

A Heuristic Inquiry into the Transformative Potential of Optimal Sexuality within a Relational Context

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This study aimed to explore transpersonal dimensions of sexuality, in particular the transformative potential of sexuality. Heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) was chosen as the research methodology. Six couples who self-identified as having an optimal sexuality were interviewed to discover their individual and joint experiences of sexuality and their sense of transformation. The data was examined and developed into individual, exemplary and composite depictions, the latter of which is presented here as the results. The results show two general themes of transformation: (1) a sense of sexual evolution, and (2) a sense of before and after transformation. In addition, there were a range of transformations in the three areas of (1) personal, (2) relational and (3) sexual transformation. While they interrelate and it was not possible to clearly differentiate them, all co-researchers felt that the sexual area contributed to the personal and relational. The discussion in this report interprets the results through a transpersonal lens in three ways: (1) How this type of sexuality is experienced as a dyadic, movement-based, embodied, mindfulness practice, (2) how it cultivates vital energy, and (3) how it forms part of a participatory spirituality. Scope for further research into transpersonal sexology is also identified.

Keywords: transpersonal, sexuality, relationships, transformation, heuristic inquiry, transpersonal development, spiritual development, phenomenological study

As a psychosexual therapist with a transpersonal approach my interest could be termed *transpersonal sexology*, as it includes both the transpersonal dimensions of human sexuality and the sexual dimensions of transpersonal development. Transpersonal psychology has three main themes: holistic, beyond-ego and transformative (Hartelius et al., 2013) which

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Recommended citation: Hellyer, J. (2022). A heuristic inquiry into the transformative potential of optimal sexuality within a relational context. *Consciousness, Spirituality & Transpersonal Psychology*, 3, 51-65. <https://doi.org/10.53074/cstp.2022.30>

also apply to transpersonal sexology. It is holistic in that it addresses all parts of the person: body, mind, heart and soul. It is beyond-ego both in the sense of being beyond the individual, as it is relational and is an important part of interpersonal expression and experience; and in the sense of being transcendent, spiritual, with altered states of consciousness. It is also transformative since it can contribute to developing our higher human potentials. As a therapist I am particularly interested in the third aspect, the transformative elements of sexuality. From my years of clinical experience, I have a strong sense of this potential and wished to substantiate it through the rigorous lens of research. This was a particularly significant endeavour given the limited amount of existing research in the area.

In mainstream sexological research, sexuality is viewed mostly as what Foucault (1980) refers to as *scientia sexualis*, an object of distanced, scientific investigation – sex as an abstract concept, rather than *ars erotica* – sex as a profound sensual act with somatic, transformative, and spiritual aspects. The mainstream perspective is a reductive approach which has reduced the complex, layered breadth of the human sexual experience to “measurable swellings, contractions, and secretions” (Aanastoos, 2001, p.84). We can see the lack of focus in this area in the two volumes of the *APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology* (Tolman & Diamond, 2014), none of whose thirty-eight chapters has a transpersonal focus. One could argue that the growing number of articles on mindfulness and sexuality (see the many articles reviewed in Villena et al., 2018) shows interest in the transpersonal aspects of sexuality. However, as valuable as this research is, the focus is on how mindfulness practices enhance sexual experience, rather than the inverse, which was the focus of this research - can sex itself be a mindfulness practice that enhances life in the same way as other mindfulness practices? There is one recent research project on sexual mindfulness that does show qualitatively that engaging with sex mindfully has positive outcomes on individual and relational well-being (Leavitt et al., 2019, 2021).

