To get to this place of complete offering of self, Jennifer believes that Walter's encouragement, support and acceptance have helped her be ok with herself. Furthermore, her faith and her relationship with God have been deeply transformative for her sexuality. She speaks about a transformation from feeling "I am imperfect, therefore I don't want to be seen, I am ashamed, I am bad," to now "I am imperfect, and that's why I need to be connected to God, and that draws me in closer." In her ongoing journey towards healing, she is able to talk to and ask the Divine about how she is seen, and is able to recognize God's heart for her. Finally, Jennifer speaks about how her body has become a source of resilience; it is through embodied knowing that she can resist the messages that she had been exposed to.

Now, Jennifer speaks at considerable length about the meaning and beauty of sexuality, specifically as it relates to her spirituality. She speaks about sex being about the whole person, connecting through their spirit, their emotions and their bodies. This, she shares, is a reflection

of the relationship and intimacy that we can have with God. Jennifer sees her sexuality as a longing for connection; this is the same longing, she believes, that God has for us. By connecting in a deep and intimate way with others, she can connect with Christ's dwelling in them; this is deeply spiritual. When she experiences this sort of connection with Walter, Jennifer describes a "bursting feeling" in her chest. She spoke about the beauty of looking in Walter's eyes, and knowing all of him. She shares, "And so just having that deep sense of looking into someone's eyes, and understanding their brokenness, and seeing them is just like, 'Woah, this is powerful' and like shivers." Jennifer captures the beauty of the goodness of being with and being close to the whole of another person. She describes being known, being accepted, being close as deeply satisfying; these experiences erase the old feelings of "Oh, it's bad when you're sexually attracted," and opens up possibilities that this longing is purposeful and has meaning.

Mary. Like the other women's stories, Mary's is one of redemption and journeying towards freedom in relationship with others. Mary recalls that her parent's philosophy around sexuality was "if you ask then we will tell you," but since Mary never asked any questions, she did not have any conversations with her parents about sex. While her parents did not explicitly communicate with Mary about sex or sexuality, she noted that they expressed their physical affection towards each other (e.g., hugging) around her, which seemed to reinforce a sense of safety. Still, Mary's sexuality was quite a mystery to her as a child and adolescent. She recalls that the only messages that she was exposed to in her church were around modesty, a wife's marital obligations, and that women aren't as interested in sex as men. Furthermore, the school she attended, which was a private Christian institution, gave her the impression that there was "not a lot of grace when you mess up" sexually, particularly because any girls who got pregnant, or any bisexual or homosexual students were asked to leave. Mary believed that this instilled in

her an attitude of self-righteousness, instead of love and grace. Furthermore, Mary said that all of these messages made her question how she knew herself and her sexuality.

The way that Mary spoke about the experience of her sexuality throughout adolescence hints at a disconnection from this part of her. She shared that she “just ignored it...just all of it,” because there was no space for questions. When reflecting on this, Mary remembered how busy her childhood and adolescence was, and how perhaps, things would have been different if she had more free time. To Mary, her sexuality was “mysterious” and “secretive” at this point in her life. When Mary started dating a boy in her late teenage years, she was confronted with the conflicting feelings between desire and internal resolve. She says, “Just because of your desire to be physically near someone is so strong that, then to navigate that. “Yes, no, yes, no, yes, no, no, no, yes, no, yes, no... wait, no, yes!” is a little overwhelming.”

Though Mary communicated very clear sexual boundaries with her boyfriend, a couple of times while she was kissing him, he attempted to cross these boundaries without her consent. In a moment of empowering agency, Mary was able to share with him, “It doesn’t make me feel safe when you do that. Because I’ve communicating one thing....Especially because that was firm to me. Like, no!” After having clear conversations about the “deeper why” Mary had set these boundaries, he was respectful of them. In light of this situation, at this time sexuality felt, “vulnerable” and “unsafe,” to Mary. She says, “I felt like it was easy to be violated,” because, to her, “it’s spiritual, and it’s emotional, and it’s physical.” What Mary is suggesting is that, for her, if she was violated on a sexual level, the whole of herself would experience this violation.

Following high school, Mary became very close friends with Jessica, a woman she met while attending a Christian school in a different country. Mary describes this relationship as enmeshed and “entirely unhealthy,” explaining that there was a lot of “manipulation and control”

and she often did not have a voice in their friendship. Mary recalls that she was “stunned” when Jessica kissed her. Mary’s attempts to share her discomfort with this dynamic were dismissed by Jessica, who would say “No one needs to know... it’s not a big deal. We’re just friends.” Jessica would then be upset, and Mary would feel like she had to placate her. While after a specific event Mary was able to finally set very clear boundaries with Jessica, the friendship she had with her left a deep wound in her budding relationship with her soon to be husband. Mary shared that she experienced so much shame about what had happened that she did not have anyone to talk about it with.

During pre-marital counselling Mary felt compelled to share with her fiancé, Craig, about what had occurred between her and Jessica, as she did not want anything unknown to get in between them. In a moment of tremendous courage and strength, Mary divulged what had happened with Jessica. Craig, though initially shocked, was able to clearly define what had taken place between Mary and Jessica as abusive. This recognition aided Mary to shift from self-silencing to experiencing her suffering that occurred in that relationship in a different way. That being said, while Mary had felt so powerless in her relationship with Jessica, for many months to come she seemed to hold all the blame for what had occurred.

Though Mary and Craig were able to share what had occurred with some close friends and pastors during this time, they eventually moved across the country, and felt left alone to work through what had happened. Though they were attending a church in their community, they both did not feel like there was a safe place to express their struggles. Mary was still grappling with intense feelings of shame and disbelief, remarking that she felt “like a terrible, terrible person,” and Craig was experiencing his own shame about what had occurred between Jessica and Mary. Mary said that as a result of both of their shame, “we couldn’t help each

other.” Because these feelings were unresolved, Mary saw that they often manifested themselves in their sex life. As she described:

We used to always ask, “Are you ok? Are you ok?” Because we weren’t ok. So we always felt this thing between us.... Like we weren’t settled with each other... Because he knew what was going on, and I knew what that had all done in him. And so the shame of that was just like, super uneasy between us.

While there was clearly so much care and love between Mary and Craig, it was as if the shame had created a barrier between them so they could not fully reach each other. It was not until Mary and Craig finally felt the internal freedom to share what had occurred with some close friends a couple years into their marriage that they were able to find healing in this area.

Through their conversations with friends, they felt significantly “lighter” and affirmed. Mary said, “And that was really helpful, just to see the truth... when it’s secretive, it’s always so much bigger.” Mary shared that spiritually, she was able to transcend the shame and finally *receive* grace. After this, she described: “I would start to beat myself up again, I would be like, ‘Ok, Jesus, I receive your forgiveness in this. I receive your truth in this.’ And that changed everything.” Mary describes an experience of knowing that her behaviour does not change “the way he [Jesus] is with you... Like that’s untouchable, regardless over everything else.” In the same way, Mary was able to hear and receive Craig’s desire, unconditional acceptance and love for her. She also noted that, “him not feeling shame in sexuality allows me to not feel shame in sexuality.” In other words, his healing allowed her to deepen her healing.

Mary expresses a deep sense of gratitude for her sexual intimacy with her husband, Craig. She shares that sex reveals to her “something different about God’s character” in that sex is so “amazing and fun.” Mary beautifully describes how her sexual experiences are much deeper

than physical. She shared that she experiences her sexuality with openness, great encouragement and acceptance. She recalls on her wedding night, being “totally” naked with her husband, and thinking, “this is the most natural thing in the world... like it just felt so right, just so good.”

Mary’s sense that “Jesus is all ‘YES!’ towards sexuality and that God created all of her is very liberating. Furthermore, the “100% safety and acceptance” she has in her relationship with Craig, she believes, has opened her to experience connection, pleasure and her sexuality more fully.

Through this journey, Mary learned that “nothing is too big or too deep, or has too much shame to let go of.” She described feeling very hopeful that her story will help and encourage others towards freedom and healing. She also wants to be a voice that speaks of the goodness of sex. As she put it:

It’s a good thing to tell people. Because otherwise if the only message you hear is: It’s about your husband, it’s hard work for you... But having someone just say, “Yes, sex is awesome, I love it, you can totally love it. You know, like if you’re not figuring it, figure it out! Right, there are books that can help you, there are people that can help you. Just do it! Don’t be satisfied with being unsatisfied. Like learn your body, figure out what makes you tick, figure out what makes him... you know, communicate it, and figure it out together, and, like just, to encourage that.

There is tremendous hope in Mary’s narrative. Having not found a safe place for quite some time, Mary is inspired to be a safe person for others to come to about their sexuality.

Meg. When asked to finish the sentence, “My sexuality is...” Meg’s answer illustrates the healing and fullness that she has come to experience. She voiced, “My sexuality is liberated

and connected.” To arrive at this point, Meg has intentionally journeyed towards wholeness and intimacy with her husband.

Meg, a very curious girl, learnt about sex at a fairly young age when she asked her Mom how could a couple she knew have a baby if they are not married. When her mother taught her about sex she had a very, natural child-like response, thinking this is “the most disgusting thing in the world!” because “that’s where you pee out of.” From that point on, Meg said that her parents did not talk to her about sex. A number of the stories related to sexuality from her childhood, however, had negative undertones to them. For example, being a gifted and creative girl, Meg has always loved art and creating. She recalled, one time around the same age, a girl in her class wrote “sex” on her story. Meg recalled feeling “so ashamed and got so worked up about it.” Later, she remembers boys in her school making silly and sometimes gross comments about sex. She remembers, even after going to high school, sexuality still had “those negative connotations” attached to it. Sex education at her Christian high school was, according to Meg, “such a joke” and “very sterilized” as it was only about preventing STIs rather than being about relationships and responsibility.

Still, even though sexuality was presented as negative to Meg in a number of contexts, she always remembers being very curious about it. She thought “there must be something good about it,” and was eager to learn more. Meg described a “push and a pull,” however, as she felt ashamed because she “didn’t know if it was ok to be curious.” Since Meg did not feel like she had anyone to talk about sex with, she recalls, “it was mostly just me, thinking, and wondering.”

When Meg was an adolescent, she was involved in a youth group that her parents led. Every year, all the female youth would go to her grandparent’s house; there they would have conversations about relationships, boundaries, modesty and talk a little bit about

sexuality. She shared that the message seemed to be about “keeping your sexuality under wraps...until you were married, basically.” Her church perpetuated this message, when there was disturbance among some members, who thought that the artwork was that was placed in the church was inappropriate. Another church member had painted a picture of herself in a bathtub, and though it did not reveal her breasts or genital region, the other members were uncomfortable with the piece. Here, Meg was exposed to the message that that sexual expression and/or the human body does not belong in the church.

Later, when Meg began attending a Christian University, she remembered feeling like she did not have any “outlets” for her sex drive, so she found herself making jokes of a sexual nature. As an artist, she also saw the beauty in the human form, and took photographs of herself and some friends in the nude. She recalled feeling very judged and ashamed when there were particular people who “put this template” on her of being a “sex-obsessed art student.” Meg seemed to feel quite trapped and isolated in those times; she noticed that she felt very embarrassed and would “shut down” around those people. In both this instance, and the incident with the paintings at her church, her creative expressions of sexuality were very limited.

Soon after Meg started dating her now husband, James, she noticed a profound shift in the way that she related to herself and her sexuality. During this time, she said she engaged in “a lot of exploration of myself, and of my faith, and...my identity is as a woman and a sexual being.” James’ healthy and affirming attitude towards sex seemed to be a breath of fresh air for Meg. James saw sex as a gift; it was something to embrace rather than shy away from. Though they decided to wait until they were married to have sexual intercourse, Meg spoke about how liberating it was for her to be able to explore sexuality. During this time, the shame that she had been experiencing for years seemed to dissipate, and she felt very in touch with her

sexuality. She recalled that she felt more whole, because before, she knew that there was a part of her that was just lying dormant. Meg spoke about exploring her body through self-stimulation, which helped her become more open to her sexuality. She says:

It felt really natural. And I felt really empowered, actually...I think at first there was a little bit of like, "Oh my gosh, what am I doing? This is so weird! I've never experienced my body like this before." But, it felt right, to be in tune with that.

When Meg was able to experience her sexuality in a different way, she felt more connected to her whole self.

Like so many other couples, when Meg and James got married, they found the adjustment to having sex to be quite difficult and emotional. Unfortunately, on Meg and James' wedding night Meg had an allergic reaction to the lubricant that they had been using. Moreover, because Meg's body was not used to holding anything "larger than a tampon" it took about a week before they were able to have sexual intercourse. Meg recalls how difficult it was for her to stay present in those moments, as she kept thinking, "Oh my gosh, I can't do it. No you need to relax. You need to relax. You need to relax." This negative self-talk, she says, perpetuated the shame spiral she was in. The unmet expectations of the "wedding night," which is very much a cultural/religious script, resulted in disappointment and shame, and feelings of inadequacy. Because of this, Meg felt like her sexuality became "more dormant" again as she retreated into shame. Now, Meg wonders if, while dating, the "forbidden" nature of the sexual activities that she and James were participating in had become a source of arousal. Then, when she married James, this forbiddenness was stripped away. She still expresses having inner conflict about whether they "did too much" sexually prior to their marriage.

In response to their struggle, however, Meg and James were able to come together to support and encourage each other during those times. Meg recalls a joyous moment when they were on their honeymoon, when they were able to celebrate their sexual successes. She says, “We were having sex, and I was like, “are you in all the way?” and He’s like “I think so!” and then we go like, “Victory!!” Sadly, Meg and James’ celebration did not last long; Meg began to experience intense shame around her arousal and difficulty having an orgasm. She, again, began asking herself if there was something wrong with her and her body. She describes how hard it was in these moments:

Because that’s all I would really think about, and then that would disrupt the connection between us. And it just became really hard emotionally to have these expectations and then time and time again I would be disappointed. And so, once that kind of started happening, I didn’t really feel, I felt ashamed, so I didn’t really feel desire to have sex as much. And then I thought that there was something wrong with me for that. Because it’s like, “why am I not aroused? I’m a newlywed? I feel like I should be having sex five times a day or something.”

Meg was left feeling very confused and guilty, because she felt like she was letting James down when she was “overanalyzing” everything. That being said, Meg spoke with awareness about the cultural expectations of female sexual functioning, and began to recognize that for her, connection, rather than orgasm, was the goal of sex.

Over time things began to shift, which Meg attributes to having very raw and open dialogue with James. Meg described going back to an “exploration phase” in which James and Meg tried different sexual activities, like oral sex. Meg speaks beautifully about how loving and caring James has always been towards her; as a result of their mutual love, they have developed a

profound sense of safety and connection. Meg and James seem to have a special closeness in which they can be really open and vulnerable about their sexual experiences, and can therefore alleviate some of the shame that they were both experiencing.

There have been a few times since Meg and James got married, when they were intimate, where Meg felt a “really, really strong spiritual connection” that resulted in an “intense feeling of love for the other person.” She spoke about how their oneness and love for each other deeply resonated with her spirit. She says, “Even as I’m crying now, even in those moments. The only thing I could do was just cry. And just embrace him and just be in the moment.” These experiences have led her to reflect on God’s infinite capacity for love, and how her love and intimacy during sex must be a glimpse of how much the Divine loves her. Her sexual experiences brought her closer to experiencing God in a new way. For Meg’s journey, it seems, her curiosity, openness, self-exploration, sharing with friends and vulnerability have been remarkably healing factors. Now, Meg describes sex as “sacred” and as a gift that transcends physicality. No longer is Meg’s body seen as a “problem,” rather, she spoke about how amazing her body is, and how she experiences it as a source of power and pleasure.

Lily’s story. Lily told her story with deep clarity, self-compassion and thoughtfulness. She demonstrated a remarkable capacity to turn her attention to her heart, and God’s heart, and to speak about her struggles and her strengths from a grounded place. Lily’s story speaks to the human capacity for deep and meaningful healing that can bring tremendous freedom, beauty and richness.

Lily describes her relationship with her parents as very close, affirming and supportive throughout her development. That being said, she recalled that, in her family, there was silence around the topic of sexuality. Lily, in fact, only learnt about what sex was when she was 11

years old, which is, in her opinion, was quite old to not have had “the talk.” While sexuality was not discussed, Lily’s parents gave her agency regarding making decisions about her relationships with boys, which indirectly empowered her to make decisions about her sexuality. As a young adolescent, Lily expressed being quite open and curious about sex and sexuality, and recalled trying to gather information about the topic from encyclopedias and magazines.

While she was still quite young, her family moved to a Christian commune that was “very much about...fleeing evil...leaving the world.” At the commune there was, “lots of discipline in order to be perfect...in Christ.” This commune was characterized by extreme rules that all its inhabitants were expected to follow, including not having any physical contact with the opposite sex prior to marriage. While Lily’s parents were “a little bit countercultural,” providing much space for Lily to think differently, and challenge the rules, the oppressive environment of the commune took a marked toll on the way Lily experienced herself. So, when Lily was eleven years old, and a boy who was at least three years older than her “took things farther [sexually]” without Lily’s consent, Lily felt ashamed and like she was somehow complicit in their interaction. This unwanted sexual experience resulted in an experience of “not wanting anything to do with” sex for a number of years.

When Lily started to experience natural sexual responses as an adolescent, she seemed to be confused about “what to do with it.” As she recalled: “I remember watching “First Knight” with Richard Gere, when I was about fifteen or something, and totally having like a physical response to like a kissing scene. And that being such a shock, like, what is this?” Around the same time, she recalled going through a “bad girl phase” in which she would hold hands with a guy, or hang out with a boy one-on-one, which was against the commune’s rules. Lily recalled feeling shame about this, though as an adult recognizes that she was quite “safe and careful” in

those times. Still, because Lily was exposed to extreme black-and-white messaging, she said that what was very innocent and natural felt very forbidden.

Lily believes that as a result of the commune's oppressive environment, she developed an eating disorder as an adolescent. When she was in university, Lily began a powerful healing process through counselling and positive, affirming relationships with women. Through these experiences Lily began to love the strength and health of her body, and grew to a place of really believing that she was beautiful. Out of this newfound love for her body, she stated, "came then a new confidence sexually, too." This, she shared, started to impact her relationship and sexual experiences with guys, as she began to think: "Yah, I look great. Others should enjoy this." While much sexual liberation and freedom was found in this healing journey, Lily shared that it also created more shame. Lily's sexual behaviour did not fit with the "black and white rules" she heard at her commune or at her Christian university. In response to the shame, Lily described shaming responses, like compartmentalization, withdrawing from God and emotional self-flagellating. Because Lily was actively involved in her church and in a non-profit agency, she felt like a fraud in some ways as she said: "everyone thought I had everything together...but I felt so miserable in a lot of ways."

As she journeyed, however, Lily spoke about her profound and meaningful connection with her spirituality and God, which transformed the way she saw her sexuality. Lily recalled standing in her parent's kitchen while making tea, and hearing God, in response to her withdrawing, say, "Don't stay away, I'm still here, I'm always gonna make this better. Don't pull away, like it doesn't matter what just happened." Then, she says, "I remember feeling that God was saying to me like, 'What if you never felt like you left, even when it [the sexual shame] was happening?'" This powerful experience, Lily said, spoke to the love of God and the way that

He saw her. Lily began to recognize that she was craving intimacy and connection, and was able to open herself up to receive that more freely from God. In the span of about a year, Lily wrestled with the meaning of sexuality; she recalled she “would pray about it a lot, and cry about it, journal about it, and try to think about different strategies” to approach her sexuality. She was eventually able to “let go” and hear God speak to her clearly. She remembers God saying things like, “It’s about you being safe, and it’s about you being free in this beautiful thing I created. And your heart.” After a gradual shift, Lily was able to come to a place where she felt “completely free in the love of God” before meeting her husband.

When Lily first began dating her now husband, Thomas, she was very worried that she would “mess it up” by bringing her “old patterns” into the relationship. Thomas had previously been in a marriage in which there was “a lot of brokenness” around sexuality, and he had engaged in a tremendous amount of healing, and had come to a place of wholeness. Lily said:

I felt that he was so free and light. And I had never been with anyone like that, who had, like he just knew that it [sex] was beautiful, and awesome, and he was so vocal about how great I was, and so careful and respectful of what I wanted. So I think we were able to start having conversations early on that were really open about sexuality.

