

Contributors to Optimal Sexual Experiences

Amy Dana Ménard

Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for a doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology

School of Psychology
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify the contributors to optimal sexual experiences. At present, there is a lack of clinical knowledge, research knowledge and in-depth public discourse concerning the nature of healthy sexuality. The theoretical and research literature in this area has focused almost exclusively on defining and conceptualizing sexual dysfunctions with little attention paid to either normal or satisfactory experiences. Very little theory exists on the nature and components of optimal sexuality. To date, no empirical investigations have been done to determine the contributors to optimal sexual experiences. In order to identify the contributors to optimal sexual experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 individuals who reported having experienced “great sex”. A phenomenologically-oriented content analysis was performed on interview transcripts to determine the contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Analysis led to the identification of seven major contributors, two pathways towards optimal sexual experiences and two minor contributors. The major contributors included developmental contributors, individual qualities overall, individual qualities in-the moment, skills, relationship qualities overall, relationship qualities in-the-moment and environmental, situational and preparatory contributors. Each of these larger themes was also characterized by a variety of more specific themes. The two pathways that led to optimal sexual experiences included individual qualities that facilitated relationship qualities and relationship qualities that facilitated individual qualities. Finally, the minor contributors consisted of personal proclivities and miscellaneous contributors. Noteworthy findings of this investigation are discussed and then compared and contrasted with existing research and theory. The implications of this work for the general public, sex therapy, sex education, theory and research are considered as well as the strengths and limitations of this study.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation for the guidance provided to me by my thesis supervisor, Dr. Peggy Kleinplatz. Your wisdom and creativity have inspired me since we first met in 2003. I would also like to thank my dissertation committee – Dr. Philippe Cappeliez, Dr. Julie Gosselin and Dr. Elizabeth Kristjansson – as well as my external examiner, Dr. Barry McCarthy, for your assistance in preparing this dissertation and for the enthusiasm that you brought to the project.

Thank you to my parents, Dan and Lois, for supporting me in every conceivable way through this degree and for making this long process more pleasant. Thank you also to my parents-in-law, Mike and Airi, and brother-in-law Tim for welcoming me into your family with such affection.

I want to extend sincere thanks to all of the research team members, both past and present, and in particular to Meghan, Tracy, Chris, Nic and Shannon. Your warmth, empathy, honesty and enthusiasm made the research process joyful.

Thank you to old friends in Ottawa, new friends in London and in particular to Amy, Jenelle, Renée, Isabelle, Chelsea and Alexis. Thank you for laughing with me, for running alongside me and for encouraging me whenever I needed it.

Special thanks to my early readers, Karen, Angela and Melanie. Your feedback in the final stages of preparing this document was very helpful.

Thanks to Zipper and Zest, my four-legged family members, who provided daily reminders for me to be present in all of life's moments.

I offer my deepest gratitude and respect to the participants who shared their life experiences for the purposes of this research. I continue to be humbled, awed and inspired by your stories. Your beautiful words made writing this thesis a real pleasure.

And finally, I would like to thank my husband John, my companion on this journey for the last 14 years, for everything. Your love pulls me through time.

Table of contents

Section	Page
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	vii
List of Appendices	viii
Introduction	
Contextualizing Optimal Sexual Experiences	3
Defining the Spectrum of Sexual Experiences	7
Contributors to Dysfunctional, Normal and Satisfactory Sexuality and Sexual Improvement	12
Contributors to Optimal Sexual Experiences	19
Contributors to Other Kinds of Optimal Experiences	25
Objectives of this Investigation	29
Methods	
Purpose and Scope of this Investigation	34
Descriptive Phenomenology	35
Participant Groups	36
Procedure	41
Participants	51
Results	
Major Contributor 1: Developmental Contributors	55
Major Contributor 2: Individual Qualities Overall	68

Major Contributor 3: Individual Qualities In-the-moment	81
Major Contributor 4: Skills	93
Major Contributor 5: Relationship Qualities Overall	102
Major Contributor 6: Relational Qualities In-the-moment	129
Major Contributor 7: Situational, Preparatory and Environmental Contributors	147
Pathway A: Relational Context that Facilitates an Individual Quality	156
Pathway B: Individual Quality that Facilitates a Relational Quality	159
Minor Contributor 8: Individual Proclivities	162
Minor Contributor 9: Miscellaneous	163
Discussion	
Summary of Results	166
Noteworthy Findings and Connections between Contributors	167
Comparison to Previous Findings	196
Implications	216
Strengths and Limitations of the Research	226
Future Directions	233
Conclusion	234
References	236
Appendix A	266
Appendix B	267
Appendix C	268
Appendix D	270
Appendix E	273