In the transpersonal field there is a growing recognition of the need to “research human sexuality from the more comprehensive lens of whole-person psychologies...with the intention to explore its deeper meanings and potentials” as stated by the editors of *The International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* special edition on sexuality (Malkemus & Thouin-Savard, 2019, p. 60). Jorge Ferrer, advocate of a participatory approach to spirituality (Ferrer, 2002), refers strongly to the sexual in his writings on embodied spirituality, underlining the necessity for a “resacralization of sexuality and sensuous pleasure” (Ferrer, 2008, p. 8). Other transpersonal scholars discuss how a participatory approach involves the physical. Malkemus (2012) states that “the participatory approach calls us to reflect upon the way in which the spiritual dimensions of our experience overlap and intertwine with the biology of our sensuous environment and bodily identities” (p. 212). His co-authored paper (Malkemus & Romero, 2012) discusses sexuality as a transformational path. They propose that when sexuality is comprehended as a creative force of life energy it can be engaged with in a way that leads to transformation, healing and growth. These and other transpersonal theorists consider sex as far more than acts

and thoughts, and much more about erotic-spiritual energies. Barratt (2019) explains: “It is not just that sexuality involves movements of subtle energies; rather, it must be understood, sexuality is the movement of these energies and that these energies are, in a profound sense that should not be ignored, inherently sexual” (p. 176).

These views are reflected by the authors of chapters in the only anthology of transpersonal sexology, *Integral and Transpersonal Sexology*, edited by Long (2014b). In her introduction she explains how integral or transpersonal sexological methodologies enable people to develop in a way that will not only transform their sexual life, but their whole human condition and existence (Long, 2014a). These transpersonal approaches have in common a proposal that sexuality is about vitality and meaning in life. We see this expounded in Moore’s (1998) *The Soul of Sex*, and Gafni and Kincaid’s (2017) *A Return to Eros*, which both refer to an *Eros* energy, a vital energy that infuses life.

While this sense of sex as vital life/*Eros* energy is apparent in more theoretical writings, when it comes to actual research, it seems that the more exceptional, spontaneous, transcendent, elements of sexuality are of particular interest. Wade (2000) researched sex-related extraordinary human experiences (EHEs). However, as interesting and important as this research is regarding those experiences, they describe isolated, albeit powerful, transpersonal experiences, rather than ongoing transpersonal states. She found that these experiences could contribute to healing, personal growth, connection to Spirit, empowerment and enhanced relationships, yet not inevitably (Wade, 2013). As with other spontaneous EHEs, the experiences could be frightening and not aligned with the worldview of the experiencer. These types of intense and profound experiences do not always result in actual transformation. To be truly transformative, that is, to cause a major change in someone for the better, experiences need to be *persistent*, more than a temporary shift that reverts to a previous state; *pervasive*, not confined to isolated aspects of one’s being or functioning; and *profound*, having an important impact on one’s life (Anderson & Braud, 2011).

The EHEs described by Wade are likely to be what Taylor (2013) refers to as *secondary awakenings*, temporary experiences that give a glimpse into and a taste of the transpersonal, rather than a *primary awakening*, where the person has evolved into a permanent, albeit evolving, new state. My sense is that true transformation is more likely to occur through a less dramatic yet more consciously cultivated ongoing sex life. This view is shared by Elfers (2009), who researched the cultivation the ecstatic potentials of sexuality as transpersonal development. While his research participants all had profoundly transcendent sexual experiences, he posited that “it will be found in future studies that many people have regular and consistent sexual experiences of a transcendent nature that may not rise to profound levels, but whose cumulative impact contains the same impetus to wholeness and healing” (Elfers, 2009, p.157).

This essentially was my research purpose - to investigate how an ongoing transpersonal sexuality is experienced, how it is reached and what are the transformational benefits of such a sexuality.

The work of Keinplatz and Menard (2007) was employed as the framework for the present research, using their eight criteria for optimal sexuality: being present, extraordinary communication, intense emotional connection, erotic intimacy, interpersonal risk-taking, authenticity, vulnerability and transcendence. This resonated with my own sense of a transpersonal sexuality, based on my clinical and personal experience

The question of how this type of sexuality is developed and attained was beyond the scope of this project, although it did form part of the interview protocol. The focus of this research project was specifically on the transformational outcomes of having this optimal sexuality. To contain the research parameters further for the scope of the project, and due to my particular interest in couples therapy, I chose to examine this transformation within a relational context, to have couples rather than individuals as my co-researchers.