In these conversations, they spoke about their resolve to be completely honest, of their desire to have God and their community involved in their relationship and of their decision to wait until marriage to have sexual intercourse. As a result of their openness and love for each other, during their dating years and engagement they both felt tremendous peace, freedom and intimacy in their sexual engagement. Their sexual relationship was (and still is) very grounded in their dialogue with themselves and with God. As a result of this openness and love between her and Thomas, Lily continued (and continues to this day) to experience healing in dating and married

life. She has been intentional in confronting the “old shame responses” and has had to “deal with them one at a time, to actively reverse the cycle.”

Community has played a significant role in Lily’s story. Throughout her story, Lily spoke about how the voices of women were very important in her journey. Lily, the middle of six girls, shared about one particular sister, who had a very free sexual life and empowered her to have agency in her body and her sexuality. She also spoke about transformative conversations with a friend who met with her with “zero judgment” and mutual vulnerability, and encouraged her to have meaningful conversations with her new boyfriend about healthy sexual boundaries. In addition, she describes her current pastor and her church, in general, as very non-judgmental, open, affirming and encouraging of sexual intimacy.

Lily describes her wedding night as “such a bonding...a beautifully bonding experience.” Though it felt cliché to Lily, she remembered feeling so much closer, emotionally and spiritually, to her husband. In describing her honeymoon, she shared “I just felt so, such a huge deep sense of peace and goodness, like the goodness of God.” Now, Lily speaks confidently about her sex life “being in the light,” about “God’s smile” on her sexuality, and God’s prompting towards sex. As a result of the mutuality in her marriage, she shared that her whole self feels deeply bonded to Thomas. When asked about her sexuality, she beautifully expressed:

It’s such a big part of my life. And of contentment in my life, I would say, and a huge part of what I think makes me have a really happy marriage. And my marriage is a big part of my life. So yah, it’s a really, this dimension that I feel so lucky when I think about it, like “Man, I can just go home and have sex tonight.” [laughs]. That’s crazy. All those years

where I could not! And it still feels like, Aw! And it feels like, all the freedom around it and how it gets better all the time. It's really an awesome gift.

Here, Lily's voice reflects that of her mother. Lily fondly recalls a lovely moment in which her mother foreshadowed, "Oh yah, you think it's good in your 20s', and then, just wait until you get into your 40's, it just keeps getting better and better." During the interview, Lily spoke about the lifetime journey of embracing her sexuality, and delighted in the idea that there was "so much more to experience," still.

Themes

In this section, I will outline all of the themes that emerged in the women's stories. First, I will highlight the messages that the women were exposed to in their homes, schools and faith communities about sexuality. Next, I will outline the women's experiences of sexual shame. Then, I will underscore the healing journeys of the women. Finally, experiences of embodied sexuality will be illuminated.

Messaging about Sexuality

The women who participated in this study identified several messages that they recall being exposed to in their families, religious communities and culture. In particular, the women described a definite silence surrounding the topic of sexuality, in general. When sex was spoken about, it was often framed in a dualistic manner, separating the body from the spirit. Furthermore, the messages that the women heard were laden with oppressive gendered scripts around modesty, women's dual-responsibility, and the notion that sex is intended for men. The women also seemed to be bombarded with messages about appropriate sexual behaviour; they talked about hearing that "sex is bad," black and white rules, and condemnation and grace around sexual "sin." Finally, recognizing all of the regulatory messages about their

sexuality, the women were still left wondering, “what do we do with our sexuality?” In this section, I will elucidate and describe in detail the above themes that emerged.

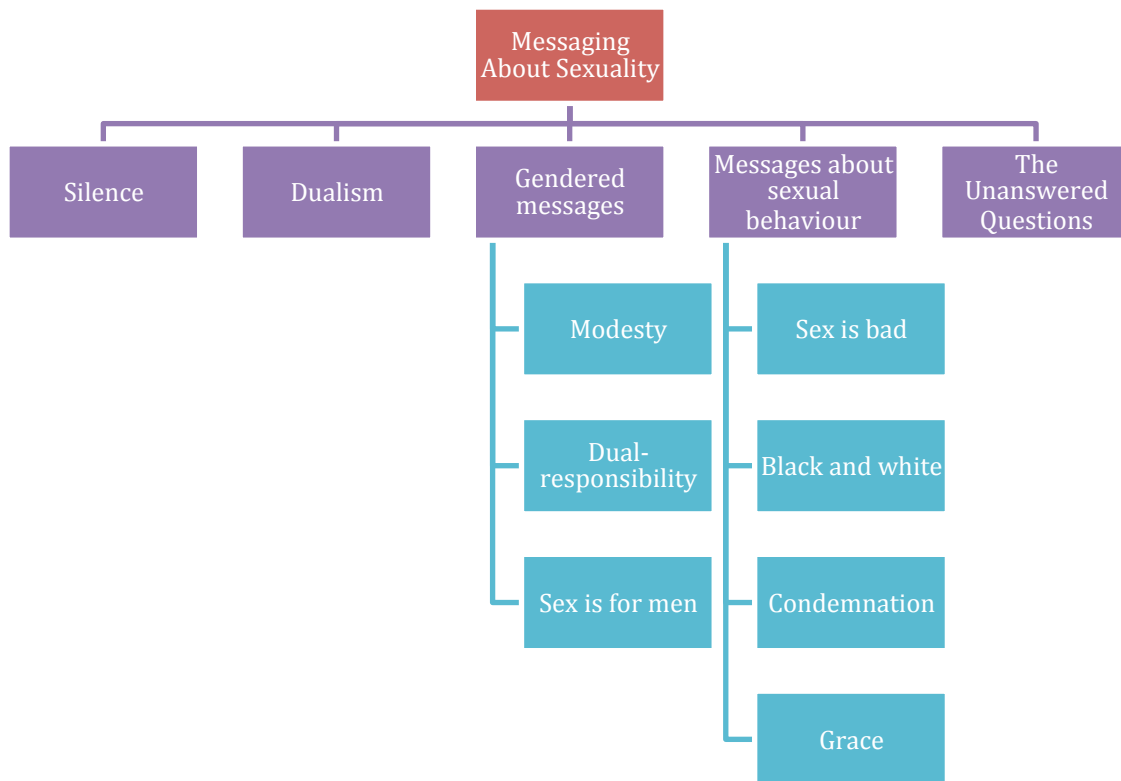


Figure 1. Themes of Messaging

Silence. All of the women identified that there was a culture of silence around sexuality within their homes growing up. Simply put, sex, the meaning of sexuality, sexual safety and sexual relationships were rarely (if ever) spoken about. Meg, for example, recalled having one conversation with her mom about sex when she was around 7 or 8 years of age, after she found out that a classmate’s dad and his girlfriend were expecting a child. “But that was it,” Meg stated, “They didn’t really talk to me about it after that, *ever*.” Likewise, Jennifer voiced:

Yah, I think that was like the biggest part of my experience of sexuality was that it shouldn’t be talked about, because it wasn’t ever really talked about. The only thing that

really my mom said... was that it was between a man and a woman, and only when you get married.

Despite having much space and openness to talk about “most things” with her parents, Lily noted that the topic of sexuality seemed to be off limits. Similarly, Mary recalled that her parent’s philosophy was more “if you ask then we will tell you,” however, Mary never asked, so the dialogue was not had. For these women, this silence left many questions and curiosities about sexuality unanswered.

As Meg stated, “I didn’t really have anyone to talk about it with at all. So it was mostly just me thinking, and wondering.” It often left the women feeling confused, uncertain, and alone to learn about and make decisions around their sexuality. Lily, for example, articulated “Sometimes I wish that—I did wish that we had more conversations and I had more direction, because I felt like I was trying to figure it out a bit on my own.” There seemed to be immense power in the silence that resulted in confusion and discomfort with the topic of sexuality, in general.

While the silence around sexuality within the homes and churches of the women interviewed was, perhaps, unintentional, it was certainly not benign. What became clear in the women’s stories was that the silence was a powerful force that was laden with messages. As Meg stated “it doesn’t really feel like I received any messages about it, but then that in itself is kind of a message about it, right?” For Jennifer, the silence meant that sexuality was “sinful” or bad, and was something to be avoided. This understanding was reinforced in Jennifer’s story when her parents prevented her from attending any sex-education classes at her high school. Furthermore, both for Mary and Kari the silence meant that it was shameful to talk about sexuality. Mary shared:

I think... it [the silence] teaches that it's not ok to talk about. Or that in their feeling, they obviously feel uncomfortable about it, so if you're uncomfortable about something, maybe it's not ok, or maybe like, just a little bit of shameful conversation, just because it wasn't had.

For Kari, this silence about sexuality extended to puberty and the changes in her body; according to Kari the message she received from the silence was that it was shaming, "You don't speak about it—[it's] an unspeakable subject. Using current language I would say shaming—our bodies are a shame thing. So don't talk about it; keep it hidden. No embracing it." In a cultural landscape that objectifies and sells sex as a commodity, silence in our homes and in our faith communities is extremely problematic. In large part, these women felt left to their own devices to learn about how their bodies worked, what their sexuality means, and how they can express themselves. Lily, for example, was around 7 or 8 years old, when a friend said, "this is what sex is, and this is what rape is" in the same sentence, so sex appeared quite troubling. This event underscores the importance of talking to our children about sex and sexuality. In many of the women's stories the silence in their relationships around sexuality may have resulted in self-silencing around this issue. How this manifested will be highlighted in the experiences of sexual shame themes below.

Dualism. Inherent in most of the messages that women received about their sexuality within the context of their families and their faith communities was mind-body dualism. As described in the literature review, dualism is the notion that everything has two opposite parts or principles (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2011). In the women's stories the message that the body was a distinct and separate entity from the spirit; the message that the body or the "flesh" was less than the spirit was reinforced. On the commune that Lily grew up on, for example,

“physicality was bad” was a very clear message she heard. Kari, similarly, was told that “staying pure” meant “not giving into the lusts of the flesh,” which, to her would be “not touching your body.” The notion that the spirit is good and the body is bad regards sexuality as *undesirable*.

Other women described subtle ways in which their families or churches separated one’s body from their spirit. Meg shared a story, one which really stuck with her, about how artistic expressions of the body were responded to at her church:

There was this lady that went to my church, and she was an artist. And she had done a bunch of paintings. One of them was about her daughter, and it was a really beautiful painting, and it was called “The Virgin.” And, one was of herself, and it was her in a bathtub. Like you couldn’t see anything. But I remember that people got really, kind of uptight about it, and they wanted them taken down in the church, and stuff. Because I guess it showed *human flesh*. Even though, it’s not like you could see her breasts or her vagina, or anything like that.

This event is consistent with the problematization of women’s bodies and sexuality that can be found in church culture. Stripping away the beauty of the human body can result in limited expression and disembodiment. The messages that we are exposed to around our bodies and our sexuality can permeate the way in which we think, feel and experience ourselves. Jennifer described hearing and internalizing this false binary, which is illuminated in this explanation: “I think that before I really thought my body was a sinful thing, like it has these desires and needs, and it was just ruining my spirituality. So it was this dichotomy, this dualism.” Another form of dualism, that in some respects, men were held in a higher place than women, was also reinforced. These gendered messages will be discussed below.

Gendered Messages

In this section, I will highlight the gendered messages that the women were exposed to during their adolescence/young adulthood. First, I will highlight the messaging around modesty. Next, I will illuminate the dual-responsibility for both men and women's sexuality that was placed on the women through these messaging. Finally, I will describe how the women were told that "sex was for men."

Modesty. All of the women interviewed were consistently told during church youth groups and camps and wider church sermons that purity, in the form of modesty, was important to maintain. Mirroring the 90's purity movement, not surprisingly, modesty was talked about in terms of how one dressed and presented themselves, rather than a state of being. As Kari states, "Yah, so purity would be...not dressing in a way that could be provocative to anybody." Likewise, Meg shared that most discussions about sexuality and purity in her youth group were about "dressing appropriately." For Mary, this message about modesty seemed to be the central theme in her youth group:

I think probably the biggest thing with that would have to do with modesty...As far as that side of it, about how you dress. Which is, I'm all for modesty, but I think lots of the ways it's talked about is not—it's very unbalanced, and it's like, "you're not ok." And so say you chose to wear a two piece bathing suit instead of a one-piece bathing suit—that's ok. But that's not always what was communicated.

To Mary, the message of modesty, in general, is considered to be a positive one, however, the way it was communicated was potentially hurtful in that it may result in feeling self-conscious and unsure.

Clearly, the way in which one interprets and experiences discussions around modesty within their faith communities can impact the way they experience themselves. Kari, for

example, described experiencing an internal shame response to the discussion about purity in her youth group on impact: “We’d have big modesty talks and you’d kind of blow it out of proportion because you’re feeling so much shame, so you’d hide under layers of sweaters.” Instead of being able to express herself with agency and an internal grounding, to Kari this message resulted in shame. Mary, likewise, shared that this message meant that she could not feel freedom to “just be a teenager,” rather, it made her self-conscious and second-guess how she expressed herself. Meg, however, understood the messages around modesty as “all about, like not wanting to present yourself like a sexual object.” In this sense, she felt that the discussion around modesty was resistant to the dominant cultural messages that women are to be objectified. While this may have been the intention for the other women who described this message, this was certainly not communicated.

Rachael Held Evans (2014), author of *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, writes about how Christian women are bombarded with very conflicting messages about how they should live within their bodies. On one hand, the dominant culture reinforces the message that a woman’s value is based on her sex appeal. Popular culture tells women that they should dress in a way to get men to look at them. Modesty culture, the other extreme, suggests that women need to dress a certain way to prevent men from looking at them. Both cultures are disempowering, Held Evans (2014) suggests, in that in both cases “the impetus is placed on the woman to accommodate her clothing or her body to the (varied and culturally relative) expectations of men” (p. 7). In these women’s stories, modesty was not discussed in a way that affirmed self-love, dignity and self-respect, rather it was seen as a means to which women could prevent others, namely men, from “lusting” after them.

Dual-responsibility. As described above, women were told that they were to dress a particular way in order to uphold the church's value of modesty. The rationale for this, it was framed, was to protect themselves and men from "lusting" over their bodies. As Mary expressed, "It was always just like, ultra-conservative because you're responsible for, you know, 'not making your brother stumble.'" In many of the women's stories, there was an underlying theme that women were not only responsible for their own sexuality, but that it was also their duty to be responsible for men's sexuality. When Kari shared about a friend who was dressing immodestly, for example, she sarcastically exclaimed, "Yah, like she was being irresponsible because if boys lusted she would be the one held responsible for it, not them.... Yah, because guys, *THEY CAN'T CONTROL THEMSELVES!* Women need to be helping them control it." Though this is how Kari felt about her friend dressing at the time of this experience, she now is able to critically reflect on how this attitude creates a culture in which women are dually-responsible for both their own and other's sexuality. This strips men from responsibility for their actions, and perpetuates the notion that men are not able to be accountable for their own sexual behaviours. While Kari can critically reflect on this now, during her dating relationship she had internalized this belief: "There was layers of wanting to protect him too, and trying to dress modestly—extra modestly, because I didn't want to make him stumble."

As the women described this dynamic of needing to protect men, it became clearer that there was an unspoken power imbalance in which women needed to protect themselves from being consumed or objectified. This dynamic, it seems, is the product of a deeply patriarchal culture that places women in the position of "passive object," while men hold the position of "active subject". Jennifer shared that she "detested" this dynamic to the point that when she was

younger she “wanted to be a guy” so she did not experience this. Jennifer described that covering her body was a way of resisting objectification:

I think [this is] related to also what we talked about was a large part of my shame was with guys and what I heard they would say about... my body...I felt like I need to cover this. Just like they can't take that away from me... I think I felt just ashamed of portraying my body in a way that other men would enjoy I guess.

In this context, Jennifer saw and experienced modesty seen as necessary to protect herself from other's gaze. This experience is mirrored in Kari's story when she identified this dynamic as not only within her faith community, but in the broader culture. She spoke about the tension of being a sexual woman when she felt like she needed to protect herself:

It's almost like it's scary to sexually exist as a woman in our culture. Versus being overly sexualized or being underly suppressed. And maybe that's a way of just surviving. Really managing, right? But then you take control to protect. But then you're controlling everything. Or you think you are, you're trying.

To Kari this dynamic is problematic, though, as she sees this is a very “overboundaried way to live,” and it strips away other “people's ability to be boundaried.” As discussed above, women's curves and bodies are framed in such a way that they are both objectified and problematic (resulting in sin). As we see in Kari's story, the extreme and conflicting cultural and religious messages about how a woman must be and dress can result in confusion about how to be in the world. As Mary underscored, these shaming and fragmenting messages create a double-bind that prevents some women from “being” in their bodies.

Sex is for men. Another, unfortunately, not so surprising message that the women encountered was that sex was not as important for women as it was for men. Kari, from a very

early age, shared that she heard the message that sex “was a more of a guy thing, and women have to be cautious and protective of it.” Likewise, Mary recalled hearing from her parents, who help mentor at their church’s pre-marital counselling workshops, that men consistently list sex as the most important aspect of marriage, whereas women would list 50 things before sex. Mary questioned this, stating, “I don’t think that’s a true representation of most of the people, or the women I know? So I don’t know where these answers are coming from?” Furthermore, Mary’s parents said that in response to the question “How many times a week do you think you will have sex?” the pre-marital workbook read “That most women would say 2 or 3, and most men will say 4 or 5.” The book continued: “If a man says 4 or 5 he really means 5, and if a woman says 2 or 3, she really means 2.” To Mary, this message reinforced that it is “not the way of a woman” to be interested in or care about sex, an idea she rejected entirely. This cultural narrative is incredibly limiting for both women and for men. If the expectation is, for example, men value and care about sex so much, then would it undermine his masculinity to not feel so interested at different times in their life? In contrast, according to this messaging, what would it say about a woman if she expressed her sexual needs? Jennifer shared that this message has persistently impacted the way that she views and experiences sexuality in her marriage, stating:

I remember that even in our first year of marriage of being like, and even still sometimes, I get anxious about, ok “how is he doing, do we need to have sex soon because like, how are you doing, do you need to release some tension?” Not even thinking about myself in that [at] all.

As a result of the messaging, Jennifer, as many women do, at times prioritized her partner’s sexual needs over her own.

This expectation that men were more interested or concerned about sex than women also manifested in ways that stressed that it was women's duty or obligation to participate in sexual activities, even when they were not "in the mood." Jennifer recalled reading a Christian book on sexual intimacy in marriage that was recommended to her by many people before she was married. In it, she recalled, "one chapter where he [the author] talked about how men just want to come up, touch you, and even if you're not expecting it, just be ok with it. And just be ok with—pleasur[ing] men for their needs, because they have needs." Furthermore, this book suggested that women need to have sex, "even if they don't really want it." This angered Jennifer as she felt like this advice "diminished" women's experience of sexuality. Similarly, Mary describes a disturbing story in which a woman within her faith community that she respected perpetuated this message in an extreme way:

I remember talking with someone, and I was 18. And she was a friend of mine, who was like my mom's age. And we were talking about something about sex, and she said something off the cuff, like not really a big deal, but she said something about... "Just wait until you have sex, and you don't want to, in your marriage." And I remember thinking, "Oh, that sounds terrible!"

Mary shared that this was framed in a way that this was factual, and a woman's responsibility in a marriage so, "you will [have sex] when you don't want to." This "never say no to your husband culture", so alive and well in some communities, comes dangerously close to perpetuating a culture of marital rape and abuse. By denying women's right to consent with all of themselves, women's bodies, again, can become objects to be consumed.

Messages about Sexual Behaviour

In this section, I will describe the various messages that the women heard in relation to their sexual behaviour.