List of Tables

Table 1. Overall contributors to optimal sexual experiences.	54
Table 2. Major themes within developmental contributors	56
Table 3. Major themes within individual qualities overall	69
Table 4. Major and minor themes within individual qualities in-the-moment	82
Table 5. Major themes within skills	94
Table 6. Super-ordinate themes, major themes and sub-themes within relational qualities overall	103
Table 7. Super-ordinate and major themes within relational qualities in-the-moment	130
Table 8. Major themes within situation, preparation and environmental contributors	148

List of Appendices

Appendix	Description	Page
A	Recruitment ad (older individuals)	266
B	Listserv recruitment post (SM communities)	267
C	Informed consent form	268
D	Semi-structured interview script for individuals experiencing optimal sexuality	270
E	Debriefing form	273
F	Full list of contributors and themes	274

Contributors to Optimal Sexual Experiences

There is a paradox in the Western world surrounding the topic of optimal sexual experiences. Seen through the lens of media sources, the pursuit of “amazing” sex seems to be one of the primary goals of human kind, driving all types of behaviours, thoughts, feelings and attitudes. The desire for “great sex” is assumed to be virtually universal (Rye & Meaney, 2007); this is evident from the covers of lifestyle magazines, the topics discussed on television talk shows, the titles of thousands of self-help books and the proliferation of advice on the Internet. Self-help authors, magazine writers and advertising executives produce claims and guarantees about how to achieve “great sex” that are questionable at best and damaging at worst (Zilbergeld, 1999). It seems clear that “great sex” is considered very desirable and that many people want to have it (or have more of it) but do not know how to go about this.

Seen through the lens of academia, the question of what leads to optimal sexual experiences is meaningless: Despite the evident interest from the general public, empirical evidence on optimal sexual experiences is almost totally absent from the research literature. Historically, researchers have conducted their research within a functional/dysfunctional paradigm, assuming that optimal sexual experiences are equivalent to the absence of sexual dysfunctions and are defined by working genitals and the ability to experience intercourse. This belief is also espoused by sex therapists, whose interventions seem to be designed to remedy flaccid penises and dry vaginas as though these were the key to what couples truly want in bed. The existence of a category beyond “functional” is not considered by sex researchers or therapists. The result is a superficial, unbalanced, incomplete understanding of sexuality and a significant gap in the literature, which the media has rushed to fill with myths and misinformation.

The goal of this investigation was to answer the question, “What brings about, contributes to or facilitates the occurrence of optimal sexual experiences?” Some recent research has begun to shed light on the nature of optimal sexual experiences (Kleinplatz et al., 2009a), with the results representing a definition of optimal sexual experiences. However, in the same way that it is not possible to look at a Renoir painting or an Olympic-calibre athletic performance and understand how to recreate it oneself, it does not seem possible to bring about optimal sexual experiences merely by understanding what they look like. In order to do so, it would be necessary to identify, explore and define the contributors or facilitating factors of optimal sexual experiences.

In order to clearly explicate the need for this research, optimal sexual experiences will be situated within the context of research on positive psychology, peak experiences and optimal functioning. Definitions of dysfunctional, normal, satisfactory and optimal sexual experiences will be reviewed. The contributors to dysfunctional, normal and satisfactory sexuality will be discussed as well as those that are associated with improvement in sexual functioning. The theoretical work that has been done to date on the factors which may contribute to optimal sexual experiences will be reviewed. Then, the contributors to other, non-sexual types of optimal experiences will be discussed as these may also have relevance for optimal sexual experiences. The purpose of the present investigation will then be outlined. This will be followed by a description of the methods used for this study, including the research methods, participant groups and procedure. The results of the investigation will be presented. This will be followed by a discussion of noteworthy findings, a contextualization of the results in the research literature and a consideration of the implications of these findings for research, therapy and education. There will also be an

evaluation of the strengths and limitations of the investigation and speculation about directions for future research.

Contextualizing Optimal Sexual Experiences

The lack of academic attention to wonderful sexual experiences reflects the overall trend in psychology to focus on the negative aspects of human experience. The goals of psychotherapy have historically been to, “make the troubled less troubled” (Seligman, 1990, p. 96) and to “go from minus five to minus three and feel a little less miserable” (Seligman, 2002, p. xi). In general, research or theory about how to bring about wonderful, incredible, optimal or peak experiences of any kind (i.e., sexual or non-sexual) is lacking. However, some work has been done that represents the exception to this rule. Some theories of optimal experiences have been developed and many seem to show important commonalities with each other and with optimal sexual experiences.