Method

Being an examination of the experience of a transformational sexuality, a phenomenological approach was required. Heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) was chosen, as my close involvement with the topic would make it difficult to bracket myself out of the research. Furthermore, heuristic inquiry does not just allow, but requires, the researcher to be part of the inquiry as much as the co-researchers. The approach was cleared by Alef Trust and Professional Development Foundation research ethics committee prior to commencement.

In addition, Moustakas (1990) describes the similarity between heuristic research and therapy, as both are potentially transformative to those involved. As a psychosexual therapist researching the transformational potential of sexuality, the potential to transform my understandings professionally and personally, to transform my co-researchers and my potential audience, while researching transformation itself, was very appealing.

Finally, heuristic inquiry has a creative component. There is an opportunity to present the findings through art. I felt this was particularly important for a subject that is as personal as sexual experience. When engaging with art we feel into the experience more than simply cognitively thinking about it, we become one with the experience of the artist.

Procedure

There are six phases to a heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). The first phase, initial engagement, clarified the research topic. The second phase, immersion, involved recruiting and interviewing six couples and continuing with literature research and

interviewing six couples and continuing with literature research and reflection. Phases three and four, incubation and illumination, allowed insights from the incubation phase to come to conscious awareness, allowing illumination, new awareness and understanding of the phenomenon. In the fifth phase, explication, depictions were explicated of the core themes that emerged. Individual portraits were prepared for each couple, two of which were presented as exemplary portraits, as they best demonstrate the experience being researched. A composite depiction then examined the experience of the phenomenon as a whole. The content of this composite depiction forms the results section in this article. The final phase, creative synthesis, was presented as a short fictional piece of transpersonal erotica. The writing of the erotic fiction was a particularly enjoyable part of the process. It embodies the essence of the sexuality and transformation depicted by the experiences of the co-researchers and was validated by them on reading it.

The six couples who became the co-researchers (Table 1) were recruited through my newsletter, blog and social media channels. I sought couples who self-identified as having an optimal sexuality, meeting the eight criteria outlined by Keinplatz and Menard (2007) above, and who would explore with me how they have grown and transformed as individuals and as a couple through developing this level of sexuality. Attempts to recruit outside of my network were not successful. While this means that the co-researchers were familiar with my work, nobody who had had a therapeutic relationship with me was chosen.

Table 1

Co-Researchers' Biographical Details

Pseudonyms	Ages	Nationalities	Professions	Years together	Children	Relationship status
Corinne & Andreas	57 56	Australian	Solicitor Project Manager	5	Corinne: 0 Andreas: 2 teen	Married
Evelyn & Thomas	55 50	Australian	Real Estate Agent Truck Driver	5	Evelyn: 3 adult Thomas: 1 teen	Married
Lena & Greg	48 59	Australian	Psychologist Engineer	5½	Lena: 2 teen Greg: 4 adult	Married
Nicole & Barry	51 53	Australian	HR Manager IT Manager	8	Nicole: 2 adult Barry: 2 adult	Engaged
Penny & Pat	56 54	British	Counsellors & Jewellery designers	28	3 adult	Common law marriage
Rachel & Tristan	49 48	American & Australian	Film Producer Advertising Exec	24	2 teen	Married

The couples were all in primarily heterosexual relationships, aged from late 40s to late 50s, from English-speaking countries. I chose couples of middle-age as they have had extensive life experience. Given the small number of co-researchers, I chose not to have a wide diversity of participants in terms of age, culture, or sexuality. Two couples were in long-term relationships of over 20 years, and four couples in five to eight-year relationships.

Interview Protocol

One-and-a-half-hour semi-structured, dialogic interviews were conducted with each couple. The interview was in three parts:

- Part one discussed each of the eight criteria of optimal sexuality, to provide a structure to discuss in more depth their own experience of their sexuality.
- Part two discussed their personal and relational history, to gain insight into pivotal points along their journey, conditions that aided or impaired, and complementary activities that may have supported their development.
- Part three asked about their sense of transformation of their own self, their partner and themselves as a couple.