Sex as bad. Interestingly, all of the women interviewed, with the exception of Mary, used the word “bad” to describe how the body and sexuality was talked about, in general. As Jennifer highlighted, “My only awareness of sex was that it’s dirty, and bad, and you shouldn’t be thinking of those things.” Again, this speaks to the dualistic perspective held in many religious communities that the spirit and the body are distinct entities, representing “good” and “evil.” As Lily put it, “the messaging around sexuality was that, all of it is bad--any sexuality, unless you’re married. Which I see in different forms now, in the evangelical church.” For these women, this message was internalized and experienced, which resulted in confusion and shame around their sexuality. Lily, for example, experienced herself as a “bad person” when she expressed her sexuality in ways that she felt were conflicting with the extreme “rules” in her faith community around sexual behaviour. Kari, similarly, expressed that she consistently understood her sexuality to be “evil.” She said that she thought, “It was out of season so therefore it was sinful. But in the right season it would be ok.” As some of the women voiced, one is left wondering, then, how sex can suddenly shift from being “bad” to “good” after a wedding contract is signed.

Black and white. A consistent theme throughout the women’s stories in terms of the messages that they received was around “shoulds” and “should nots” of sexual behaviour prior to marriage. Lily shared that in the commune she grew up in, there were extreme rules around sexuality (i.e. no touching before marriage) that “you were expected to follow.” To her, these rules reinforced the idea that “sexuality was bad” outside of marriage. As Lily described:

And it's very black or white. Like, somehow there's, we all know, this code. But I couldn't really find it in the Bible, what you can or can't do outside of marriage. But it was like, "but this is what it is." Both my commune and university as well seemed to have codes around what was ok that you should know and follow.

While it seemed to be unclear exactly what was in this "code," Mary similarly recalled conversations like this at the Christian high school she attended that reinforced the message that there are rules about what one can or cannot do sexually: "I think that kind of communication about it then makes kids think, ok then "how far is too far?" They then just encourage us to miss the point.... The point isn't how far is too far." Still, she remembers students asking questions like, "Oh well can we do this, or do this, or can he touch me here?" that spoke to their confusion about where exactly "the line" was. Similarly, Lily recalled hearing from the University she was attending that, "You can kiss and hold hands or whatever.... but you can't really experience passion or sexuality, you know, unless you're married. Or you shouldn't." She also spoke about how there was a general sense in her faith community that if "you broke the rules that means you can't be close to God." This black and white messaging does not promote critical thinking or sexual responsibility, rather, sexuality becomes about bending or breaking rules.

Condemnation. Some of the women described an experience in which was a different flavour of judgment or condemnation when it came to "sins" of a sexual matter. To these women, sexual sins seemed to be construed as "doubly bad." As Mary recalled this idea, "like if you're going to mess up, and you're going to have sex, that's the biggest mess up that you can mess up...it's not the end of the world. But we learn it is the end of the world." Likewise, Lily reflected on the message about if a couple did have sex before marriage that there was, "a sense of fatality with that...If you do, your marriage will be messed up. Like it's kind of

irrevocable. Like something is lost.” The inherent message was that in “sinning against the body,” one would permanently lose a part of their self and damage future relationships. The condemnation of sexuality before marriage was persistently manifested in judgment and shaming of others. For example, Mary shared about her experience at a private Christian high school she attended, remembering that judgment and fatality around “sexual sins” was the predominant message:

I think probably most from there would be that there is not a lot of grace when you mess up. Like, if you were to say get pregnant, you couldn’t continue going there [to the school]. Or if you decided that maybe you thought you were bisexual, you couldn’t keep going there. And I just don’t think that that’s like Jesus. And so, it’s just that there’s a whole lot of no grace for messing up in that area.

This dynamic creates a culture of fear and shame that, again, can result in a divorcing of self from sexuality. Furthermore, these skewed views strip sexuality from all meaning, reverence and sanctity. The demonstration in Jennifer’s youth group with the two pieces of paper (as described in her story) highlighted for Jennifer that you should not do “anything to have things taken away, or take away from someone else.” There was a sense, for Jennifer, that when you express your sexuality in a relationship prior to marriage, that a piece of you is lost forever. Lily, similarly, described a sense from her faith community that abstaining from sexuality, in general, meant that you were a good Christian; therefore, if one was engaging in any form of passion or sexuality they were labeled and seen as a “bad” Christian. This condemnation, and judgment, as the reader will see in the “experiences of sexual shame” section below, resulted in painful shaming experiences.

Grace. One of the messages that seemed to be unique to Lily's story was that there was grace for those who did not fit the mold in terms of what was seen as acceptable sexual behaviour in her faith community. When Lily spoke about her parents, she shared:

They weren't Christians and they just, they were living together, and they didn't think it was a big deal at the time. So I think that affected them. They didn't grow up in a Christian context, so I think they were pretty genuine about it and about people having different experiences. So then the messages I got when they weren't judging other people's sexual experiences, I think came from their life ... They knew what God had done in them. And they didn't despise their younger selves in any way. Which is neat.

It was clear that Lily's parents did not shame themselves for their past experiences, rather they embraced their journey as evidence of God's redemption in them. Because of this, they seemed to hold themselves with openness towards others and their decisions. This message was countercultural in Lily's context, as she grew up in a very conservative Christian commune that had very clear "rules" about how sexuality should be expressed. Lily describes how she saw this dynamic play out:

Like someone who got pregnant and wasn't married... and then they decided to get married and they were just very supportive of them. Affirming, like, "that's really cool that they're making that choice." They were never condemning about anything sexual. So I always found them a little bit countercultural. I would kind of be surprised at my parent's responses sometimes, versus the commune's official party line.

In the context that Lily's parents were in, it seemed that the messages they shared were ones of resistance and liberation. Unfortunately, this did come as a surprise to Lily, as grace around sexuality was not practiced in Lily's faith community. The message of openness and grace

seemed to be extended to Lily and her sisters. When Lily's sisters decided to have sex with their partners, for example, Lily's parents' response was consistent with the messaging. She shared that "There was no ostracizing them... It was like they could sleep in the same bed when they came to my parent's house. It was very much like their choice was the sense I got." It seems as though this gave Lily permission to question the "rules" at the commune, thereby giving her permission to make her own decisions about how she wanted to live out her sexuality.

The unanswered questions. As the reader can see, the women were bombarded with a number of (sometimes conflicting) messages about what their sexuality "should" and "should not be," particularly before marriage. None of the messages that the women spoke of, however, gave a lot of room for messages about how to be in one's body, how to embrace their whole selves, and how to experience their sexuality in healthy and liberating ways. This left many of the women wondering what to do with a God-given part of themselves. As Kari pointed out:

And really strong messages in that way, which I wouldn't say I necessarily, in my belief system are wrong. But it definitely left no space, once again, for what to do with one's sex drive. So it's like, "hmmm, we have sex drives, but we're not supposed to have them until when we get married, so where does it go in the mean time [laughs] is the big question."

In a cultural landscape that sells and cheapens sex, making people mere objects rather than beings, I think we (as in people in faith-communities) are confused about how to *be*, sexually. It became very clear in the data that a theme of confusion emerged. As Meg expressed: "But they [the church leaders] never really talked about having, like they never said what having a healthy sexuality could look like before you're married. Or that it was ok to think about it." She went on to say, "it was still something that I was really curious about. But I didn't know what to do

with that curiosity.” Mary, similarly, was not quite sure about how to know herself and her sexuality, in light of the harmful messages that she was exposed to. She shared, “But being told that most women aren’t [sexual], that you’ll have to [have sex] when you don’t want to. These things were just kind of confusing. Obviously having no experience with that I [was] just going based on what I know, how I know myself. [These messages] made me second guess how I know myself.” Again, the messaging created confusion about how to be a woman in the world, which can, in a sense, result in a disconnect or fragmentation of self.

For the women, the narrow focus on regulating sexuality neglected to affirm that sexuality is a natural and beautiful aspect of being human. As Jennifer stated, “I never really got the message that this [sexuality] was part of who we are as human beings, that you’re going to have those desires. It was like just shove those desires until you get married.” But again, one wonders how we can “shove” our desires for years upon years, until we feel we have permission to experience them (typically in the context of a marriage), and then come to fully embrace (or at minimum, accept) these desires? Despite the confusing and conflicting messages, prior to getting married, Kari expressed feeling quite optimistic and idealistic about what her sexuality might look like:

And then, that it would be ok one day, when I found prince charming and got married, and it would all be easy and fine and sexuality could be expressed then. But until that point it had to be shut down and suppressed, and really managed.

While this was Kari’s hope, as we saw in her story, this was not the case in the first years of marriage. The messages that we receive about our sexuality are not benign. They can shape the way we perceive and experience ourselves in marked and profound ways. While there seemed to be glimmers of light and hope in the messages that the women heard about their sexuality within

the context of their religion, those messages were, in a sense, countercultural. As Lily so eloquently stated in reference to her faith community, “But the official party line wasn’t about promoting healthy sex in any way, I would say.” Instead, the women’s stories would suggest, these messages resulted in the deeply painful and confusing experience of sexual shame.

Experiences of Sexual Shame

The women in this study identified that the messages that they were exposed to in their homes and churches (described above) were internalized and became a source of shame. As Meg stated, “I think coming from a place where, like growing up in the church and stuff, it wasn’t really talked about, right? And it was kind of associated with being bad. A little bit, or being more negative, or a source of shame.” Similarly, Kari shared “I feel like religion, unfortunately for me, has served to establish a more shaming mentality around sexuality. Because it’s waiting, and not expressing, and not lusting, not doing anything with your sex drive until you get married.” In this section, I will highlight the way in which these women described their experiences of sexual shame, outlining the themes that emerged. First, I will highlight how the women experienced sexual shame in their bodies. Next, I will talk about how the women experienced themselves, in light of their shame. Finally, I will outline how the women’s sexual shame manifested in their relationships with their husbands, with others, and with God.

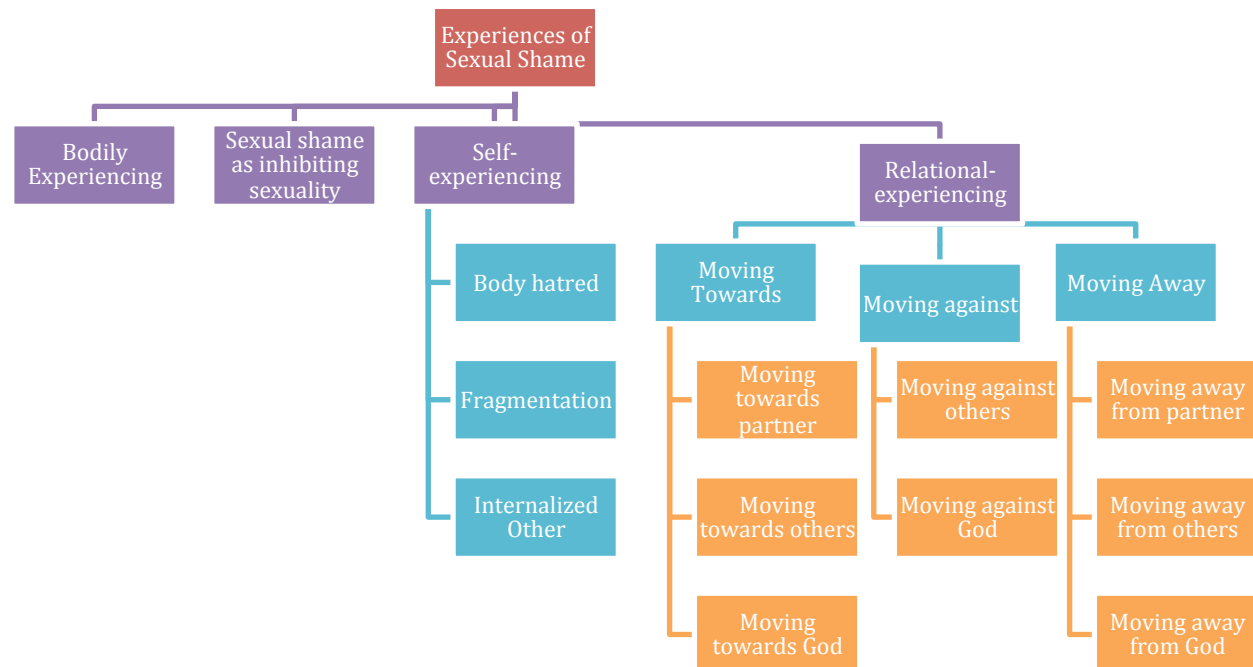


Figure 2. Themes of Experiences of Sexual Shame

Bodily experiencing. Merleau-Ponty (1962) wrote, “The body is the vehicle of being in the world (p 82).” Both an object for others and ourselves, and a lived reality, the body helps us understand the world around us (Merleau-Ponty, 2006). In constant dialogue with the world, the body is the foundation from which we can self-reflect and develop our identity; it shapes the way that we interact with others and our external reality (Finlay, 2006; Zeiler, 2013). Herman (2006) compares the bodily shame response to fear, as both are experiences that elicit intense physiological responses, that can “overwhelm the higher cortical functions (p. 5).” The physical symptoms of shame are universally recognized, and typically consist of gaze aversion, bowing of head, hunching shoulders, fidgeting, blushing, and covering one’s face (Herman, 2006). When I asked the women about what their experience of sexual shame were like, with relative ease, they were able to designate how shame felt in their bodies. Kari, for example, insightfully described her embodied experience of shame:

Well physically it's usually a weight on my chest, and an impulse to pull in and to hide. Like the face often wants to go down, I don't want to make eye contact...I would really want to kind of collapse into myself. Externally or emotionally that shame would be more withdrawal responses to things, like close down emotionally as well...Yah, I retreat to numbness.

As the reader can see, Kari was both able to identify her bodily response, and how she experiences that response emotionally. Similarly, when asked about what shame felt like her, Lily effortlessly identified her physical response:

I would say nausea, in the pit of your stomach kind of feeling. Like this "ughh" like your skin being, like your skin's uncomfortable. And just like disgust at yourself. Yah, I think that's just, like, ugh, trying to remove from it. Yah, you could feel your heart pounding sometimes.... I can feel myself cringing.

By delineating her own experiencing of shame, Lily could touch upon or perceive the sensations in the here-and-now. When Jennifer experienced shame, she noted that she felt both "heavy and empty," as if there was weight on her chest, but emptiness in her core. Like Jennifer, Mary too felt that "Shame feels heavy and impossible. And just really dark." She differentiated this experience from guilt, which she shared, "feels like remorse or regret of something. But none of the weight of shame." Within their bodies the women were able to make meaning or sense out of their experiences of shame; this beautiful awareness aided them, as the reader will see, in their healing journey.

Sexual shame as inhibiting sexuality. For all of these women, shame seemed to have a marked impact on the way the way in which they experienced their sexual bodies. For example,

after an incident in which a friend criticized and shamed Kari's sexuality, she noticed that the way in which she experienced and saw her sexuality and her relationship with Owen shifted:

I think my sex drive, [which] was starting to flow a little bit, was really shamed and suppressed, and then it turned a lot off with Owen as well. Before you know, you're making out or whatever, and I was connected in those moments, and then after that it really started to—I was disconnecting from it more and more, and viewing it more as like actions versus an experience in those times that I was close to Owen.

When experiencing and holding onto intense sexual shame, Kari's expression of her sexuality became disembodied.

Interestingly, most of the women described a dynamic in which they felt disconnected from sexual desire or arousal after they were married to their partners. Jennifer saw, in her relationship with her husband, that some of the sexual activities she participated in prior to marriage had "lost their essence." Experiencing intense shame about what she had done sexually before her marriage, she wondered whether these feelings or behaviours impacted her sexual functioning, noticing that she was "not as turned on" as before. Schermer Sellers (2012) highlighted an experience for young Christians in which their natural sexual desire is shamed and criticized, and therefore becomes disconnected. She writes:

Inside this dark vault, they persecute themselves with the belief that these wants and desires are evidence of their depravity. The tragedy for many of these earnest young Christians is learning this assault on desire did not lift when they got married. Many, both men and women, develop significant sexual dysfunction and chronic low desire issues persisting well into their marriages. (p. 220)

Some of the women's experiences were consistent with Schermer Seller's (2012) statement. Kari, for example, was left wondering how she became so disinterested and even "grossed out" about sex after she got married. This diminished arousal, then, can potentially become a source of shame for some women. When reflecting on how lack of arousal was a source of shame for her, Meg said:

Especially since before we got married I had felt so sexual, right? And now it was like, "ugh, what's happening, I just feel like I just don't even care." But I did care...It was hard to not feel aroused in that way. And then I felt really guilty about that, because I would imagine it wouldn't be as nice for my husband if I didn't really feel like it, or if I overanalyzed things so much that I kind of talked myself out of it.

It appears that Meg's sexual shame resulted in low sexual desire; this absence of sexual desire, then, became a source of shame for her. Similarly, Meg described other experiences in which she felt shame about not reaching orgasm via vaginal sex. Meg shared that she was left wondering if there was something wrong with her body, again, further perpetuating her shame. Given the unrealistic and conflicting messages that women are bombarded with in their churches and in the sociocultural context, it is not surprising that the women lost touch with their desire and/or arousal.

Self-Experiencing

Body-shame. Most of the women interviewed described a dynamic in which they disliked or even hated their bodies. When Jennifer, for example, reflected on how she experienced her body and her sexuality as a young adult, she shared, "I detested my body. I hated it. For how it looked and appeared..." She described a dynamic in which she "seriously

wanted to be a guy,” because of the way that women’s bodies were being portrayed, and the shame she experienced about her body. As she stated:

I felt a lot of shame about my body. Because I think that I was, I developed pretty late, but at the same time I was very much disgusted with my change in my body. And I think my—I didn’t know anything because I didn’t go to sex ed[ucation] classes, that my mom knew about. And so the changes that were happening, I felt almost ashamed of having breasts and what that means. I felt like I was just becoming this sexual being and that was bad. And so, I think it developed into a lot of other things of me trying to control my body and hating my body.

Jennifer was repulsed by her femininity and curves, in many ways, because of the internalized message that her sexuality was somehow immoral or “bad.” Sadly, it is likely that there are many adolescents, like Jennifer, who feel deeply confused, ashamed and alone when confronted with puberty.

For three of these women, shame and the resulting attempts to control their bodies were manifested in disordered eating. Kari explains this by saying:

I was severely anorexic throughout my teenager years, so I guess that is really, on one level it’s an effort to keep my body childish. To eliminate breasts and curves and thighs, and anything... especially being tall, it was like wanting to stay small. And being skinny is kind of your way of doing it. Yah, so it’s probably another way of... you know, you bury it down and then you take it out against your body without conscious thought.

For some of these women, the body became the target and holding place of their shame. Jennifer, too, shared that she has come to realize that the shame and insecurities that she experienced about herself (as a whole person) were displaced onto her body. While the women

seemed to experience their bodies as a separate entity, in reality when hating one's body, one hates the whole self.

Fragmentation. Interestingly, all but one of the women used the words “whole,” or “integrated,” to describe themselves now. Upon reflecting about what their experience of sexual shame was like, however, Kari, Jennifer and Meg, described feeling “less whole” before they were able to embrace their sexuality. For example, Meg shared she felt less whole, in her words, because, “I knew that there was this part of me that I couldn't do anything with. And so it's just kind of lying dormant in yourself. And it's just strange.” Later, Meg reflected on when she started dating her husband, this shifted for her. She said, “I didn't have to put up this dam on my sexuality. I mean, there was still a little one, because we still had boundaries, but it wasn't like it was completely locked away or barricaded.” Similarly, Mary talked about not fully knowing her sexuality or her body before she was married. She describes her sexuality, prior to marriage, using the words “secretive” and “mysterious.”

All of the women, to a greater or lesser degree, talked about the need to separate or compartmentalize parts of themselves from their whole self in response to their sexuality or their shame. For example, a number of the women mentioned that they would “push down,” “bury,” or “put away” any sexual thoughts that they had when they were adolescent. As Kari described, “But until that point [marriage] it had to be shut down and suppressed, and really managed. That was my understanding of it—what to do with it.” Kari explained a process of “dissociating” and compartmentalizing herself, including engaging in a fantasy world, to help manage her sexual thoughts or impulses. Similarly, Lily spoke about how, when she was engaging in sexual behaviours that she felt ashamed of, she would push her feelings aside in the moment. The following morning, however, she would experience the shame. Lily, therefore, could not fully

celebrate her sexuality or her experience, because it had to be separate. Lily likened this to her struggle with binge eating when she said:

Shame, no eating, but then, you eat, eat, eat, and then the next day it was like, 'I'm gonna starve all day and I'm gonna be good.' Right? So I think I did that with physical [sexual] stuff, too.