Humanistic psychology, with its focus on the subjective aspects of human experience, is one of the few areas of psychology where peak or optimal experiences have been studied. The term “peak experience” was first used by Maslow to describe those “moments of highest happiness and fulfillment” (1968, p. 73). Peak experiences have also been described as mystic and ecstatic, involving a sense of great awe, intense happiness or rapture and ecstasy or bliss (Maslow, 1962), a “naturally occurring state of altered consciousness” (Ravizza, 1984, p. 453) and a “positive subjective experience involving self-transcendence” (Jackson & Roberts, 1992, p. 157).

Based on his study of peak experiences and the individuals who experienced them, Maslow concluded that peak experiences were more frequently experienced by people who had attained self-actualization (1962), which he defined as “experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption” (1971, p. 45). Self-actualization

involved, “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (1954, p. 383). Maslow defined peak experiences as transient moments of self-actualization (1971). Psychological health was not defined merely by the absence of psychopathology but instead by the striving to meet higher needs and eventually self-actualization (1970). Maslow conceptualized mental health as a pre-requisite for self-actualization, which he believed represented a discrete level of advanced psychological development.

Like Maslow, Rogers also defined self-actualization as a tendency towards greater growth and fulfillment; however, Rogers tended to equate this with movement towards greater authenticity (1961). As people achieved greater actualization, they would become increasingly aware of what was right for them and would experience greater acceptance of themselves and of others.

Although not research on peak experiences per se, Vallerand and his colleagues have conducted an extensive investigation of passion, defined as, “a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy” (Vallerand et al., 2003, p. 757). Their work tends to be included under the umbrella of positive psychology. In large part, Vallerand’s research program has focused on the differences between harmonious and obsessive passions.

Csikszentmihályi, another researcher frequently identified with the positive psychology movement, has developed a theory of optimal experience called “flow”, which he defined as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (1990, p.4). Feelings of flow are characterized by total concentration,

deep focus, a balance between personal challenge and skill, feelings of absorption and embodiment, unselfconsciousness and transcendence.

In recent years, peak or optimal experiences have received very little research attention or theoretical speculation. Mahrer (2008), an exception to this rule, has made a study of optimal behaviours, which he believes are usually missing from books on the good life and well-being. Although optimal behaviours may be different from optimal experiences, Mahrer's program of research is unique in its specific focus on the nature and qualities of "optimal" anything and may therefore be relevant to this study. Mahrer defines optimal behaviours as, "...the distinctive behaviors of people who have become the people they are capable of becoming, who have gone beyond the ordinary meaning of normal, or even mentally healthy, and somehow reached a higher plateau" (p. 16). Development of these behaviours involves extensive training and practice over a period of months and years. Mahrer defines an optimal state as one in which an individual is carrying out many optimal behaviours, including learning, practicing and dedicating oneself to optimal behaviours; welcoming the moment; being attuned, receptive and responsive to bodily-felt sensations; being open and welcoming to different parts of the self; and appreciating the personal world of others (2008).

Whereas peak experiences are more likely to represent moments of highest feeling (Privette, 1983), the term "peak performance" tends to refer to moments of superior functioning (i.e., behaviour), often among athletes (Harmison, 2006; Jackson & Roberts, 1992; Privette, 1981). On the surface, this construct does not appear to resemble wonderful sexual experiences (given that the latter tend not to be goal-directed nor performance-focused). In fact, results from research on flow, peak experiences and peak performance suggest that these experiences often coincide across a variety of contexts (e.g., an experience

of being in flow results in a peak performance for athletes) (Privette, 1981, 1983).

Researchers in this area have often found that moments of peak performance tend to co-occur with peak experiences or feelings of flow. It seems likely that there may be a set of common contributors underlying all three constructs.

Recent research on positive experiences has tended to be subsumed under positive psychology, with its focus on positive emotions and traits, strengths and virtues. However, there are obvious distinctions, beyond the linguistic, between positive experiences and wonderful, incredible or optimal experiences (Mahrer, 2009). The aims of positive psychology are to study well-being and optimal functioning (Snider, 2006) as well as experiences that are pleasant, good or meaningful (Seligman, 2002) rather than ecstatic, wonderful or fantastic. Seligman may ponder, “how to go from plus two to plus seven” (2002) but where is the research on how to go beyond seven, if one so desires? Although research on optimal functioning theoretically falls under the rubric of positive psychology (Seligman & Csíkszentmihályi, 2000), researchers in this area have tended to emphasize well-being and healthy functioning at the expense of optimal functioning or experiences. Information about optimal behaviours is missing from discourses on the nature of the good life and the meaning of well-being (Mahrer, 2009).