Data Analysis

Following the interviews, I sat with the recordings and transcriptions, reflecting on the literature and on my own professional and personal experience, often in seated contemplation, meditation or on long walks on deserted beaches. I identified common experiences and language, drew charts and tables, and gained insight into the phenomenon. This process refined the themes into personal and relational transformation. Additionally, although I had originally thought the Kleinplatz and Menard (2007) research on optimal sexuality would suffice in terms of describing the sexuality of the co-researchers, I found further themes that explicated less around what the co-researchers were *doing* sexually, and more around how they *engaged* in their sexuality. Therefore, I also have a section on sexual transformation. This concept, that the co-researchers' sexuality itself has transformed, became a key component of the research.

Results

This results section represents the composite depiction part of the heuristic inquiry. The two exemplary portraits and the creative synthesis can be read on my blog (Hellyer, 2020). The composite depiction describes two overall themes of transformation, plus sub-themes in the three domains of personal, relational and sexual transformation.

Two overall themes emerged: Before & After and Sexual Evolution.

1. Before & After

The co-researchers all had a period of transition where they opened up sexually, leading to transformative changes. There is a clear 'before' and 'after'. As Andreas says: "I'm living a completely different life now".

Of the newer couples, the individuals all went through a period of personal and sexual exploration after their previous marriages ended. They feel they wouldn't have met each other if they hadn't gone through that period of growth. Evelyn says: "I don't believe I would have allowed such a lovely human being as Thomas into my life had I not persevered with working and living actively in a place of love and trust."

The two longer-term couples also felt a clear difference in themselves and their relationship after they opened up sexually, both in discussing their desires and in acting on them, as indicated by Penny's comment: "That was a massive unleashing from which... I haven't looked back."

2. Sexual Evolution

They all agreed that sex is integral to their personal and relational growth, and all but one felt that their sexuality itself has *evolved* as part of their broader evolution. For the longer-term couples this took opening up to each other around their desires. Penny says their sex life "shifted big time when we started exploring, first in our fantasies... and then in reality, and that was a massive change. It was a reawakening." For those in newer relationships, leaving repressive earlier relationships was key. Lena's experience is indicative: "The day I said to my husband I want a divorce, my libido just went ping! It was like, woah, what's this?"

In addition, there were transformations in the three areas of personal, relational and sexual.

1. Personal Transformation

All but one co-researcher felt they have transformed by becoming more confident, vulnerable, open-minded, gentle, embodied, intuitive, free, and with less guilt or shame. They all feel that the sexual has contributed to the personal. For Corinne: "It's made a complete difference to my life." Barry feels "totally, very close to 100% comfortable with who I am." Thomas says: "I finally have freedom to be me..."

As these qualities revealed themselves in the analysis, I was reminded of how Taylor (2016) describes spiritual growth in his paper on soft perennialism: "[Spiritual growth is] a movement towards an increased expansiveness of being, towards an increased openness, an enhanced awareness, an increased sense of connection and a more authentic and meaningful existence" (p. 21).

In follow-up emails, I asked the co-researchers to reflect on this quote. Lena and Greg responded: "We think in all cases our sexual development has led us to being better as individuals on all counts, particularly increased openness, connection and awareness". Nicole and Barry felt that: "There's no doubt that our sexual development, individually and as a couple, have supported improved trust, openness, connection and authenticity for us both." Andreas responded:

Definitely for me – I was outward looking and expansive already... but having the support and trust to be vulnerable and open has expanded that greatly and made me much more comfortable within my own skin and confident that I can send ever more energy out into the world. My internal world/personal connection to the universe has also increased.

2. Relational Transformation

There were many ways in which the co-researchers felt their relationship had transformed. Six main subthemes emerged:

Trust

The term ‘trust’ came up more than any other and is seen as the key to the vulnerability and authenticity that defines these relationships. As Andreas says: “This is the first relationship where I’ve felt the trust to be able to be vulnerable.”