At this point in time, when Lily was engaging in sexual behaviours, it was "all or nothing" in that either there was complete restraint or abandon, both in response to the shame. While separation and fragmentation can be protective when we are experiencing intense shame, when we are able to integrate, thereby experiencing our sexuality with our whole self, we come into closer contact with what it means to be human.

Internalized other. Lewis (1987) describes shame as "one's own vicarious experience of the other's scorn" (p. 249). Shame is an inherently relational experience in which we imagine the "self-in-the-eyes-of-the-other" (Lewis, 1987, p. 249). The women's recounting of their shameful thoughts, feelings and experiences illuminate the experience of the internalized other. Lily, for example, described her sexual shame as an "inner supervision," in which she was comparing herself and her actions to the internalized messages she had received. This "supervision" and self-judgment is consistent with the other women's experiences, particularly as emerging adults. For example, because the rules at Lily's commune included no physical touch before marriage, Lily felt like a "bad girl" because she had held her boyfriend's hand. Similarly, Meg, Jennifer and Kari all spoke about feeling deeply ashamed when they even thought about sex as an adolescent. This inner supervision can be unrelenting and painful; Mary described this dynamic as "beating a dead horse," while Lily spoke about "self-flagellation." This internal supervision extended to how some of the women experienced their sexual

bodies. Meg described a number of experiences in which she felt tremendous shame because she felt like her body “wasn’t doing what it was supposed to” in terms of initial sexual intercourse and achieving orgasm.

All but one of the women used words like “terrible,” “horrible,” “bad,” “whorish,” to describe themselves when they thought their actions were inconsistent with the messaging that they had heard. For example, if Jennifer even thought about sex, she recalled that she would “feel incredibly disgusted with myself. ..that I was a horrible Christian and a horrible person to think about these things... I would be super embarrassed and ashamed.” Here, shame is internalized as Jennifer’s spiritual status, as well as her status as a person. This experience not only drove her away from God, but also from other people. For Kari, this fear and shame around sexuality felt quite threatening, even as a child. She said that she felt like if her parents overheard her talking about sex as a child, then: “I’ll be dirty, I’ll be rejected in some way, I won’t be close to the pack. I won’t be close to them if they find out that I know this bad stuff.” While Kari recognizes now that this may not have occurred, at the time the experience of fear and rejection was very real.

Many of the women described a familiar dynamic in which their cultural and religious expectations were in an inherent conflict, which left them in this impossible double bind. Women are expected to be both a sexual object for men to consume and a pure, virginal girl. This leaves young, Christian women confused about how to be in the world. As Kari strikingly describes:

It’s been a wheel that I’ve been trying to get off of, it’s so much pressure to be beautiful and sexy and have sex appeal is what is thrown at us culturally, as women. So that’s one part, me always feeling shame over not being beautiful enough, not being sexy

enough. You know, I can't reach that unattainable standard that's been set up. And then, the flip side, with like spirituality then, if a boy, if I do look good, and if a boy were to lust after me, Boom! I'm in shame mode again. But it's a different kind of shame so now it's not shame about not being attractive enough, now it's shame that somebody was attracted to me. So it's this weird cycle of attraction. Of wanting to be beautiful, but then feeling terrified and ashamed that someone will find you beautiful.

Here Kari describes how she on one hand was not "enough" in terms of the unattainable standards of beauty, and how on the other hand, she was "too much" according to the internalized messages about purity and womanhood in church culture. As the reader can see, the women all experienced tremendous pressure to monitor or "supervise" themselves to see if they lined up all of the expectations that were held. Unfortunately, as with any unrealistic/impossible expectation, we all fall short.

Relational Experiencing of Sexual Shame

As described in the literature review, Hartling, Rosen, Walker and Jordan (2000) outlined a relational understanding of shame and delineated three disconnection strategies humans use when they are experiencing shame. To recall, these strategies include moving away (withdrawing, hiding, silencing and keeping secrets), moving towards (attempting to earn connection, people-pleasing and appeasing), or moving against (powering over others, shaming, aggression). These strategies are typically employed under the assumption that if we reveal part(s) of ourselves to another person, they will reject us, and this will cause disconnection. Therefore, these strategies are failing attempts to maintain connection. Again, though these are deeply protective responses that we all engage in at different times, they all result in disconnection and/or isolation. In all of the women's stories, they speak about their personal

responses to sexual shame in relation to their partners, other people (friends, family, etc.) and to God.

Moving Towards

As mentioned above, one of the relational responses to shame is moving towards people with compliance, people-pleasing, and, at times, self-effacement in an attempt to feel liked, needed or wanted (DeYoung, 2015). In this section, I will outline the women's experiences of moving towards their partners, others and with God.

Moving towards partner. All but one of the women spoke about sacrificing both their authenticity and their own needs in an attempt to please their partners. Lily spoke about how this would sometimes take place between her and the man she was dating, "I did something to try to make a guy happy, because I want to be cool like that, but I don't feel good about it after.... I like to make them happy. I love people." For Lily, this dynamic carried on into her marriage until her husband was able to reassure her that there was "never any negative pressure of letting him down" sexually. Similarly, Jennifer spoke about how, towards the beginning of her marriage, she was constantly anxious about her partner's sexual satisfaction, and overlooked herself and her own desires. In her words, "I had almost that mindset that I needed to pleasure him, and I wasn't thinking about my own self." Moreover, Mary described a dynamic in which both her and Craig were feeling an incredible amount of shame and, while intimate, they would constantly be asking each other, "Are you ok? Are you ok?... Are you ok? Is it ok? Are you ok? Ok, Ok?" Because of their shame, Mary described a tension or uneasiness between them that was "very dividing." While their constant checking-in speaks to their love and care for each other, because of their shame in those moments they were unable to voice what was actually happening for themselves. Instead, they would try to please by being "ok" for each other; in

doing so, however, each of them were silenced. While all of these stories can be seen as an attempt to maintain the relationship, when we are not being genuine, it is impossible to truly connect with one another.

Moving towards others. Some of the women spoke about using the “moving towards” strategies with their friends and family when they were experiencing shame around their sexuality. Kari, for example, spoke to this dynamic when she shared about how her best friend criticized and shamed her for dressing proactively in an attempt to seduce her friend’s fiancé. She soon after said to her friend “You’re right, I do have something off and dirty. And I shouldn’t have worn that shirt...” in an attempt to placate her friend and restore their relationship. While the shame convinced Kari that she was “at fault” in this interaction, Kari spoke about being very clear that she did not try to “seduce” him, she owned this shame so that she could keep her best friend. Mary, likewise, describes the experience of “moving toward” her friend, Jessica, after expressing her discomfort with kissing her. Jessica, she shared, would “get upset” and her hurt would threaten the relationship, so Mary would try to appease her by saying, “Oh yah, no it’s fine, oh yah, you’re right, it’s fine, it’s fine, it’s fine, it’s fine.” Again, in saying this, clearly Mary was not fine. As the reader can see, this dynamic with Jessica mirrors the interaction that Mary and Craig had experienced towards the beginning of their marriage. Both Kari and Mary’s stories illuminate the tremendous need that humans have to feel close and connected with others; they were both trying to fit in with their loved ones. These women’s experiences illuminate Gilligan’s (1982) formulation of “loss of voice,” in which women sometimes silence themselves for preservation of relationship. While the women were attempting to fit in, they were unable to be who they truly were in moments that they were moving towards others.

Moving toward God. Interestingly, in most of the women's stories, the way in which they related to others when they experienced shame paralleled how they responded to God. Some of the women described a dynamic in which they felt that they had sinned sexually; they would then experience intense shame, and would try to "repent" to God. For example, Kari said, "If sexual thoughts came up I'd be stuck in this shame cycle. And over and over, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry God, can you forgive me? God, it's happening, I'm so sorry! Can you forgive me?!" And just constantly repenting for any kind of sexual thought." Kari shared that this would even be her response if she felt attracted to another person, which she knows now is a very natural human experience. Lily spoke of a similar experience in which she would run to God to repent after behaving sexually in a way that she thought of as sinful. She recalls: "I felt ridiculous often in my early 20's. How much I was going back and forth [between "sinning" and repenting]. And I knew the infinite capacities of God's grace, but I felt so annoyed at myself." While Lily had already internalized at this point that God cleanses her, she found that when feeling shame she continued to respond to God in the same way. This dynamic that Kari and Lily both describe illuminates their heart to connect with God; however, their shame may have been a barrier for them to receive the freedom of grace they knew that God could provide.

Moving Against

As mentioned above, one of the relational responses to shame is when an individual "moves against" another by over-powering or shaming them. In this section, I will outline how the women employed this strategy in relation to others and how they experienced this with God.

Moving against others. While there were no examples of "moving against" their partners in the women's stories, there were numerous occasions in which the women shared about times that they had judged or criticized others. Both Mary and Kari spoke about having

very little “space for grace” as an adolescent when it came to other people’s expressions of sexuality. Mary recalled at her private school, the message was that you can not “screw up” sexually, which, for her, instilled a lot of self-righteousness. In a sense, her attitude at the time mirrored the one of her school culture. She recalled thinking, “‘I wouldn’t do that. Like, how could you be so stupid, why would you do that?’ Instead of grace and love, right? And so I think that [shaming culture] that just gave space for that in me.” Analogously, Kari spoke about her internal response to a girl in her church that was pregnant prior to marriage. In her words, “My mindset at the time when that happened was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I can’t believe that would happen, why would she do that?!’... I didn’t have much understanding in it. I didn’t have much space for grace either.” When speaking about her response to instances like this, Kari reflected:

I think I was close-minded about the topic for a long time. Which probably speaks to how deep the shame was. It wasn’t like a, “Hey, let’s have some critical thinking and challenge what I’ve grown up with, because maybe it’s not accurate.” It was like a, “Oh my gosh, these people are sinning, this isn’t good.”

Here, we can see that the messages and experiences we are exposed to in relation to sexuality can become entrenched in the way that we see others and ourselves. Having journeyed and healed in this area, the women now reflect an openness, love and compassion for other’s sexual experiences, rather than the judgment described above.

Most of the women also spoke about many painful instances in which people had judged or shamed them. For example, Lily spoke about “a few experiences of judgmental conversations with people” about decisions she had made in her dating relationship with Thomas. In response to this, she remembered, “for sure the shame coming up. That was really challenging to work through, and needing to talk with him [Thomas], pray about it, talk to friends, process it, and let

go of even being angry at them.” Instead of holding on to their shame, however, as we can see, Lily was very resilient and found a way to move through it. Similarly, Meg recalled feeling very hurt and isolated after she was judged for making jokes of a sexual nature. One person in particular, she recalls had judged her, putting her in an inaccurate box. Meg spoke about how she believed that these people in particular had been quite sheltered, and seemed to experience considerable sexual shame. Brown (2012a) speaks about how we tend to judge people in areas of life that we are vulnerable to shame in; this is illuminated in how Meg perceived the individuals who had shamed her.

According to DeYoung (2015), “moving against people feels powerful, but we have to keep winning to stay superior and invulnerable” (p. 61). DeYoung suggests that when we shame other people, we feel a need to be perfect, in order to avoid being shamed. This can be seen in the stories that Kari shared about her sister’s shaming her about sexuality. As Kari described, “I think they [my sisters] have a lot of shame around sexuality, too.” Later, she goes on to say, “I think I owned the shame in those conversations [with my sisters]. As the youngest I absorbed it, and held it, and I thought it was me. But it was them communicating their confusion to their younger sibling.” Kari’s sisters, she said, were able to assert their power over her to diffuse their own shame. While this strategy reflects, again, a protective attempt to manage one’s experiencing of shame, it is always at the expense of another.

God as moving against. While the women did not speak about personally shaming or moving against God, a couple of the women shared stories about experiencing God as shaming or judgmental. Others described people who they knew had rejected God because of their experiences of judgment and religion in the church. Jennifer, for example, shared about fearing that God was going to “be ashamed” of her because, in her words, “I am allowing myself to go to

these sinful places. Sinful, flesh desires.” Here, we can see that the way in which she was judging herself for her sexual thoughts was the way in which she experienced God.

When reflecting on women who have a low sex drive in the early years of marriage, Lily noticed that her Christian friends seemed to experience this more often. Lily spoke about her curiosity around this, and wondered if it was because of the way the church speaks to youth about sex. Because of this, she said, “I think that’s why we have people who totally reject any idea of God being involved in your sexuality... like. One of my sisters... wouldn’t really call herself a Christian, but she feels like spirituality cannot be connected to it [her sexuality] because it’s all judgment and religion.” While this was not part of Lily’s personal journey, she could see that people who have been shamed by messages they were exposed to in the church sometimes rejected God or their faith entirely.

Moving Away

In the women’s stories, the “moving away” relational approach to coping with shame was, by far, the most frequently referenced strategy. In this section, I will highlight how the women employed this strategy in relation to their partners, to others, and with God.

Moving away from partners. Each of the women spoke about withdrawing from their partners when they were experiencing sexual shame. The women described this experience by using words or phrases like “isolating,” “withdrawal,” “disconnect,” “shut down,” or “putting a wall up.” Jennifer, for example, described her pattern of withdrawal as a fear of being completely seen: “if someone knew me, if they actually knew who I was and actually saw me completely vulnerable and naked, then they would hate me.” This fear may have created an emotional and sometimes spiritual and physical distance in their relationships.

In a poignant example of the “moving away” response to shame, Kari spoke about a moment that her husband was injured during a sexual encounter, which for her was “such a shaming experience.” In Kari’s words:

And I was mortified, I totally went into collapse. I was crying, I closed off. I had no language, I’m in another world kind of thing. So I would say that was a strong experience of sexual shame. And then I think owning the responsibility of the injury.

In that moment, the experience of shame was so painful that Kari noticed that she became disconnected from herself, her husband and from reality.

Like Mary stated, “shame is...really hard to talk about,” as it is very painful to experience, so many of the women shared about withdrawal as a form of “numbing” to help cope with their pain. Kari spoke to this dynamic quite articulately: “Externally or emotionally that shame would be more withdrawal responses to things, like to close down emotionally as well...yah, I retreat to like numbness...” While this numbing served to protect Kari and the other woman, it can also create a disconnect between the women and their partners. During sexual intimacy, Meg, for instance, found that she would become less present or in the moment when she was grappling with expectations around orgasm and arousal. When we are not present with ourselves, however, it is very difficult to connect with another. Similarly, Jennifer spoke about when she experiences shame, her own internal disconnection creates a barrier to connecting with her husband:

I think in those moments I realize kind of how much I am doing to myself, because also hurting him in a sense, that I’m causing more of a disconnection by not being connected to myself, he can’t connect to me. So yah, I think those times when I’m like, I just hate my body.... it’s myself hating who I am in those moments. Like, I’m feeling

inadequate...so I just hate my body. In a sense I am not ok with me, and so I can't show that to him. And so it's also disconnecting from him.

Interestingly, many of the women spoke about how shame not only served as an emotional distance, but that it often created a physical distance between them and their husbands. For example, Meg spoke about normally being a "cuddle fiend," but when she was feeling sexual shame she would want to distance herself physically. Likewise, Kari shared about when she felt shame about her body she would think, "Oh my gosh, I'm wearing an oversize football t-shirt to bed, please don't try and snuggle with me." In the women's stories, they each talked about ways in which they were able to "reconnect" with their partners after they had experienced sexual shame. This will be described in "the road to healing" section.

Moving away from others. The women not only described moments of disconnection from their partners, they also spoke about moving away from friends or family, while experiencing shame. For example, when Meg was feeling embarrassed while her mother was speaking about sex at a youth group event she recalled: "Putting my hand to my face, and I'm just like, "Oh my gosh, I want to leave the room." Similarly Meg recalled, when being labeled as "sex-obsessed" in undergraduate studies, she would shut down around those who were judging her. Kari spoke about silencing herself around issues related to her changing body and her sexuality in her family system because of the shame and fear she was experiencing. While this moving away approach kept many of the women feeling safer in relationships (by avoiding judgment or pain), as both Jennifer and Kari described, it also can result in feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Moving away from God. All but one of the women spoke about how, when experiencing shame, they found themselves moving away from God. Mary beautifully described

this dynamic when she said, “We think that when we do things wrong we build dividers, and barriers, and brick walls between us and Jesus.” This is consistent with Jennifer’s experience as an adolescent when she found herself: “Disconnecting from myself, and from others, and from my parents, and from God. Because of this sense of I am bad, and I shouldn’t be doing this.” This pattern carried on as a young adult, when she was dating her now husband:

But anything else that was sexually intimate was like, “oh this is bad.” And I do remember in dating like kissing and making out, I was just like every time feeling incredibly ashamed and intense, “oh my gosh, I am awful, I allowed myself to go to this place and to feel things that I shouldn’t be feeling. And this is not ok.” I think that really took a toll on my spirituality at the time... I distanced myself from God because I felt really ashamed of just even making out and doing things that I felt, “ok, this is not ok.”

Jennifer’s “internal supervision” impacted the way that she experienced and responded to God. Lily very clearly voiced, how, as an adolescent, she responded to God quite similarly. In her words, “I was lining it [sexual engagement] up with Christian values too. Like if I was close to God then I wouldn’t be doing those things. Then I would have to pull away from God if I was engaging in anything physical.” To her, this response was about, “Oh, you broke the rules and that means you can’t be close to God, or you won’t have a healthy life.” Though she noticed that this was her experience, she also recognized that this was not grounded in how she cognitively knew God would respond to her. Lily spoke about being frustrated with her cycle of hiding from God, as she knew that “it was God that was cleansing” her. That being said, it is likely that Lily was critical of, and judging herself, and perhaps feared (despite her understanding of God) that God might judge her in the same way. As the reader can see, when experiencing shame the women creatively engaged in disconnecting strategies in attempts to keep themselves safe in

relation to others. As the women ventured forward on their healing journeys, however, they sought and used more connected strategies to move through their shame.

The Road to Healing

There is no place so awake and alive as the edge of becoming. But more than that, birthing the kind of woman who can authentically say, 'My soul is my own,' and then embody it in her life, her spirituality, and her community is worth the risk and hardship.

Sue Monk Kidd, 2002, p 55

All of the women described key strategies, relationships and experiences that enabled them to grow and move through their sexual shame while maintaining authenticity in their relationships. The women reflected on their own internal growth, including learning about their bodies, mindfully attuning to themselves, participating in personal counselling, educating themselves about sex and sexuality, and critically examining the messages they had received about sexuality. They also spoke about the importance of their relationship with their husbands to aid in the process of healing. The women shared about how open communication, love, mutual empathy, and commitment in these relationships helped them feel safe and free to experience their sexuality in a different way. Moreover, the women shared about how engagement with community, namely other women, played a significant role in their healing journey. Finally, spirituality and the women's relationship with God emerged as a transformative factor in their lives.