At present, research and theory on optimal or peak (non-sexual) experiences is the closest analogue to information about optimal sexual experiences. It is likely that there are some similarities between the components of and contributors to these types of experiences; however, it is also probable that there will be key differences between sexual and non-sexual peak experiences, not least of which is that sexual peak experiences are usually experienced with at least one other person. Moreover, there is very little in the way of research or theory on optimal or peak experiences in the psychological literature, whether these are experienced

in a sexual context or not. This is a serious omission given that optimal experiences may allow individuals to grow and give meaning to their existence (e.g., Csíkszentmihályi, 1997; Frankl, 1966; Maslow, 1968, 1971). Research aimed toward filling the gap in the literature with regards to optimal sexual experiences would enable a more complete understanding of the entire spectrum of human potential and of the contributors to optimal experiences.

Defining the Spectrum of Sexual Experiences

To understand the contributors to optimal sexual experiences, it is necessary to define and distinguish wonderful sexual experiences from other kinds of sexual experiences.

Definitions of dysfunctional, normal and satisfactory sexuality provide a context for defining and understanding optimal sexual experiences and make it possible to tease out the factors that are uniquely associated with optimal sexuality. To date, the vast majority of research, clinical and theoretical attention has been directed towards defining and describing the dysfunctional end of the spectrum as opposed to normal, satisfactory or optimal sexuality (Kleinplatz, 2001a, b; Kleinplatz et al., 2009a; Mitchell & Graham, 2008; Schnarch, 1991).

Sexual dysfunctions. Sexual dysfunctions are defined within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual – 4th Edition (DSM-IV) (American Psychological Association, 2000) as, “a disturbance in the processes that characterize the sexual response cycle or by pain associated with sexual intercourse” (p. 535). In practice, the majority of the sexual function disturbances are defined by physiological problems (e.g., flaccid penis, dry vagina, anorgasmia) accompanied by distress and/or interpersonal difficulty.

Although the DSM definitions of sexual function disturbances are frequently used for diagnosis and research, many criticisms have been levied against this section of the manual. Several authors have claimed that the DSM definitions pathologize normal variation in sexual functioning, omit the necessary relational context and assume a universal,

physiological, sexual response pattern that does not reflect many individuals' reality (Basson, 2005; Basson et al., 2001; Mitchell & Graham, 2008; The Working Group for a New View of Women's Sexual Problems, 2001).

The current academic paradigm of dysfunctional sexuality has focused on a dichotomous understanding of sexual functioning (i.e., dysfunctional and not dysfunctional, which has been labeled "normal"). Within this classification scheme, individuals who have physiological problems and who are unable to experience intercourse and/or orgasm are automatically considered dysfunctional (e.g., Laumann, Paik & Rosen, 1999). However, the results from an increasing body of research have shown that many people who have physiological problems by objective criteria (i.e., who are unable to engage in intercourse or orgasm) are nevertheless not distressed (Ferenidou, Kapoteli, Moisisdis, Koutsogiannis, Giakoumelos & Hatzichristou, 2008; Frank, Anderson & Rubinstein, 1979; Kaufman, Silverberg & Odette, 2003; King, Holt & Nazareth, 2007; Shifren, Monz, Russo, Segreti & Johanes, 2008). It would appear that this dichotomy does not reflect the reality of many people's experiences.

Normal sexual response. Normal sexual functioning is frequently (although not always) equated with normal physiological functioning, a bias that originated with the development of the first model of normal sexual response, Masters and Johnson's Human Sexual Response Cycle (HSRC; 1966). The HSRC consists of four phases, which are physiological and genitally-focused: excitement, plateau, orgasm and resolution (Masters & Johnson, 1966). The implicit message within these models is that normal sexual functioning is defined by successful engagement in intercourse and achievement of orgasm for both men and women.

This dichotomous understanding of sexual functioning is problematic for understanding normal sexuality. Many people who experience perfect physiological functioning (i.e., successful completion of intercourse and orgasm) are nevertheless dissatisfied with the quality of their sexual experiences despite the fact that there is nothing objectively “wrong” with them. Such cases are common within the clinical literature on sexual dysfunctions and contribute to the rising number of those diagnosed with Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD), a sexual disorder characterized by some authors within the clinical literature as resistant to conventional sex therapy treatments (Schnarch, 2000). Normal sexual functioning may be insufficient to account for sexual satisfaction, well-being or fulfillment (Kleinplatz, 1996b). Unfortunately, the current dichotomous definitions of dysfunctional sexuality automatically preclude the existence of a higher level of functioning (i.e., beyond normal) and set the stage for a definition of normal sexuality that leaves many wanting more.