Freshness

Most said their relationship feels fresh, even after many years together. Along with this is a sense of the relationship being light and playful, as illustrated by Evelyn’s comment that “I can express myself sexually as deeply and as playfully and as frequently as comes naturally to me”, and Greg: “One of the really cool things about us is that our relationship’s not tired, it’s still very fresh because we’re still learning and still exploring, and we realise that we’re on a journey that’s going to take some time.”

Touch

All the couples have a great deal of touch in their relationship. They reported this verbally, such as Corinne’s comment that: “We’re always touching and hugging and feeling”, and it was clear in the way they interacted during the interviews.

Sex is a ‘mutual hobby’

The couples felt so comfortable talking about and exploring their sexuality, that it was as if for them sex is a mutual hobby. They study and learn about sex and sexuality, reading books, listening to podcasts, attending workshops and retreats. Further, their sexuality is seen as an important and regular topic of conversation and discussion, not just when it is a problem, but as an ongoing creative exploration and journey of learning and discovery. As Evelyn says: “Nothing is off limits.”

Differentiation

The quality of these couples’ engagement, both relationally and sexually, is highly differentiated. It comes from both awareness of self and the ability to be aware of the other. They are simultaneously both self-aware and other-aware. There is a strong sense of respect and non-judgement in their interactions. As Barry says: “It’s about being comfortable about what your likes and dislikes are or your preferences... and being able to share those in a safe and non-judgemental way.”

Freedom and consciousness

Freedom is a strong aspect of their relationships. The freedom to be their conscious, authentic selves. As Tristan said, it is “liberation from bizarre culturally constructed roles and dynamics to personal to spiritual to experiential“. The co-creation of this liberation was clear, as Pat stated: “We were coming from a very secure place...so we were able to stand our ground and go against society norms.”

This attests to the *conscious* awareness and engagement the co-participants have in relation to their sexuality and its place in their relationship and lives. They are not simply following established social conditioning. They have examined their sexuality, they have studied and explored, they discuss it freely, frequently and without judgement.

As an example, all the couples have addressed the issue of non-monogamy. They all discussed it without judgement and collaboratively and consciously come to terms with the place it has in their relationship. The agreements they have created all differ, because there is no one correct way to engage in non-monogamy. Each of the six couples has determined their own unique approach:

- a polyamorous relationship where each has their own lover (Rachel & Tristan);
- swinging together, but never having sex with others on their own (Penny & Pat);
- monogamous, although they would engage a paid professional together, which they had done once (Corinne & Andreas);
- open to the possibility of non-monogamy and will address it if and when it arises (Evelyn & Thomas);
- fully monogamous (Nicole & Barry);
- occasional threesomes, plus have agreed they can have sex with others if it feels right at the time, as long as they share the story after. Although at the time of interview neither had done so (Lena & Greg).

Clearly, whether monogamous or non-monogamous, each couple’s decision has been, and continues to be, a *conscious* choice.

3. Sexual Transformation

The co-researchers all confirmed that Kleinplatz and Menard’s (2007) eight criteria of optimal sexuality described their experience of their sexuality, as well as identifying five further qualities. These are less to do with how they experience the act of sex, and more to do with how they engage with their sexuality more broadly in life.

Safety is sexy

The co-researchers have an extraordinary ability to accept the other, to listen and hear, even when the subject is challenging. By being able to discuss their desires and fears they create a safety which allows for expression and exploration. As Corinne said: “Our bed is the safest place in the world.”

Breadth and depth

The co-researchers have explored a range of sexual experiences: playful, sensual, kinky, energetic, depending on their eroticism. They have also discovered a greater depth of intimacy and connection, with all but one individual feeling that depth is primary. As an example, Pat and Penny say in regard to swinging that “often the deepest bit of it comes at the end of the night, when we are just back together as the two of us.” Greg recalls after a threesome: “We genuinely made love after he left, and it was... awesome.”