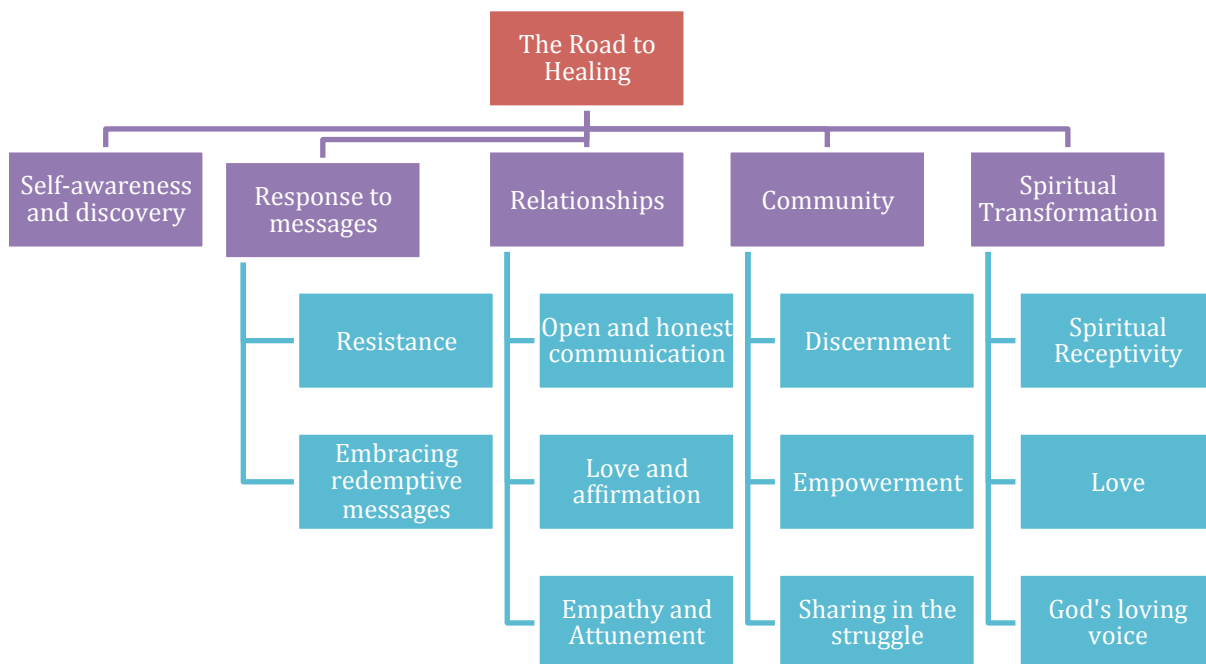


Figure 3. Themes of The Road to Healing

Self-awareness and discovery. All of the women spoke about their internal work that facilitated greater self-awareness and attunement to their sexuality. As they were able to discover, name and understand their experiences, they were able to find healing in the area of sexuality and sexual shame. Lily, for example, spoke about how her awareness precipitated a significant shift for her. She voiced, “I think that I had to reach a pretty strong place of dissatisfaction with the shame, and with even recognizing an awareness of what was happening.” In response to this dissatisfaction, Lily spent a significant amount of time reflecting on her own experiences. She said, “And [I] would pray about it a lot, and cry about it, and journal about it, and try to think about different strategies” to approach her sexuality. Like Lily, Kari beautifully described the tremendous amount of growth and healing she has found through self-discovery and increased self-awareness. As Kari voiced:

[I have been] trying to gain as much awareness that part[s] of me hold these beliefs, and part[s] of me holds those [different] beliefs. And...at different times I am going to be

activated in different components of myself. And so [I am] trying to work on the inner dialogue between it. But I think I've been able to hold out that as real and as demanding as the negative thoughts about sexuality are, that there is another part of me that actually is healthier in this area and just trusting that she exists even though she doesn't feel as close by a lot of the time.

As the reader can see, with great compassion towards herself, Kari is able to recognize the parts of her that are hurting, and the parts of her that are more embodied. Kari spoke about the meaning of grieving and "being able to be connected to loss, and anxieties, and sexual impulse." When she was able to do this, she stated, "It all starts thawing out and when the structure isn't binding it." Being able to recognize her struggle, and also her strength, enabled her to open herself up to deeper healing. This gave her "grace to be up and down, and all over the place." Similarly, while Lily found much healing and redemption in her singleness, her healing journey continued into her marriage. She recalled that as a married woman that she has asked herself questions like "If I want this thing sexually...[I would ask] is that because it's connected to shame in any way?" She shared she did this, "because you just don't always know if there is anything left over—or I don't, if there's anything left over in my psyche from old stuff." Both Kari and Lily's experience speak to the ongoing nature of bringing past wounds into the light, highlighting the ongoing process of resilience.

Meg keenly understood that sometimes people can go through their lives without acknowledging that they are sexual beings, because "we are not even allowed to." For her, making the shift to recognizing and embracing her sexuality was so freeing. To do this, she recalls, "it took a lot of exploration of myself, and of my faith, and who... my identity is as a woman and a sexual being." Meg has also found that being very mindful when she is having sex

has helped her relax, enjoy herself and stay more connected with her husband. Similarly being present and mindful of herself has been very healing for Kari; she spoke about the value of “sit[ting] with some of the hard emotions coming up, and...going through it instead of continuing to push it down.” Both Meg and Kari are speaking to the importance of being present and embracing their whole selves, including their body and their emotions. By doing so, both have been able to walk towards greater wholeness and integration.

All of the women in this study spoke about the importance of learning about their bodies in relation to their healing journey, opening up doors to experiencing their full, embodied sexuality. While she was dating her husband, for example, Meg found that by exploring her body, she noticed her sexuality became more open. In recollecting on this experience, Meg said: “And doing some experimenting with myself and trying to figure out how my body responds to something like that felt very natural. And I didn’t really have a ton of shame about it.” Similarly, Mary spoke about how important it was for her to learn about her body “and what does what and how” in the context of her marriage. Kari found that exposing herself to herself by “looking in the mirror at herself” before or after showering, thereby “facing the shame of [her] nudity.” In addition, Kari said, “Touching my body in non-sexual ways and being mindful of what it was like to be touched” was helpful. She recalled that at first she was resistant to this, but found that by exposing herself to her body, she was able to “face the discomfort and connect” with herself.

Not only did the women actively work to know themselves on a deeper level, all but one of them spoke to the importance of educating themselves about sex and sexuality in general. Four of the women mentioned specific books about spirituality and sexuality that they found to be meaningful and helpful. As Kari beautifully stated:

With no healthy exposure to sexuality, the filing cabinet in my brain that is suppose to be full of 'sexual knowledge' was pretty much empty... minus a few negative documents stored there. I had to fill it, so I read books, looked up youtube video's explaining stages of puberty, and educated myself on the many aspects of sexuality.

By intentionally turning their attention towards sexuality the women were better able to embrace their own sexual experiences with more awareness and understanding.

Response to Messages

Resistance. All of the women in this study spoke about the importance of critical thinking about the messages about sexuality that they had heard. For these women, part of their journey was in the wrestling and challenging their old scripts by questioning the framework of sexuality they previously held or heard. As Lily shared, early on in her healing journey, she was “trying to figure out what to reject and what to keep” in terms of the messages, in an intelligent and very sophisticated way. Lily spoke about seeing her parents model critical thinking (when they were questioning the commune’s extreme rules), which gave her permission to question the messages quite early on. The other women, however, seemed to begin questioning as young adults. For example, both Kari and Meg spoke about their wrestling with the idea of masturbating, while Jennifer spoke about rejecting gendered scripts that say that women’s bodies are for men’s consumption. As Kari wisely advised:

I think [I would] really encourage women to be aware that sometimes we are stuck in our old belief systems, and that it is a journey we can’t just automatically replace old beliefs with new ones, even though we wish we could. That you’ll have to walk it out and be tough, and it’s a lot of mindfulness and being able to notice what thoughts are present and how to challenge them, and encourage your new ways of thinking. So that’s a thought

level. And revelation I think will say you'll have to keep walking the journey and it'll come. On a deeper level.

Some of the women talked about this being an ongoing journey in which they will notice that the old beliefs are coming up for them, and taking time to reflect on their current beliefs. As outlined in the literature review, critical awareness about social and cultural expectations, and the ability to assess one's personal context in light of these expectations, according to Brown (2006), is a significant source of shame resilience. It is clear that, in their journeys, each of the women have developed and honed this skill. In doing so, the women were freed up to rewrite the old sexual scripts that they were hearing and telling.

Embracing redemptive messages. While resisting the messages that they were exposed to was an essential aspect of these women's journey, of equal importance were the redemptive messages that women were able to internalize. These new, redemptive messages, were found within themselves, through reading new ideas about sexuality, and, significantly, through relationship with others. For example, Meg shared about how, when she started dating her husband, he shared with her very healthful, empowering messages about sexuality. She recalls, "I think he saw it more as a gift, and something that we shouldn't shy away from. Completely. Ever. Despite whether you're married or not, it's still part of you, right?" In hearing this message, Meg said that she was able to view herself as a sexual person, and carried much less shame. Now, Meg says, "It's not something that needs to be swept under the rug, it's not an obligation, it's not something that's dirty. It's something that we've been given, and something that's designed for us to do. Like God wants us to do it. Because it's His gift to us." Here, we can see a significant shift in Meg's attitude towards sex, from something that was "bad" to something that was natural and precious. Similarly, Jennifer shared some incredibly deep

insights about spirituality and sexuality that she had learned and has come to know as truth in her life. For example, Jennifer spoke about her being an “embodied spirit,” which helped her begin to embrace her body and her desires to be connected as *good*. She also resonated with the idea that human sexuality, in a sense, is about emotional, spiritual and physical connection. She describes: “To almost reflect, to have a small glimpse of what God was intending in the beginning. Of wanting to be in this deep connection with his people, but that has been broken. And so, I think that sex is such a beautiful thing.” To Jennifer, sexual attraction is a crying out of the heart, a yearning, to be reconnected with others. It is the closest expression about being able to fully know one another; this, she says, is a glimpse of how we can be connected with God and others. Here, we see Jennifer recognizing her capacity for connection, intimacy, and understanding that our spirits are a part of our sexuality. This captures that by knowing and experiencing one another as sexual beings, we can reflect our intimacy and connection with God.

While Kari, for so long, adopted the messages about sex and sexuality that she heard in the church, she has now come to a place in which she is trusting her inner voice to define her beliefs. For example, when she spoke about purity, she said:

I think purity has become something that I can maybe trust myself to determine more than something that I need an outward structure to determine for me. And it can come from holding within a place within myself an awareness of what my conscious, my intuition, my being, really, is saying as right or as wrong, or as ok in the situation...So within that feeling, having a clean sense.

Rather than subscribing to the rules to which she was exposed to, for Kari, purity is a deep knowing. Likewise, Mary speaks about a significant paradigm shift, from having some judgment towards others around sexuality, to believing and holding that “Jesus cares about our hearts”

rather than what we do, sexually. Because of this shift, Mary rejects the black and white rules that we use to define what appropriate sexuality is, and suggests sexual decisions are made in love. In her words:

The point is love. And so if we aren't learning how to love each other best, then we will ask the question, "How far is too far?" But that's not the loving question, right? Because we're not asking, you know, "What's loving towards this person?" And they're not asking, "What's loving toward this person?" And then deciding.

Both Mary and Kari are speaking to the human capacity to internally know, in love, what is best for oneself and one's partner, in order to be responsible and healthful stewards of sexuality.

Relationships

In all of their stories, the women's husbands were central figures in their healing journey. The women reflected on how open and honest communication, love and affirmation and mutual empathy helped them feel safe to explore all of their parts. They shared about how receiving this love and acceptance helped them love and accept all of themselves, including their bodies and their sexuality.

Open and honest communication. Throughout the women's stories, it became very clear that they had the space and freedom to engage in honest dialogue with their spouses in matters related to sex and sexuality. This open dialogue gave space for the women and their husbands to foster intimacy and bonding. Brown (2010) defines connection as, "the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive substance and strength from the relationship" (p. 19). It is this type of connection that the women described. The women shared about feeling completely safe to express their difficulties and shame without judgment or criticism. Lily, for

example, spoke about how throughout her relationship with Thomas, they were very intentional about talking about what they want their relationship to look like. Even still, Lily describes her conversations with Thomas about their sex life:

Like we talked so much around sex and around like, “can we try this,” or “I felt kind of funny with that,” or “I used to like that but I don’t so much anymore.” I think we push to talk about it when it feels uncomfortable and vulnerable because we care so much about it, you know, in terms of marriage. And we care about our marriage in terms of our spirituality, in large part.

Because their marriage is so sacred to them, it is worth the discomfort of having deep, and sometimes challenging, conversations. Similarly, when Meg and her husband were experiencing difficulties on their honeymoon, she describes how they were able to share in each other’s shame, and were able to “talk each other out of it” at different times. She said: “Sometimes I would be the one that would be like, “Oh we’re getting the hang of it, this is ok!” And sometimes he’d be the one to say that, depending on who was feeling more distraught in the moment, I guess.” When they experienced breakthroughs in their sexual relationship, they were able to celebrate with each other. Similarly, when Meg started to feel shame about not having orgasms as often as she would like, she recalls: “Just communicating about it really openly with James” and returning to an exploration phase” was really healing. Throughout these times, rather than appeasing or disconnecting from one another, they were able to share, be present and love each other through the struggles by continuing to have hard conversations. In each of the women’s stories, this open and honest conversations in moments of shame or fear emerged as a significant source of their resilience to the sexual shame they were experiencing.

Love and affirmation. When the women spoke about their relationships with their husbands, they all shared about the love that existed between them. Not only did the women share about their love for their partners, but the ability to *receive* love and affection. Receiving this love and hearing and believing the loving voices of their spouses opened the women up to deeper healing. Mary exquisitely describes this experience when she says:

For him [Craig] to just speak truth to me, too. Of his desire for me, his love for me, his acceptance for me. You know, just that his place with me is the same regardless of how I'm feeling. Like that's obviously really helpful. Just him. And like, him not feeling shame in sexuality allows me to not feel shame in sexuality.

By hearing Craig share his heart for her, Mary was able to be released from some of the shame she was carrying around her sexuality. This allowed her to come to a place where it felt ok to be her. Kari described a similar experience on her honeymoon, when she said was able to experience her sexual body with more confidence and freedom. She remarked that her husband, Owen, is “an exceptionally loving person” and he “voices so much encouragement and care.” Likewise Jennifer shared about how Walter saw all of who she was, so when he said, “your body is amazing,” she was able to fully understand that God created her body, and it was a very good part of her.

In a tremendously powerful moment, Meg was moved to tears as she described the intensity of love she experienced with James during sexual intimacy. Because of the power of this love, she shared: “Even as I’m crying now, even in those moments. The only thing I could do was just cry. And just embrace him and just be in the moment.” It is very clear that in this moments, Meg and James are able to be fully present with all of themselves; even as she was sharing, this love between them reverberated in her spirit. For Mary, recognizing and truly

believing that her husband loved all parts of her helped her to feel completely safe in their relationship. As she said, “There’s just 100% safety and acceptance, and “yes” from him for me.... If I didn’t have that, I don’t think I would [feel freedom in my sexuality]. Because it’s really vulnerable, so it’s really risky when it’s not safe.” Craig’s love for Mary gave her complete openness and freedom to engage with all of herself in their relationship.

Interestingly, a number of the women were able to put words to a dynamic in which their partner’s love and unconditional acceptance quieted their shame voice. For example, Kari describes struggling with shame around her body, but she has “been able to internalize and really believe” that her husband loves her body, and thinks she is “the hottest wife ever!” Similarly, Meg shared about, through her relationship with James, she has really grown into who she is. For Meg, “to have someone, like no matter what you’re experiencing emotionally, like no matter how much shame you’re experiencing, to have someone that just accepts you for who you are, and just values you for who you are,” has been an incredible source of resilience and healing. As Kari put it, her husband’s “love has been an anchor... [His] love is an invitation for me to be able to stay present” to herself and in relationship with him.

Empathy and attunement. Consistent with Brown’s (2006) Shame Resilience Theory, most of the women spoke about their spouse’s empathy as incredibly healing in their own journeys. They shared that their husbands were present and were able to recognize and allow themselves to be moved by the women’s feelings. For example, both Lily and Kari spoke about the importance of their husband’s attunement to them when they were “frozen” or “withdrawing” during sexual intimacy. Jennifer beautifully describes her own internal transformation and integration as she began to see and receive Walter’s empathy towards her. At first, Jennifer shared about the difficulty she had in hearing his love for her and her body, sharing that she

thought that “he was full of crap.” At this time she could trust that it was impossible that he could actually love and enjoy her. She shared about how it really hurt Walter to hear her say “I just hate my body” when she was feeling inadequate. Jennifer found that she would disconnect from him in those moments, because she was disconnecting from herself. In response, Walter sometimes would cry in pain, and say to her “I wish you could just see who you are.” His persistence in caring for her, hurting with her, and actually seeing her beauty helped her care for him. She began to see that her self-hatred was not loving towards him, because when she was in that space they could not retain their connection. In a striking, cyclical way, when Jennifer empathized with Walter’s pain she was able to return and care for her truer, deeper self. It was through being known, and his empathic attunement to her, that she could stop “torturing her body” and could finally be ok in her body. This story reflects a truth that was revealed in the some of the other women’s stories; when we are deeply seen and empathized with, we can be opened up to in deeper connection with ourselves and others.

Community

Not only did the relationships with their spouses serve as a source of resilience for the participants, each woman talked about the importance of their relationships with others in their healing process. The women talked about their need to have others that they could share their strengths and their struggles with. Specifically, they found that the empowering, validating and normalizing voices were very redemptive and helpful.

Discernment. While other people’s voices were of the utmost importance, a few of the women stressed, however, that they should share their stories with those who deserve to hear. Namely, some of the women thought it was important to share with people who would be able to meet their experience with openness, a non-judgmental attitude, and with an assumption

of trust. For example, Lily spoke about her desire to have community involved in her budding relationship with Thomas so it “always felt like it was in the light.” Yet, she struggled with questions like, “Who do we tell?” and “How do we go about it?” Similarly, Mary said that her and Craig could not deal with their sexual shame by themselves, however, they did not feel like they could trust anyone in their church to keep their story private, or to receive the story with grace. While Mary recognized that “there should be a safe place,” sadly, it took her and Craig some time before they could speak with another couple about their struggles. By using discernment and intentionality in their choice to share, however, all of the women described having very rewarding and healing dialogues with others.

Empowerment. Significantly, a few of the women in the study spoke about how some of the voices in their community gave them agency and freedom in their sexuality. This was often done by others who encouraged the women to make decisions that fit with them and their partner’s hearts. For example, Lily spoke about moments with men where she felt powerless, and would think, “There’s nothing I could do now” because she had already chosen this, and was stuck “in their hands.” When Lily told her sister about this experience, her sister lovingly asked, “What if you just told yourself I have two legs, I can get up and walk out of this room?” This was deeply transformative to Lily; from this point on she would tell her that message prior to hanging out with someone, so she could continually have agency in her body and sexual life. Similarly, Lily shared about a friend who told her, “You don’t have to kiss him yet, if you’re not ready to. That’s ok.” Though on some level, Lily knew this to be truth, hearing this from a friend was “very powerful” for her. For Lily, these women encouraged her to make decisions about her rights to continually consent, thereby giving Lily authority over her body at all times. Other women talk about the education and empowerment they received from figures

like their personal counsellors in the realm of their sexuality. In a very sweet story, Kari shared about how, after feeling free and confident in her body on her honeymoon, Kari emailed her work supervisor, Melody about it. Her supervisor was able to celebrate and appreciate Kari's transformation and welcome her newfound sexual liberation. When we can celebrate other women's sexuality, as Melody did for Kari, we can empower them to deepen their freedom and power.

Sharing stories. All but one of the women in this study spoke about how important community was to normalize their feelings of sexual shame and validate their struggles. Each woman spoke about the beauty of mutual vulnerability, in which the women and their friends were exposed. In fact, at times, it was their friend's vulnerability that opened up the women to deeper exposure and healing. For example, Mary shared it was only until her friends "shared their story" that she felt safe enough to finally talk to someone about her story. Mary found it very therapeutic to hear her friends validate her feelings, and say: "Yes! Of course you feel that way! It's ok to feel that way...That does affect you.... And that's still real and true." Before, Mary felt alone and in the dark with these feelings, but having them heard and held well became a powerful catalyst for growth and redemption. She spoke about how it felt "so much lighter" to release her shame and to be met with love and compassion. She recalls, "And that was really helpful, just to see truth instead of like, it's just like, when it's secretive, it's always so much bigger." By bringing her shame into the light, the power of it's darkness could not be sustained. Lily, similarly, spoke about how women were so important in her life, as she was able to share her shame, which "dissipated" it. Importantly, Lily also spoke about her pastor and her faith community, and how supportive, non-judgmental and affirming they have been in her

marriage. Here, we can see, the church *can* be a powerful source of healing for men and women who are hurting.

Meg and Kari spoke about how they have been able to open up to other women, who are also struggling with some aspect of sexuality, and share their stories. Being able to be open and honest with female friends, normalize their process, and share their stories in a real way gave them permission to carry less shame, and increased the women's sense of connection and intimacy. Though having these vulnerability conversations, for Kari, was "really nerve wracking," it helped her feel supported. By being deeply seen and affirmed by friends, the women could experience the "you're not alone" message that Kari spoke about.

Many of the women, including Lily, spoke about how enriching it is for her to be able to be a source of strength and love to her friends that have sexual shame. Because she saw how relieving and valuable women's voices were in her life when she was in the midst of struggle, she feels "really privileged" to be that for others. Moreover, Jennifer talks about being revealing her imperfections, as she sees that this draws in other people. She shared that by doing so, "You can connect on feeling these longings and this angst and that we are not perfect...I feel like my brokenness is a way to connect with other people's brokenness. And it points to Christ." Jennifer has come to a place where she is not rejecting her brokenness anymore; instead, she is embracing it so she can have that intimacy and connection that she so longs for. Finally, just as Mary's friend could use her own story to open doors for tremendous healing in Mary's life, Mary holds immense hope that her story can help others. Because she experienced the heartache of not having space for her story for so long, she is inspired to be a safe place for others.

Spiritual Transformation

All of the women spoke about the importance of their spirituality and their relationship with God as a source of healing and journeying towards wholeness. The women highlighted how their shift from a shaming, rules-based understanding of sexuality to an affirming, embodied sense of sexuality took place in the context of their relationship with the Divine. They spoke about receiving God's infinite grace and hearing God's loving voice towards them and towards their bodies. By experiencing the fullness of God's love, they were able to love their whole selves with great depth and mystery.

Spirituality receptivity. A number of the women spoke about how they were "opened up" to receive love and grace in their spirituality, which brought healing into their sexuality. Lily noticed that she remained open to receive from God throughout her whole story. She says, "God's love [was] always drawing me in. Just even through the years of those experiences, [God would say] "Just come to me, you know I was right there the whole time." She reflected on how she began to internalize the message: "I can go to Him just the way I am"; When she did, she would hear God say, "I wash you whiter than snow." Here we see that Lily recognizes that God's love and grace were there, always, yet she needed to "come to" God to receive it. This is true for Meg, when she spoke about how it is sometimes hard to accept and receive how much God loves her. In her words, "Because you don't always feel like you deserve that much love. But it's definitely been part of my journey to get towards that place where I have 100% accepted it."

Similarly, Mary shared that, for years, she could not forgive herself for what had occurred between her and Jessica. This resulted in painful feelings of shame and disconnection from Craig. While she was sharing her story with a friend she spoke about her difficulty letting

this go, and her friend shared that she needed to receive grace and forgiveness. She recalled, then, saying: “K, Jesus, I receive your forgiveness in this. I receive your truth in this.” And, in her words, “That changed everything.” Following this, Mary was able to transcend herself and her shame and receive the infinite grace that was there all along. Once you open up yourself to Jesus, she says, “then you have the grace and the strength and the ability to be done with it. However long or short that takes.” Jennifer, too speaks of sharing her heart, desires and struggles with God; in her vulnerability, she is able to stay in connection with God, receiving the Divine’s gifts, grace and mercy.

Love. Getting in touch with the sacred in the deepest parts of themselves opened up this powerful force to heal all parts of the women. All of the women spoke about a loving relationship that they had with their God. They spoke about experiencing God’s presence in real and meaningful ways in the midst of their pain and their brokenness. This presence called them towards wholeness and goodness, and love. This was love for themselves, for their bodies, for their partners, for God. Kari spoke strikingly about how her spiritual transformation has shifted the way she sees sexuality. In her words: “My spirituality is kind of simple at this point in my journey. It’s carved away to foundation of four letters L-O-V-E. It’s LOVE! Love around sexuality.” While this love remains an ineffable mystery to Meg, she touched on this experience when she recalled powerful experiences of love with James during sexual intimacy:

And in those moments, those really spiritual moments, I look back and think, Man, if this is a taste of... Like, it’s hard to put it into words. If I can experience love this intensely, being a human being as I am. Then how, what is God’s love for us, right? Like, how much more intense is it? And it’s really, it’s kind of an overwhelming thing to think about. But it’s also really...beautiful.

The depth of connection and intimacy that Meg shared with James reflected back to her the intensity of love and connection that the Divine has for her.

This love is a love that beckoned the women into closer communion with their spirit. When Lily was experiencing sexual shame and hiding herself from God, she heard a voice saying, “What if it never felt like you left... even when it [the shame] was happening? Don’t stay away, I’m still here, I’m always gonna make this better.” This, according to Lily, affected her in “big ways.” Similarly, Jennifer talks about how before, she used to feel intense shame about her sexuality, but now she sees her brokenness as evidence of her need and desire for Christ. She shared that now, there is not condemnation, but love. Kari delightfully summarizes this when she talks about her shift from religiousity to spirituality when she said:

Because there’s been a lot of suppression around it in my religious upbringing, part of being able to experience spirituality as something different from religion then frees up spirituality to actually be all these other components, and to actually tie into my sexuality. And to bring freedom into it. And try it completely—from a love angle instead of a shame angle. Instead of a structured angle, instead of a procedural angle. It’s from the flow, from the love, from the authenticity of the heart instead of the suppression of how I understood a structure to be.

This loving and authentic angle has opened her up to desire to be a “more whole woman.” Now, rather than seeing her sexuality as something that needs to be shut down, she sees it as a part of her that needs to be loved and cared for.

Hearing God’s loving voice. All of the women reflect on their experiences of hearing truth from the Divine; these spoken words were greatly healing and transformative. In relationship with God, the women reflected on spiritual revelations or insights that they heard

from a transcending voice. Lily shared: “God has told me things about it [sexuality]...When you can just hear it as like, “Oh yah, I think that’s what you want for me, and you want it cause you want me to be safe, and you love me.” By hearing God’s heart and care for her, Lily was able to feel more free and more intentional in her body and in her sexual relationships. Mary also reflects on experiencing Jesus’ “100% Yes!” towards sexuality in her marriage, which has brought her freedom to be all of her when intimate with Craig. When she talks to God about sex, she says, “Everything is always like, ‘Yes, of course you should feel such pleasure, of course you should give, of course you should enjoy your husband so much. And desire him so much.’” God’s affirmation and love towards her sexuality has encouraged Mary to be completely present during intimacy with Craig. Similarly, Meg reflected on how “God wants us to do it [have sex]... Because it’s His gift to us.” Hearing and experiencing God’s prompting towards intimacy propelled these women into closer connection with their spouses.

One summer, when Lily was on a trip overseas, she shared that she could hear God’s voice really clearly. She recalled God saying, Sex is “about you being safe, and it’s about you being free in this beautiful thing I created. And your heart.” This was very moving for her, and she said that as a result, she experienced a lot of “inner healing”; hearing God’s voice brought greater recognition that Lily had been viewing sex from a “rules-based way.” It was here, that she began to change the way she thought about sex. Other women described how God’s voice shifted the way that they saw themselves. Jennifer, Lily and Mary spoke about how, in moments when they were feeling the weight of other people’s expectations, or were experiencing shame, they would ask themselves, “Is this how Jesus/God sees me?” By hearing God’s heart towards them, they were able take a step back and discern God’s character through a lived relationship

with the Divine. Curiously, all three of these women, when reflecting on how God sees them, said, “God cares about my heart.”

Lily highlights the beauty of connecting with God and others on a meaningful level when she says, “It’s just been really beautiful to look back and see, just see how great sex is. And think that that was just the faithfulness of God who led us through all that, and all these people who supported us. All the healing.” These women’s inspiring stories are ones of redemption and hope for all individuals who are struggling with sexual shame. Mary gives voice to this hope when she says, “Nothing is too big or too deep, or has too much shame to let go of... We often hold on to shame because we agree with it. But there’s nothing that’s too dark or too deep to receive freedom from. Nothing.”

The Embodied Experience

“Sexuality is a beautiful, good, extremely powerful, sacred energy, given to us by God and experienced in every cell of our being as an irrepressible urge to overcome our incompleteness, to move toward unity and consummation with that which is beyond us.”

(Rolheiser, 1999, p. 196)

In light of all the growth and healing the women experienced in their stories, they each shared about the place that they have come to now. While most of the women recognized that their journeys with sexual shame and sexual and spiritual integration were ongoing, the place that they have come to is worthy of honour and celebration. According to Piran and Teall (2012) embodiment is a complex concept that includes, feeling “at one” with the body, feeling agency and power in the body, a feeling of freedom to “take up space” in the world and a connection with and clarity of one’s own needs, desires and rights. Sexual embodiment is when, through and within their bodies the women experienced their sexuality with their whole selves. In this section, I will outline how the women spoke about their embodied experiences of their sexuality. I will also highlight the tremendous safety that the women have come to experience in

themselves, and in relation to their husbands. Next, I will discuss the agency and freedom that the women spoke of in their bodies. Then I will reveal how the women spoke about the experience of pleasure and delight. Following this, I will outline the profound sense of oneness and connection that the women spoke of in their relationships. I will then illuminate the women's experiencing of wholeness and integration. Finally, I will underscore how the women talked about how sexuality reveals God's character.

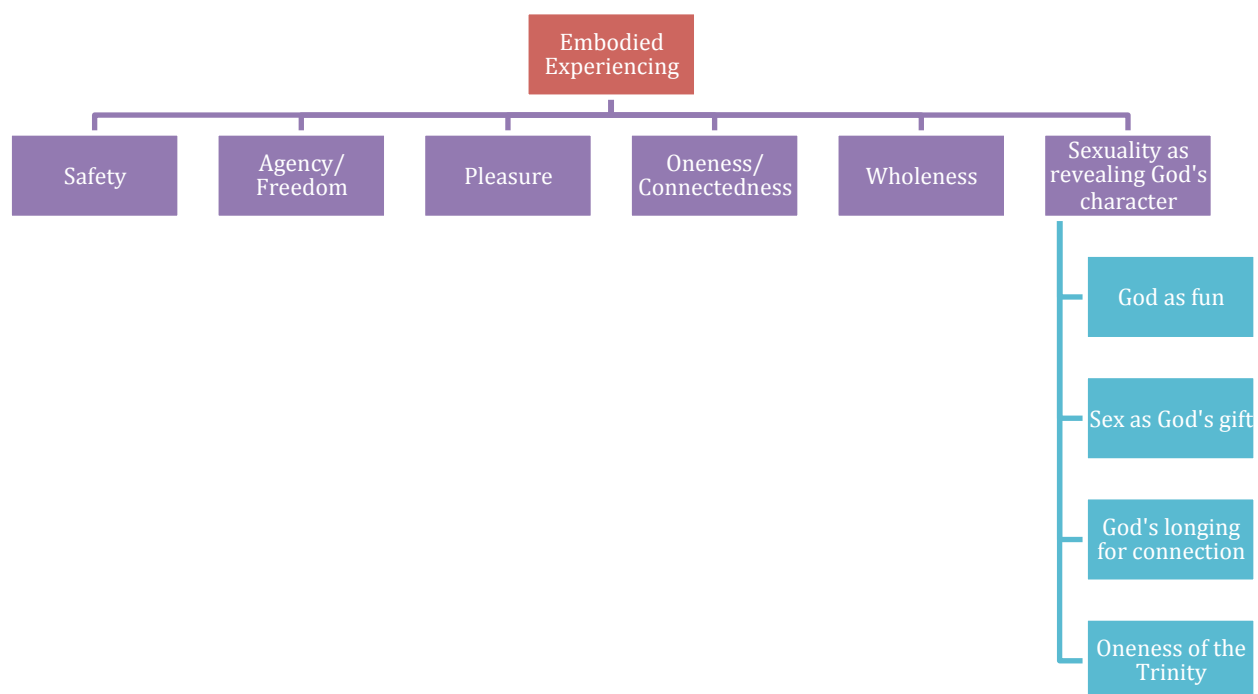


Figure 4. Themes of Embodied Experiencing

Safety. All of the women spoke about the importance of the safety that they experience in their sexual relationships with their husbands. They spoke about the importance of consent, of not feeling guilty if they said “no”; they shared about being able to express their desires and needs, and having the safety for open dialogue about vulnerable topics. Furthermore, the women's husbands' empathy, and ability to attune to them when they are feeling uncomfortable

and check-in during intimacy opens doors to deeper safety and connection. In Mary's story, we can contrast the feeling of complete safety she now experiences with her husband, Craig, to the experience of feeling unsafe with her ex-boyfriend. When she was in a dating relationship with him, she spoke about how vulnerable, in an unsafe way, her sexuality felt. Similarly, in Mary's journey with Jessica, it was clear that Mary did not feel safe enough to share her discomfort with what had been occurring between them. Now, with Craig, Mary speaks about the all-encompassing safety she experiences. She says, "There's such vulnerability and it's complete trust, and complete openness, and complete like, for, the other person. And allowing the other person to be 100% for you." It is this type of safety that can open up women to experience their sexuality with their whole selves.

Lily speaks about how she and Thomas intentionally took steps to procure her emotional, spiritual and physical safety in their dating relationship, prior to marriage. She recalls that at times, they would pray and ask God if there was anything happening between them that was not keeping each other safe, to reveal this to them. Now, in their marriage, Lily speaks beautifully of the safety they have found together. She says "Like it's so safe. It's like, yah, I can ask for anything, anyway I want to ask for it, and that's ok. There's space for that. And if he isn't able to, or doesn't want to that night, that's ok too. Like, just in the sense of, we're both safe." As we can see, Lily's sense of safety has given her the space to be open and free with her needs and desires.

Agency/Freedom. When the women describe their experiences of their sexuality now, they speak about the freedom that they have in their bodies. Rather than their bodies being a source of shame and a hindrance to connection, they are a means to rich connections with themselves, to their partners, and to God. The women describe their ability to choose for

themselves, in dialogue with their husbands, how they will explore and engage in their sex lives. Through Lily's journey with her disordered eating in University, she was able to come to the place where she loved how "powerful," "strong," and "healthy" her body was. This gives the reader a clear sense that she received this freedom in her body during this process. Furthermore, Lily spoke about experiencing this type of freedom in her dating relationship with Thomas. She says, "So it was this beautiful sense of like, you have total freedom, you're totally safe, so you can just take your time and enjoy this." Similarly, Mary was surprised about how "freely" she was able to experience her sexuality on her honeymoon. She felt permission to express herself and her sexuality with openness and ease. When Meg was asked about how she experiences her sexuality now, she says it is "liberated and connected." This is mirrored in Lily's response when asked the same question. Lily says, "There's definitely a sense of feeling powerful and free sexually. And just a different understanding of what I like, even as my body changed."

Finally, through Jennifer's inspiring journey from body-hatred and fragmentation, to a closer connection and embracing of it, she has been able experience her sexuality and spirituality within her body. This speaks to the profound freedom she has found from the oppressing and disconnecting thoughts and feelings she experienced earlier.

Pleasure. Most of the women spoke about the pleasure that they experience during sexual intimacy. While Jennifer, at first, seem to reject the idea that sex is about pleasure, and has journeyed towards embodiment, she is coming to see that pleasure is meaningful. Lily, too, speaks about how beautiful and fun sex is, and how it keeps getting better all the time. She says, "I think I feel like I know my body really well. I feel like I know what I want and what I like... Like I feel pretty powerful sexually." Here, Lily is able to speak to how, by knowing

what feels good and pleasurable, she is able to come to know her power more fully. Like Lily, Meg wonderfully describes her embodiment of pleasure, when she says:

And, I see it more as a source of pleasure and a source of power, almost. It's, I don't know, sometimes I'm just amazed by it. It's incredible in the ways that it can respond, right? To being aroused, to my husband, to, I don't know, sometimes I just have a sense of awe about it, and a sense of wonder, and curiosity.

Here, we can see how, unapologetically, Meg was able to speak lovingly and passionately about her body. By experiencing love in the context of a relationship with James, Meg is able to reflect on the wonder of her body in a different way.

Oneness/Connectedness. All of the women in this study spoke about the profound sense of connection that they have with their husbands; this, they said, is often expressed through their sexual encounters. In fact, some of the women spoke about how mystically and beautifully “bonding” sex is for them and their husbands. The women often identified specific moments, where they felt a transcendent connection with their partners. For example, when Jennifer reflected on this experience with Walter, she says, “And it’s amazing when that happens, and you feel deeply connected, it’s—you just feel in those moments, this is why you [God] created sex. So you can have that intense intimacy with someone and just feel connected physically, emotionally, spiritually.” When the women speak of these experiences, they describe feeling deeply seen and known; this, they say, is deeply satisfying and meaningful. Similarly, Mary describes a deep love connection between her and Craig that is experienced through intimacy. This intimacy is so powerful; she says she is often “moved to tears over love of Craig, and his for me.” When Mary and Craig are not able to connect sexually for some time, Mary can feel that something is absent. She says:

[It's] just such a connection. I mean physically, obviously, but just connection. When there's been time between [sex], for me, I feel a disconnect with Craig. Where it's just like, "I just miss you." I mean we talk, we see each other, but something's just missing. So it's just like a culmination of our intimacy, right?

While Craig and Mary are able to connect on an emotional level, there's a sense that sex is the deepest expression of intimacy between them. This expresses their capacity to know each other, on multiple levels, with their whole selves. Like Mary, Lily beautifully speaks to an ineffable connection that exists between her and Thomas when they are intimate:

I've never been so in love with someone or have had this physical connection as well. So it still is mind boggling to me, what you can express physically, when you don't have the words, or you know, I think it's really beautiful that way. I think it just keeps growing too. It's like, oh yah, another level of that and that expression. And the more you love them how your sex life changes too, because you are expressing things that have deepened over the years.

Again, as we see here, it is through sexual intimacy that their love and connection is expressed.

Interestingly, some of the women explicitly spoke to the how their love and oneness with their partners compelled them to give and receive, sexually, with fullness. For example, Lily spoke about her love for "doing things" for Thomas. She says, "Oh yah, I so enjoy it, and I love doing certain things for him. That's just the way my sexuality is, I get more turned on. It's like, oh yah, 'this is so fun.'" Lily then reflects on how she has talked with others who see various sexual activities as an obligation or a sacrifice, but for her it is delightful. She continues:

I felt like God just totally released me to be like, "just go for that, that's so healthy." And I feel like I just lost any sense of like doing that out of obligation. Just as he was, you

know, just the full joy that he has in sex now, you know? He's still blown away all the time. Which makes it so much more fun. Yah!

It is here that Lily reveals a paradox in which, when she lays herself down for others, by giving her full self, she receives the joy of giving. In her story, conversely, Mary talks about being able to receive with freedom and completeness. She speaks about how women seem to be more “work” in the bedroom, so she sometimes felt tension, questioning whether Craig was “sure” that he wanted to “work” for her. Craig, she remembers, constantly reassured her, saying, “But I like that work. Like this isn't work for me. I like to do this for you. I like to learn of you. I like to give to you.” What becomes clear through Craig's voice is his love towards Mary, and his desire to give Mary care and pleasure. It seems as though it was through their connection and love that Mary could begin to receive, unapologetically.

Wholeness. In direct contrast to the disconnection and fragmentation that the women experienced when they were struggling with sexual shame, the women now talk about feeling more whole. For example, Jennifer talks about how she thinks her sexuality has been a catalyst to feel “more integrated with who I am in my body and my spirit.” Through her sexuality, Jennifer is more fully her. Like Jennifer, Kari's sexual experiences have led her down a path towards wholeness. In her words:

Being able to be sexually more active and healthy probably has impacted my spirituality in terms of awakening parts of me that haven't allowed me to be present. So it gives me a fuller sense of self. Which is a very spiritual experience.

Here, we get the sense that Kari recognizes that loving and caring for herself is deeply spiritual. While before, her sexuality played an oppositional role in her spirituality, now they are mutually enhancing. Interestingly, Lily wonders about the depth of the connection between her

body and her spirit when reflecting on intentionally choosing sex. She asks, “Sometimes I wonder, is it spiritual? Is there some sort of spiritual strengthening that happens with it?” This, she says, is a hard question to answer because, “I think it’s tricky sometimes for me to separate, because I think that spirit, and soul, and body are so holistic.” This holistic experience leads her towards sex, even when she is “not feeling physically the drive” out of love and desire for connection.