Some are finding that the breadth of sexual experience has lost its appeal in favour of depth. Tristan describes how he no longer has specific sexual fantasies: “It’s more about connection”. Corinne describes how “even though we had great sex in the first three years, we didn’t when we look back on it, we just didn’t”, compared to the last two years. Barry describes how in the early days he and Nicole were very experimental, but now “the quality of the connection when we do have sex is just so amazing”.

Sex permeates life

Sex is not something they do and then get back to life. Sex follows them into life, the vibrancy, the joy, the connection flows into all aspects of their lives. Sex is less an act and more a creative expression of energy, love and desire that constantly flows between them. Andreas describes it as:

A very constant thing. It’s always just bubbling along in the background... I can feel your energy, particularly in bed but just generally. Even when we’re apart I can still feel the energy... It’s just there and part of life now.

Non-linear approach

The co-researchers experience sexual encounters in a non-linear way. There are no key performance indicators around what has to occur. Instead, it is a moment-by-moment co-creation. In this way the encounter could be as simple as a conversation or a kiss, or could be hours of varied love-making. As Thomas says: “[I] love to feel it, love to push the boundaries with it, just keep trying new things, repeating old things, enjoying every moment [with] no pressure to get to an end goal.”

Pleasure-focus

The focus is pleasure, not orgasm. The pleasure is not a chasing after brief moments of orgasm, rather there are heightened states of arousal, waves of orgasmic pleasure, whole body sensations and movements, often multiple and varied orgasmic experiences. Most co-researchers felt energy moving through and between them at times of deep sexual connection, such as when Nicole describes: “It’s quite amazing. It’s an intense experience. It’s this real merging of the two of us. It’s like this energy flow... you can feel that energy in here, out there”, with Barry adding, “circulating, passing between us. Really quite an incredible experience.” They find that, as Penny puts it: “The bliss and joy... permeate life in general.”

Discussion

There is a ‘chicken and egg’ dilemma in this research, as it is not possible to separate clearly what is purely the sexual, what is relational, and what is personal. They are interrelated and throughout their lives the co-researchers have focused on development in all three areas. There is not a clear cause and effect that having optimal sexuality leads to this personal and relational transformation. Nonetheless, all the co-researchers felt that as much as these elements are intertwined, the fact of their having an optimal sexuality enhances the other elements of their being and of their relating. In this discussion I would like to examine why this might be, starting with the more scientific and moving into a more spiritual conceptualisation of the link between optimal sexuality and transformation.

Dyadic Movement-Based Embodied Mindfulness Practice

For these co-researchers, their sexual engagement is a very embodied experience, very mindful, and very present. The sexual experience itself is an embodied mindfulness practice. Further, it is what Schmalzl et al. (2014) refer to as a dyadic movement-based embodied contemplative practice (MBEC). They explain that MBEC practices “can be tools for restructuring an individual’s sense of agency, and consequently impact the exploration and transformation of their sense of self” (p. 2). This means that MBEC practices have the benefits of seated mindfulness and meditation practices, benefits which include awareness, insight, wisdom, compassion, and equanimity (Baer et. al, 2006), plus have the additional benefits of being movement-based: kinaesthetic, proprioceptive, tactile, spatial and interoceptive. Additionally, sex is dyadic, it is partner-based, and in the case of the co-researchers, *loving* partner-based, so there are further benefits as the partners share somatosensory and affective experience, “entering a state of enhanced connectivity referred to as ‘resonance’” (Schmalzl et al., 2014, p. 4).

Cultivation of Vital Energy

The co-researchers feel a sexual flow in all parts of life. Rather than sex being limited to genital behaviours, their whole relationship is immersed in a loving-sexual energy, a vital life force, which flows within, between and beyond them. I believe this loving-sexual energy is akin to the vital Eros energy referred to by transpersonal scholars Romero and Malkemus (2012), who view sexuality as “a flow of clean and dense primary life” (p. 38), and that this energy:

Is present not only when having sex, but also when allowing life to flow through the whole of one’s being, whether this involves sexual behaviour or simply drinking a cup of tea. Sex in this sense is not something separate or divided from the energetic flow of daily life, but an integral and natural aspect of human identity (p. 38).