Sexuality as revealing God’s character. All but one of the women spoke explicitly about how, in their lives, their experiences of sexuality have revealed and deepened their understanding of God’s character. The women spoke about how, through their sexuality, they have come to see God’s fun and heart for pleasure. They shared that they experience God as “all for” sex, and believe that it is a gift from the Divine. To some of the women, sex revealed God’s yearning for connection with them. Finally, one of the women spoke about how her oneness and connection with her husband speaks to the mystery of the Trinity (of three beings interconnected and one).

God as fun. Mary delightfully reflected on how God’s heart for marriage and sexuality illuminates how God wants humans to have fun and feel pleasure. She says:

I’m always just like so thankful. Like [sex is] so amazing. It wouldn’t have to be. So it just shows me something different about God’s character. So when people talk about, “Oh you know, the purpose of sex is to have babies,” well... that can’t entirely be true, because if that was the only purpose it wouldn’t feel so good, it wouldn’t be so fun. All of these things. And so I just think it just reveals more how much He cares about every single part of life so much that He makes it so awesome.

What Mary is alluding to is that pleasure and enjoyment of one another *is* meaningful and purposeful. Mary later shares about how pleasure is *good* to Jesus. The understanding that “Jesus is all “YES!” towards sexuality” gives Mary freedom to embrace sexuality with fullness. Mary speaks about how she feels the encouragement from Jesus to delight in and love her husband through her sexuality. Lily, too, has felt prompting from God to be intimate with Thomas, and pleasure him. Lily shared about how she heard the Divine speak to her, saying, “You can enjoy this with him...Like to be good to him and enjoy it sexually.” Here, Lily is describing God’s desire for her to experience the fullness of pleasure and connection with herself and with Thomas.

Sex as God’s gift. Three out of five of the women used the word “gift” to describe how they experience God’s intention for sex. Rather than sex to be so something that is shameful, driving us away from close connection with God, these women were able to hold that God “smiles” on sex. In Lily’s words, “I definitely feel God’s happiness around the whole topic of sex, and just how happy He is that we can enjoy His great gift.” When Lily speaks about her honeymoon, she reiterates this message beautifully:

Like it felt, I did feel something different, and I think, it was so—those first few days especially, on our honeymoon, I just felt so, such a huge deep sense of peace and goodness, like the goodness of God. And just the smile of God, is I guess the best way to describe it. Like this is so good.

Similarly, when reflecting on her honeymoon experience, Mary shares, “Yes! This is exactly right!...God made this, all of this is good and ok and wonderful.” It was the experience of this deeply redemptive message that opened up Meg to have a deeper connection with her body as a young adult.

God's longing for connection. The women also spoke about how, through sex and intimacy, God's desire for a deep and fruitful connection with his people is revealed. Jennifer shares about the deep meaning that she has found in sexuality, as it points to the connection that she can have with God:

Sex is not just pleasuring one another, but like being emotionally connected and spiritually connected to another person too. To almost reflect, to have a small glimpse of what God was intending in the beginning, of wanting to be in this deep connection with His people. Jennifer shares about how, through her sexuality, she expresses her longings and desires for connection; these longings, she shares, draw her into deeper connection with her Creator. Mary spoke about how the lived experience of her sexuality shed light on the overwhelming intimacy and connection that she can have with God. She says, "I'm always like, "Oh man, Jesus, woah!"... Just shows more of Him... it's the physical way for me to see, "Oh this [sex] is the closeness of us, this is the closeness with you [God]." Similarly, when reflecting on the love that exists between herself and James, Meg describes the "overwhelming" love and desire for connection that God has for her.

Oneness of the Trinity. Mary spoke about how the example of the deep intimacy that she experiences in her marriage, and the oneness she experiences with Craig, is the closest way that she can think of the Trinity. Just as, in Christian religious tradition, married couples are described as "one flesh," the triune God is mysteriously three entities in one (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). Mary recognizes that through sexual intimacy, the mystery and the beauty of the Trinity is revealed.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of women who have been immersed in Christian religious culture, and have been able to develop resilience to sexual shame. It also sought to understand whether or not embodiment and/or the integration of spirituality and sexuality plays a role in this resilience. A hermeneutic phenomenological method illuminated the phenomena of participants' development of sexual shame resilience. Through an in-depth analysis, four categories of themes emerged; namely messages about sexuality, experiences of sexual shame, the healing journey and embodied experiences were revealed. Within these categories, 20 major themes and 28 subthemes were underscored. Though each of the woman's experiences of struggle and healing were uniquely theirs, common threads wove the women's stories together, capturing a rich tapestry of meaning. In this section, I will outline the strengths and limitations of this study. I will then highlight the common patterns that emerged in all of the women's stories. Here, I will integrate relevant literature, including Brown's (2006) Shame Resilience Theory and the concept of sanctification of sexuality. Finally, clinical and religious implications and future recommendations will be described.

Strengths and Limitations

Participants in this study were selected for their existing relationships with their sexuality and spirituality, and were not excluded from inclusion in the study if they had existing relationships with myself, the principal researcher. Because of this decision, I had personal relationships with three of the women that met criteria for, and participated in the study. Due to the relational dynamic of this research, and the constructivist research paradigm, it was anticipated that a pre-existing relationship would be of benefit to the research project and the

participant's ability to share information with the researcher. Scientific inquiry should not have to be sterilized; instead, pre-existing relationships can lend itself to human encounter, while still maintaining rigour. This research documented and distilled some of the most vulnerable aspects of existence, and the findings will be made public. This speaks to the women's profound courage and reveals the phenomena of interest—resilience to sexual shame. Recall from the literature review, Brown (2012b) proposed that shame resilience is the capacity to practice authenticity when shame is experienced, and to move through this experience while still maintaining personal values. By opening themselves up to being interviewed, this is what the women practiced. Consistent with the research findings, by encountering each participant on a very authentic, human level, we were all deeply moved by the process. Following the interview, a number of women who I interviewed approached me and shared that by opening themselves up with courage and vulnerability and participating in this study, they noticed further transformation and healing. For some of the women, participating in this research solidified their journeys, and highlighted areas for future growth. As Monk Kidd (2002) writes: “The truth is, in order to heal we need to tell our stories and have them witnessed...The story itself becomes a vessel that holds us up, that sustains, that allows us to order our jumbled experiences into meaning” (p.172).

An additional strength of this research project is the relational and collaborative nature of the data analysis. Co-researchers and I worked together to analyze the data, and all of the participants provided me with feedback about the interpretations made. Co-researchers who helped analyze the data were counselling psychology graduate level students/professors who had been trained in research methods. This relational approach expands and enriches the dialogical nature of a hermeneutic phenomenological method. Co-researchers and I, in dialogue with one another, and in dialogue with the women's voices, deeply resonated with the women's stories.

Through this resonance and dialogue, together we thickened the interpretive process, providing this research with a deeper understanding of the lived experience. Furthermore, the participants' feedback on the interpretations made improves credibility and greatly adds to the interpretation process.

While hermeneutic phenomenology has proven itself to be a legitimate, rigorous approach to inquiry, within the method there are limitations. Applying a hermeneutic phenomenological method to illuminate and interpret the lived experience of the participants brings to the forefront the matter of the implicated researcher. Because I am unable to detach myself from my own values, assumptions and views, the neutrality of my findings are called into question. That being said, I made explicit that the interpretations I come to in this research are filtered through my own lens, and therefore, the data is open to reinterpretation by the reader. Furthermore, although I was deeply engaged and moved throughout the research process, I intentionally made space for the women's presence and their stories, both during the interviews and throughout the analysis and writing processes. While it was clear that my voice was present throughout the results and the discussion, as were the voices of the co-researchers, and especially, the participants.

Five young Caucasian, heterosexual, married Christian women with at least some post-secondary education participated in this research; each of these women fell within a middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status. Because of the homogeneity of the sample, it may be difficult to transfer findings to other samples of differing cultural or socio-economic backgrounds. That being said, these women's stories can serve as a bridge to connect to other's experiences. While the sampling procedures used to find participants were consistent with the phenomenological method, future research with more diverse populations would contribute to

broader and deeper understanding of spirituality and sexual shame resilience. Additional suggestions for future research will be outlined below.

Discussion

In this discussion section, first I will highlight the collective story that the women told. Next, I will illuminate how the women's stories support and extend Brown's (2006) Shame Resilience Theory. Finally, I will outline how this literature deepens our understanding of the phenomenology of sanctification of sexuality.

Common threads. Interestingly, all of the women's stories shared very important common threads. Each of the women spoke directly about the pervasive silence that surrounded the topic of sexuality in their households. Moreover, all of the women recalled, in great detail, shame-provoking messages that they heard in their families and/or in their faith communities. The women were able to remember how those messages impacted them and the way that they perceived sexuality. Each of the women spoke about painful experiences of sexual shame, and how this was, at least in part, experienced as a result of the way that sex was framed in religious contexts. All of the women expressed feeling confused about sexuality and their bodies, and grappled with issues about how to respond to their desires or longings. Though they were dissatisfied with their states of sexual shame, all of the women seemed to be unsure about how to work through their experiences in a way that brings about healing and richness.

That being said, each of the women talked about specific events that seemed to be guideposts in the journey towards healing. In all of the women's stories a reciprocally healing relationship existed between being exposed to redemptive ideas and the lived experiencing of their sexuality (see *Figure 5*). It seems as though being exposed to new, redemptive ideas or messages about sexuality opened up new possibilities for the women, allowing them to

experience their bodies in new ways. Likewise, the lived experiences of these women (including experiencing the messages in new ways, having healing encounters with others, or having transcendent sexual experiences) deepened and integrated their developing understanding that sex is good, created by God and to be delighted in. All of the women were able to notice, reflect on, and celebrate the growth that they have experienced. Finally, they all shared in a manner that reflected their on-going journeys towards embracing their sexuality in awe-inspiring ways.

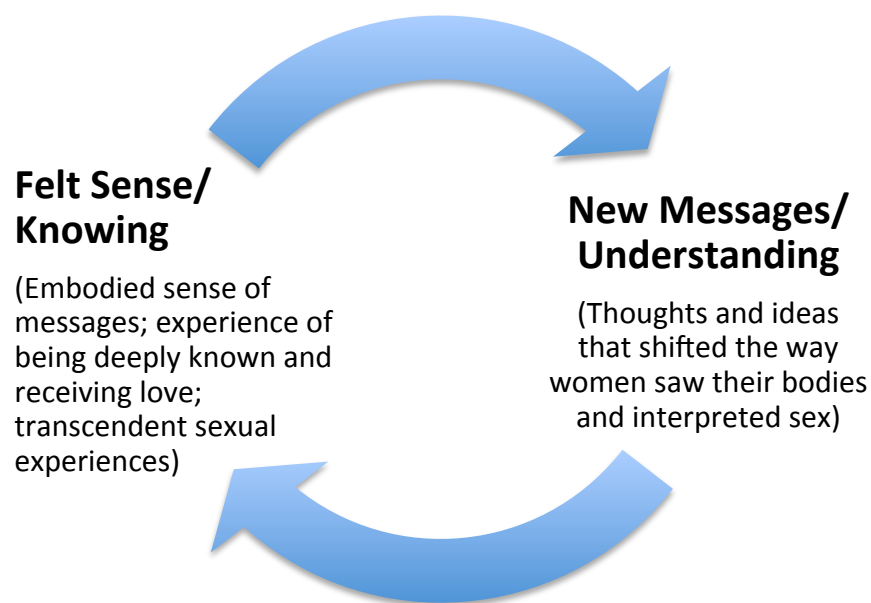


Figure 5. Reciprocal, healing relationship between lived experiences and hearing new messages about sexuality

Shame resilience theory. This study suggests that the way in which women conceptualize their sexuality in relation to their religion can shift the way they feel about and experience their sexual selves. Moreover, it also indicates that when we can encounter each other on an authentic and loving level, we can create new space for healing. All of the women in this study showed deep self-awareness, and were able to eloquently describe their experiences of sexual shame. These sources of resilience are consistent with Brown's (2006) Shame Resilience Theory (SRT). When an individual works through their experiences of sexual shame,

Brown argues that they emerge more courageous, compassionate and connected. In SRT, shame and empathy are on a continuum; the farther away from shame an individual falls, the more “shame resilience” an individual has developed. To review, where an individual falls on the shame-empathy continuum is based on four separate continuums:

a) the ability to recognize and accept personal vulnerabilities to shame; b) the level of critical awareness regarding social/cultural expectations; c) the ability to form mutually empathic relationships that facilitate reaching out to others; and d) the ability to “speak shame” or possess the language and emotional competence to discuss and deconstruct shame” (Brown, 2006, p. 47-48).

Below, Figure 6 illustrates and expands on Brown’s (2006) SRT. As the reader can see, the women’s experiences of sexual shame (as outlined in the analysis) closely reflect the adjectives used to underscore shame in SRT (e.g, isolated, confusion, fear, pathologizing, etc). Similarly, the embodied experiences of sexuality mirror the words used to describe “Empathy” (e.g, connection, power, freedom, awareness, normalizing, increased understanding of shame).

Consistent with SRT, through the women’s stories, connection and meaningful relationships with husbands, friends and with God, were essential for their growth and healing. These relationships breathed-life and light into the darkness of the women’s sexual shame. When the women spoke about sharing their experiences of shame with others, the healing experiences occurred in moments that the listener was able to remain open, and hear their stories with empathy and love. They were able to meet the women’s vulnerability with mutual vulnerability, and to share in their struggles. In short, when we are seen, deeply known and accepted; in these women’s stories it was the love of God and others that exposed and healed shame.

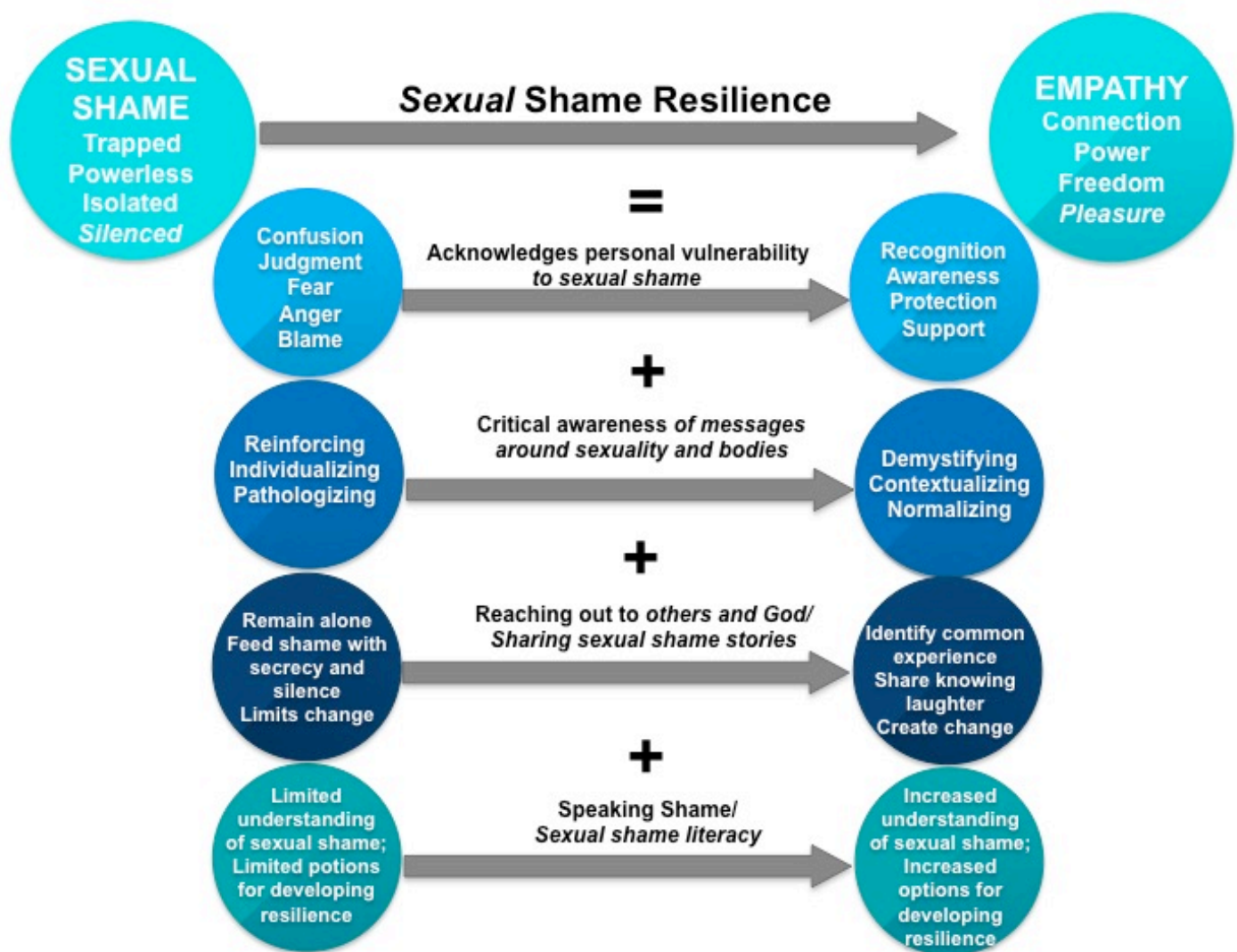


Figure 6. Adaptation of Brown's (2006) Shame Resilience Theory.

While Brown's (2006) Shame Resilience Theory fits well with the women's stories, the women's experiences also extend our understanding of how resilience can be developed. Their stories illuminate the process of developing resilience to sexual shame, and the phenomenology of this journey. They also provide us with unique insights the potential role of an authentic relationship with the Divine and the experiencing of God's presence. The role that spirituality plays in the development of resilience opens up new doors to exploration and highlights the need

for further research. While SRT provides us with deep conceptual insights about shame resilience, the women's stories speak to the lived experiences and development of this concept. The women's experiences breathe life into theory.

Sanctification of sexuality. An additional body of literature that the women's stories corroborate is the emerging research on the concept of sanctification of sexuality (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011; Mahoney & Hernandez, 2009; Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005; Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005). As outlined in the literature review, sanctification of sexuality is the perception that the sexual bond is sacred, and that God can be experienced during sexual intimacy with one's partner (Mahoney & Hernandez, 2009). Researchers showed that holding these beliefs results in greater satisfaction with sexual intimacy (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005) and predicted increased marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, greater frequency of sexual activity and greater sexual intimacy and spiritual intimacy (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011).

As the existing body of literature in this area is quantitative in nature, this study lends itself to deepen our understanding of the meaning of sanctification of sexuality. This current study also illuminates the potential process of coming to the understanding of sex as sanctified; in this study, the women speak at length about their ongoing journeys towards holding an integrated understanding of sex as sanctified. As described above, as the women's beliefs about sexuality shifted (from shaming messages they previously heard to embracing sex-positive messages), their attitudes about their sexuality and their relationships evolved. As sexual shame was released, the women were able to deepen their understanding of sex and hold that sexuality was deeply spiritual. As this happened, women were able to find increased safety, pleasure, connection and freedom in their marital relationships. While in her study Mahoney (2008) found

that her research participants had difficulty articulating their experiences of sexual and spiritual integration, all of the women in this study were able to speak, at varying lengths, about their deeply spiritual experiences of sexuality. This is very hopeful for women, for clinical practice and for future research that seeks to underscore the lived experiences of sexual and spiritual integration.

Implications and Recommendations

Clinical. The women's stories and journeys of healing can provide clinicians with significant insight as to how to honour and help women who are experiencing sexual shame. Imperatively, clinicians must provide clients with the tools to become aware of, and label their feelings of shame. The women in this study spoke about the importance of mindful attunement to their bodies to help them recognize and work through their shame symptoms. In their working through, they all had the capacity to express and describe their embodied experiences of shame. In my experience as a counsellor, many clients will not initially have the awareness or resources to do this. Clinicians, then, can help clients feel shame in their bodies and to recognize their relational responses to shame in action. To facilitate change, we must first recognize and understand our struggles and become dissatisfied with the status quo.

To specifically aid in the process of clients reclaiming their bodies from potentially harmful messages that they hear from their faith communities, clinicians can learn from the women's stories. First, regardless of personal religious orientation and worldview, clinicians need to be acutely aware of the old messages of the "Purity Movement" that are recycled and repeated in Christian churches and institutions across the country (Schermer Sellers, 2012). Exposing these messages for what they are—deeply shaming, oppressive and patriarchal, can aid in the process of releasing the grips that they hold on both men and women. Secondly,

providing alternative, redemptive and sex-positive messages, including the potential for sex to be sacred, to clients may empower women to look at their bodies and their sexuality differently.

Perhaps most importantly, the women's stories suggest that an empathic and loving holding place is needed for experiences of sexual shame to be shared. Though romantic relationships emerged as a significant healing factor in all of the women's stories, not all women will have partners who will have the capacity to attune and empathize with them. As discussed in the literature, researchers have identified three relational responses to shame (moving towards, moving against and moving away). Hartling, Rosen, Walker and Jordan (2000) propose that in working with clients who are in shame, counsellors can "move with" clients. In other words, they suggest that it is crucial for clinicians to be open and vulnerable—to be moved by client's experiences. In short, by encountering our clients with mutual empathy, by having our clients be deeply seen and known, we can help our clients undo the aloneness of their shaming experiences (Fosha, 2010). As Brené Brown (2012a) said in one of her Tedtalks, "If you put shame in a petri dish...and douse it with empathy, it can't survive" (18:54).

Lastly, it seems important to add, in the women's stories, it was really important for them to hear that they were not alone in their shame. As many of the women in this study suggested, shame is very difficult to talk about; so, the experience of sexual shame often remains unspoken in faith communities. Women, then, are left feeling alone to wonder whether there is something wrong with them. Clinically speaking, it can be very helpful to normalize the experience of sexual shame and provide psychoeducation about how it develops. Sharing stories, like those of the women in the study, of journeying through sexual shame can elicit new hope of freedom and sexual fulfillment.

Religious communities. In the women's stories, unfortunately, messages that they heard within their religious communities often emerged as a significant source of shaming. Yet, from their stories, we have also learnt that faith communities, friendships and churches can be safe and empowering spaces for shame reduction. The women spoke about pastors who did not judge them, who deeply cared about their well-being, and who supported their agency to make decisions about their own bodies. Similarly, one of the women spoke about churches who valued sexuality, saw it as God-given, and an essential aspect of being human. Communities, such of these, have an enormous potential to breathe life and healing into members who are struggling with sexual shame.

To do so, dialogue around new, empowering messages that emphasize bodily-love, self-compassion, sexual safety, freedom and agency need to be had. Furthermore, spaces where imperfections are seen and valued without judgment, and spaces that enable authentic human encounters are desperately needed. In the words of Schermer Sellers (2012), we “need an environment that is informed, grace-filled, encouraging, and compassionate when sharing [our] stories, [our] desires and [our] histories. [We] need wise guidance to integrate faith values while navigating the sexual pressures of youth culture, and conversations about God's purpose in sexual desire.” Creating space for this in faith communities by running workshops or retreats that are informed by this and other research can help facilitate the development of sexual shame resilience.

Research. This hermeneutic phenomenological analysis sought to understand the lived experiences of women who have journeyed through sexual shame. It gave voice to women's experiences of learning to embrace their sexuality with their whole selves. To my knowledge, no other research has sought to uncover the lived experience of sexual shame resilience. Given this,

further research that gives voice to women's stories would be helpful to learn more about the phenomena of interest.

Through listening to the women's stories, it became increasingly clear that their husbands played a significant role in their development of resilience. The women shared about their husband's voices as deeply empathic, loving and accepting. Many of the women spoke about their husband's own grappling and working through of sexual shame. These findings beg for the study of couples' development of sexual shame resilience. Specifically, further studies could interview couples together, and each individual separately. As shame is an inherently relational affect and is often described in the literature as "contagious," it would be advantageous to highlight the relational experience of mutual sexual shame and a couple's journeys towards embodiment and embracing sexuality (Herman, 2006).

Obviously, this research studied the lived experience of young women; additional research that explores the way in which men experience their sexuality and their bodies would be very illuminating. Though restrictive gendered messages around sexuality are harmful to both men and women, it is likely that they impact or manifest themselves differently in men's lives. Research that explores the way that men experience sexual shame, and the healing factors in men's development of sexual shame resilience is crucial. In an article that highlights the need for men's sexual and spiritual integration, Giblin (2014) argues that men's disintegration can result from, "men's early psychological development; the influence of socially constructed gender narratives on men's ongoing development; loss of male rites of passage; broader social changes in America including diminishing "social capital;" and the chronic influence of sexual and spiritual dualism" (p. 75). Uncovering the varying and overlapping ways in which men

experience and heal from sexual shame will lend itself to increased understanding and compassion for the struggles unique to men.

Finally, in this study, women chosen to participate were of Christian faith. Specifically, three of the women identified themselves as non-denominational, while two women identified themselves as affiliated with the renewal denomination (which is associated with Pentecostal churches). It would be of interest to analyze what role specific denominations play in the development of resilience to shame. Specifically, it might be illuminating to compare more conservative denominations to more liberal ones. Furthermore, understanding the role of other religions (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, etc.) in the development of resilience to sexual shame would help provide a richer understanding of the phenomena.

Conclusions

It is clear in the research and in the participant's stories that the interaction of religion and sexuality can be deeply shaming. Oppressive messages about sexuality, which are intended to restrict and control an essential aspect of being human, can leave deep wounds and scars. Consequently, sexual shame can develop and leave us feeling flawed, disembodied and alone. Yet, religion and spirituality also has the immense capacity to enrich and give meaning to sexual experiences. Religion and spirituality can enhance and build into resilience to sexual shame. By honouring and affirming the *goodness* of sex, we can begin to redeem our bodies and our sexuality.

The women's stories speak of this very possibility. They talk about the darkness of their sexual shame, and the hunger for change they experienced. They spoke about the road to healing as sometimes long and arduous, but very worthwhile. This journey brought light into the dark spaces inside themselves; it revealed their yearnings for connection, intimacy and freedom.

Resilience to sexual shame, for these women, was, and is developing over time, and in relationship with others. It was in relationship with themselves, their partners, and their communities and with their God that they have come to experience their sexuality differently. New, life-giving messages about sexuality birthed in them that which they longed for. Now, there are moments in which they are completely naked, and no longer feel the need to hide.

As I heard the women's stories of shame, struggle and transformation, I was able to, more clearly, see and embrace my own. While helping tell their stories, countless times, I was moved to tears by their courage, power and beauty. Hearing their words called forth my own courage, power and beauty. Their stories give me indescribable hope that others, too, have and will journey towards wholeness and connection. They also give me hope that we can love and be loved more fully. Helen Schucman (2000) writes: "Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it" (p. 162). As the women slowly whittled away the layers of shame and painstakingly carved out barriers to connection, they emerged more fully themselves.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

A MARRIAGE OF SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S RESILIENCY TO SEXUAL SHAME

Principal Investigator: Kelsey D. Siemens, M.A. Student in Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University. Contact number [phone number]. Contact email address: [email address]

Supervisor: Janelle Kwee, PsyD, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University. Contact number: [phone number]. Contact email address: [email address]

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of women who have been immersed in religious culture, and have been able to develop resiliency to sexual shame. Due to the sometimes sex-negative or silence around sexuality in faith-based communities, sexual shame is a common and potentially harmful experience for Christian women. Researchers will seek to construct insightful descriptions and interpretations of how women have been able to overcome this shame. **This study was designed to inform the academic community, clinicians, and most importantly women, with the purpose of helping women understand resilience to sexual shame in the context of a religious community.**

Procedures: The method chosen to conduct this research values the unique input of each woman and the way each individual woman experiences their sexuality. To be able to participate in the interview portion of this study, you must be a woman who has been married in the past three years, and have completed the screening phase of the study verifying you have developed resiliency towards sexual shame. For the interview portion of this study, you will participate in a semi-structured interview where the researcher will ask you questions about your experiences of sexual shame, your journey towards working through this shame, and how your faith has played a role in these experiences. This interview will take place in the location of your choice, where you feel comfortable sharing with the researcher about your life. This interview will last between 1 and 1½ hours and will be audio-taped for transcription at a later time. During transcription, all the details that may identify you will be removed. You will be able to choose the name to identify your story during the final research report. After the interviews of all the participants have been collected and reviewed by the research team, the results of your initial interview will be shared with you. As a co-researcher in this project, you will be given the opportunity to aid in the interpretative process of the data analysis, and provide wisdom and input in the analysis of your own personal experience. When the study is completed, the results will be made available if you wish.

Potential Risks and Discomforts: Participating in this study may be challenging for you for a number of reasons. Although the study is about something positive, resilience to sexual shame, you may experience some emotional discomfort while sharing about your life, particularly if your relationship with your sexuality has been difficult. All interviews are conducted by the primary researcher, who has training in counselling psychology. The primary researcher will not provide counselling herself, but her training will enable her to create a safe place for you to share your experience. The researcher will also provide you with a referral to a clinical counsellor should any emotional distress arise.

Potential Benefits to Participants and/or to Society: Participating in this study will assist the researchers to better understand the lived experience of resilience to sexual shame, and how what meanings are made about these experiences. This will help to better inform other clinicians and researchers about wholeness and sexuality. In addition, it is an opportunity to celebrate your sexuality, to discuss how you've come embrace your sexuality, what has challenged your perspectives of sexuality, and what you think may help others embrace their sexuality.

Confidentiality: *Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.* For example, audio-tapes and transcripts will be kept in an encrypted, password protected folder on the researcher's laptop computer. Paper copies of transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, which is located within the researcher's locked office. Audio-tapes and transcripts will be kept until the completion of the research, and Trinity Western University has approved this study as meeting all its requirements for completion of a thesis for the Masters of Arts in Counselling Psychology program. Following completion of this thesis, all such data will be deleted from the computer, or will be shredded, by the researcher.

Remuneration/Compensation: **To thank you for participating in this study, you will be given a gift certificate of \$25.00 to a local book store or cafe (a few choices will be provided when setting up the interview time and place).**

Contact for information about the study: If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Kelsey Siemens, [phone number] or [email address]) or her research supervisor, Dr. Janelle Kwee, at [phone number] or [email address]).

Contact for concerns about the rights of research participants: If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact Ms. Sue Funk in the Office of Research, Trinity Western University at [phone number] or [email address].

Consent: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time (in person, via email or telephone) without losing your reward. Your withdrawal from this study is not possible after the researcher has integrated your story into the dataset. You will also be given a pseudonym, however, to protect your identity.

Signatures

Your signature below indicates that you have had your questions about the study answered to your satisfaction and have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study and that your responses may be put in anonymous form and kept for further use after the completion of this study.

Research Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of the Research Participant signing above

Appendix B: Questions during semi-structured telephone screening interview:

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this telephone interview. Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary, and you may refuse to ask any questions at any point in time.

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your interest in this project?
2. Can you describe to me about how you see yourself as a candidate to participate in the project?
3. Can you commit to an interview for an hour to two hours?
4. Have you had any unwanted sexual experiences, either in childhood, adolescence or adulthood? Does anything come to mind?
 - a) If something does come up, follow-up question: Was the person older, younger, or the same age as you?
 - b) Was this a close up violation?
 - c) Would you call this abuse or incest?

Thank you for your interest in the project, and I will be letting you know participation in the project in the near future.

Should you notice that you have experienced any undesirable responses today, or at some point in the future as a result of this interview, I have a list of free or low cost counselling services that you can access. (Read names and numbers of Counselling services)

Fraser River Counselling

7600 Glover Rd, Langley, BC V2Y 1Y1
(604) 513-2113

Brookwood Community Counselling

#107- 20103 40 Ave Belmont Centre,
Langley, BC V3A 2W3
(778) 278-3411

Burnaby Counselling Group

3701 Hastings St,
Burnaby, BC V5C 2H6
(604) 430-1303

Appendix C: Pre-interview script

Thank you very much for taking your time to meet with me. I am very grateful for your willingness to share your story.

Before we begin, I would like to go over the informed consent and confidentiality form with you [read together]. Do you have any questions or concerns about this?

As mentioned on the online survey and in our telephone conversation, I will be asking you personal questions about your sexuality. You are free at any point in time to not answer any question, and you may discontinue the interview at any point in time.

Appendix D: Sample of Interview Questions

1. Describe your experience of the how sexuality was talked about in your family. Were there any conflicting messages?
 2. Describe your experience of how sexuality was talked about in your faith community. Were there any conflicting messages?
 3. Describe your experience of how you understood your own sexuality (based on message you heard) as you were an emerging adult.
 4. Describe how you experienced your sexuality in the context of newly married life.
 5. Describe how your sexuality has impacted your spirituality.
 6. Describe how your spirituality has impacted your sexuality.
 7. Describe your experience of how you saw your sexual body throughout your life.
 8. Describe your experience(s) of sexual shame.
 9. Describe how you experience your sexuality currently.
 10. Describe how your experience(s) of working through sexual shame.
 11. What spoke into the working through of sexual shame? What people, what messages? What was your sense of the Divine, etc?
 12. Can you think of any specific examples of how your spirituality has impacted your sexuality?
 13. Can you think of any specific examples of the experience of working through sexual shame?
- Finish the sentence: My sexuality is...

Appendix E: Debriefing Script Following the Interview

Thank you very much for your participation in this study!

What was this experience like for you? Was there a part of the study that was difficult? Do you have any questions or comments about what it was like participating in the study?

Just a reminder, I will be contacting you once the analysis of all of the interviews is complete. This is for me to receive feedback from you about my interpretation of your experience to ensure accuracy. Your participation in this part of the process is entirely voluntary. If you would like to participate in this part of the research process, we can discuss how you would like to go about doing so. Furthermore, if you would like me send you the results of this study, I can send you the completed thesis.

I have a packet for you that contain your incentive for you participation. It also includes a list of free or low cost counselling services that you can access should you notice that you have experienced any undesirable responses today, or at some point in the future (give participant packet).

Thank you again for your participation in this study. I am really grateful for you time and contribution to this research.

Appendix F: Thank you letter with local, free or low cost counselling services:

Dear: (Participant Name)

Thank you again for your participation in this research project. I am very hopeful that your story will be used to help other women come to embrace their sexuality. Enclosed is a small token of appreciation for your time and willingness to share your experiences.

If you notice that there is something that we talked about that you wish to speak with a mental health professional about, or if you experienced some distress as a result of this interview, below is a list of free or low cost counselling resources in your community.

Fraser River Counselling

7600 Glover Rd, Langley, BC V2Y 1Y1
(604) 513-2113

Brookwood Community Counselling

#107- 20103 40 Ave Belmont Centre,
Langley, BC V3A 2W3
(778) 278-3411

Burnaby Counselling Group

3701 Hastings St,
Burnaby, BC V5C 2H6
(604) 430-1303

Thank you very much,

Kelsey Siemens

Appendix G: Debriefing Script Following the Reviewing of the Analysis

What was this experience like for you? Do you have any additional questions or comments about what it was like participating in the study?

As mentioned in an earlier conversation, if you would like me send you the results of this study, I can send you the completed thesis.

Thank you again for your participation in this study. I am really grateful for you time and contribution to this research.

Appendix J: Brief Electronic Recruitment Advertisement

I am looking to interview recently married women (in the past 0-3 years) who have been able to develop resilience to sexual shame. If you are a woman grew up in a Christian culture, and can speak about your sexual experiences, you may be a good fit for this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study please see for more information:
Survey monkey link

Appendix K: Brief Script for Oral Advertisement

Hi! My name is Kelsey Siemens, and I am completing a study on women's sexual shame resilience for my Master's thesis at Trinity Western University. I am interested in speaking with women who have been immersed in a Christian culture, and who have been able to embrace their sexuality. I am hoping to interview women who have been married in the past three years. If this describes you, and you would be willing to share your journey about working through sexual shame, you are welcomed to complete a survey at: [Survey monkey link](#)

If you would like more information about the study, you can feel free to contact me via email at XXXXX@hotmail.com

Thank you very much for your time!

Appendix L: Email Permission for Use of Screening Questions

From: GinaOgden <email address>
To: 'Kelsey Siemens' <email address>
Subject: RE: Use of ISIS survey questions in thesis
Date: November 21, 2014 at 1:38:06 PM PST

Hello Kelsey,
Delighted to have you use whatever serves you for your research.
I'm interested in what questions you're choosing to use--as it would be fascinating to compare the responses you get with the responses I got in 1997-8.

Also, when you come to writing your thesis, please, of course, reference my work.

It would be great if you could come to Esalen Institute on the California coast, where I'll be teaching two programs:

Feb 6 -8 (for professionals)
<http://www.esalen.org/workshop/weekend-february-6-8/expanding-practice-sex-therapy-training-health-professionals>
and
Feb 8-13 (for women)
<http://www.esalen.org/workshop/week-february-8-13/womens-sexual-stories-healing-wounds-celebrating-joy>.

Please let your colleagues know about these trainings.

And tell me more about your project!
Warm wishes,
Gina Ogden

Gina Ogden, PhD, LMFT
Sex Therapy Supervisor
www.GinaOgden.com
www.ISISNetwork.org
[phone number]

Expanding the Practice of Sex Therapy
The Return of Desire
The Heart & Soul of Sex
Women Who Love Sex

Appendix M: Demographics and Screening Survey

Demographics: (fill in the blank)

Age: Relationship Status: Length of marriage:
 Religious affiliation: Denomination (if applicable):

History of spirituality and religiosity:

Religious activities (check all that apply)

	Youth (13-18)	Young Adult (18-25)	Current
Attend church			
Prayer			
Reading Bible			
Reading other theological/spiritual literature			
Attending church functions			
Attending theological workshops			
Attending vacation bible school			
Attending bible camp			
Attending pastoral pre-marital counselling			
Attending youth groups			
Attending religious seminars			
Volunteerism in religious setting			
Other			

I received information and/or messages about sexuality within these contexts: Yes/No

In the past, my religion influenced my sexuality: Yes/No

In the past, my spirituality influenced my sexuality: Yes/No

Working survey on sexual shame resilience: 5 point likert scale 1 completely disagree— 5. completely disagree

1. I understand or am familiar with the experience of shame:
2. I have learned ways to overcome sexual shame:
3. I have never experienced sexual shame:
4. I currently do not experience sexual shame:
5. In the past, I have felt like there are a number of expectations placed on my sexuality
 1. If so, I felt like I didn't live up to these expectations:

6. I currently feel like there are a number of expectations placed on my sexuality
1. If so, I feel like I do not meet these expectations placed on my sexuality:
7. I feel connected to my sexual self:
8. In the past, I have been personally vulnerable to sexual shame
9. I recognize that there are specific experiences that 'trigger' my sexual shame.
10. I am able to recognize when I am experiencing shame:
11. I know the bodily sensations I have when I experience shame:
12. There are particular experiences or feelings that make me feel sexual shame:
13. When I have had sex, I have at times been flooded by overwhelming, negative emotions:
14. I feel like my sexuality is flawed:
15. There are messages about what my sexuality should look like:
16. I believe it is normal to experience sexual shame:
17. I believe sexual shame is part of the human experience:
18. I feel like you should not talk to anyone but your partner about sex:
19. I feel like sexuality is an inappropriate subject for conversation with friends:
20. I feel alone in my sexual shame:
21. I have been able to talk with people about their experiences of sexual shame:
22. I am comfortable talking about my body:
23. Sexuality is of the "flesh," while spirituality is of the spirit.
24. I am comfortable talking about my sexuality:
25. Other people have supported me when I have talked to them about my sexuality:
26. I am comfortable with my body during sex:
27. Sex is mostly physical:
28. Sex involves the body, mind, heart and spirit:
29. I have experienced God through sexual experiences:
30. My sexuality is influenced by my spirituality:
31. My spirituality is influenced by my sexuality:
32. Religion has shaped the way I experience my sexuality:

After survey:

I would be willing to have a brief phone interview to talk with the researcher about participation in the study.