As Gafni and Kincaid (2017) describe it: “When the very Eros of existence is awakened in you...You begin to live the erotic life in every dimension of your nonsexual life. As you re-eroticise your life you are personally transformed” (p. 17). I believe we see this in the language we use to describe sex. Sex is procreative, the sexual energy is a procreative energy.

It is pro-creation, “for creation”, not just the creation of babies, but for the creation of our lives, the enaction of our lives.

Participatory Spirituality

This enaction of the Eros energy in one’s life, relates to a participatory spirituality, as proposed by Ferrer (2002), a spirituality that is holistic, embodied and engaged in the world. The participatory approach has two key elements: it is embodied and it is relational. As discussed above, optimal sexuality is embodied; the focused mindful experience in love-making is carried out into the world. The co-researchers referred to feeling extended bliss after sex, and how their sexual energy is part of their lives. In terms of the relational, the participatory approach is not about one individual transcending the world as in the dualistic hierarchical spiritual philosophies; rather, it is about engaging *with* the world, having a relationship with the physicality of existence, with the world as a whole and the individuals within it. The quality of the sexual connection enhances the relational aspect of the participatory spirituality.

Their relationship, and the sexuality expressed within it, adds to their completion as whole individuals, taking them to a level they would not reach on their own. They reveal parts of their self through being with the other that they could not reveal on their own. It could be said that they move beyond their ‘small-s’ self to their ‘big-S’ Self, to feeling part of the whole while still maintaining their integrity. This is transformation into the transpersonal.

I started this research with Kleinplatz’s optimal sexuality (Kleinplatz & Menard, 2007) as a framework, and I would like to finish the discussion with a quote of hers that incorporates the link with the spiritual:

This is the flame, the passion that burns but does not consume. A sense of uniqueness here exists with universality. It is an integration and celebration of sexuality and spirituality. It is being fully embodied in *realizing* the sacred (Kleinplatz & Krippner, 2005, p. 306).

Further Research

This was a small project researching a large topic so there is abundant scope for more research in this area. Three areas of research would be beneficial:

1. Due to the small number of participants, this project focused on a fairly homogeneous group of similar age and culture. It would be worthwhile to research whether similar findings are apparent in other groups of people: different cultures, different age groups, same-sex attracted couples; and to focus on individuals rather than couples.
2. This project was broad in scope, thus it would be interesting to focus on specific elements of sexuality and how they contribute to transformation. For example, do transcendent experiences embedded in sexuality contribute to an ongoing optimal sexuality and subsequent transformation, and if so how?

3. Finally, a very useful research approach would be to examine *how* this optimal sexuality is developed. As the current research showed, the co-researchers had engaged with diverse personal, relational, sexual and spiritual growth practices, research and learnings. It would be worthwhile to explicate this process in more depth.

Conclusion

Conducting this research was validating for me as a transpersonal clinical sexologist. The detail and rigour applied to examining in depth the experiences of six couples confirmed and enhanced my own professional and personal experience of the importance of sexuality, not just to individual and couple well-being, but to enhancing life more broadly. This research corroborates my understanding that sex can, and dare I say should, be engaged in in a transforming, life-enhancing way; sex that evolves and matures through life, which allows an expansion of consciousness, a growth in awareness, a growth in love.

This small research project is just a small drop in what needs to be an ocean of research. Sex is powerful – let us use it for good, for transformation and growth, let us weave our sexuality and spirituality together so we transform our consciousness, have better quality relationships and live more fully and deeply in the world.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on the final dissertation research project undertaken by the author and supervised by Dr. Jessica Bockler. It was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MSc programme in Professional Development: Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology. The programme was delivered by Alef Trust in collaboration with the Professional Development Foundation. The degree was quality assured and accredited by Middlesex University, UK.

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