Sexual satisfaction. Definitions of sexual satisfaction in the research literature are frequently inadequate or, in some cases, totally absent. There have been no studies conducted, either qualitative or quantitative, for the sole purpose of defining the term “sexual satisfaction”. As a result, there are a wide variety of definitions of the term and measures of sexual satisfaction (e.g., Bridges, Lease & Ellison, 2004; Gossmann, Julien, Mathieu & Chartrand, 2003; Jones et al., 2008) as well as several different models (i.e., Basson, 2000; Lawrance & Byers, 1995), which may or may not have empirical support.

To date, research on sexual satisfaction remains the closest approximation to positive, but not necessarily optimal, sexual experiences. So far, researchers on sexual satisfaction have not considered the possibility that something may lie further along the continuum of sexual response.

Optimal sexual experiences. Until recently, there have been no attempts within the academic research literature to define or describe fantastic sexual experiences. However, the topic of “great sex” has been addressed frequently within pop culture and, to a lesser extent, by some clinicians.

Media. Although there is a great deal of information about “great” sex in sex manuals, lifestyle magazines and on the Internet, research in this area has focused exclusively on the content of magazines to the virtual exclusion of other forms of media (e.g., sex manuals, television, commercials, movies, fiction, websites). These studies show that advice on how to achieve “great sex” in lifestyle magazines (e.g., *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, *Men’s Health*) tends to be characterized by a focus on performance (Duran & Prusank, 1997; Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008). Suggestions for how to achieve optimal sexual experiences revolve around the introduction of particular stimulation techniques, new positions and/or the inclusion of novel behaviours (e.g., use of props or food). Anecdotal information suggests that sexual self-help manuals adopt a similar focus on techniques and novelty, although empirical content analysis on these books has not yet been done. The lack of research on sex manuals or handbooks is unfortunate given their widespread proliferation. So-called “tantric” sex manuals represent a particularly popular sub-genre but they are virtually identical to other handbooks on the subject of “great sex” and are likewise performance-focused. Certainly, the information contained in these books bears little or no similarity to authentic *maithuna*, a ritualistic form of sexual congress practiced by adherents of left-hand Tantrism (c.f., Garrison, 1964).

Media definitions of sexuality (whether optimal or not) tend to be riddled with gender stereotypes and sexual myths (Abramson & Mechanic, 1983; Duran & Prusank, 1997; Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008; Prusank, Duran & DeLillo, 1993; Ward, 2003), belief in

which may lead to dissatisfaction, problems or dysfunctions (Zilbergeld, 1999). However, until recently, there have been no alternate conceptualizations of optimal sexual experiences within the research literature.

Theory. Although no empirical research had been done on optimal sexual experiences or “great sex” until recently, various authors (usually clinicians) have advanced theories on the subject. Optimal sexuality is thought to include elements such as communication, eroticism, a focus on pleasure rather than performance, a non-genital focus, openness, lack of inhibitions, playfulness, variety, intimacy, relaxation, being present, anticipation, affection, communication, orgasm, ecstasy and transcendence (Barbach, 2000; Barbach & Levine, 1980; Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Morin, 1995; Ogden, 1999, 2001; Schnarch, 1991).

Theoretical work by clinicians in the area of optimal sexuality does provide an alternative to media definitions of “great sex” and to the functional/dysfunctional dichotomy espoused by many other sex therapists and researchers. However, these theories are based on clinical work, in many cases with couples who are, at least initially, unhappy with the quality of their sexual experiences. There may be significant differences between conceptualizations of optimal sexual experiences that are based on work with unhappy couples and conceptualizations of optimal sexual experiences based on research with individuals or couples who self-define as having optimal sexual experiences.

Research: Describing optimal sexual experiences. In order to fill the gap in the literature on sexual functioning, Kleinplatz et al. (2009a) set out to define and describe optimal sexual experiences based on phenomenologically-oriented content analysis of semi-structured interview transcripts with individuals who reported having had great sexual experiences and/or with sex therapists. Eight major and two minor components emerged

from the analysis. These included being focused, present and embodied; feeling a sense of connection, alignment, merger and being in synch; deep sexual and erotic intimacy; extraordinary communication and heightened empathy; exploration, interpersonal risk-taking and fun; authenticity, being genuine, uninhibitedness and transparency; vulnerability and surrender; transcendence, bliss, peace, awe, transformation and healing. The two minor components of optimal sexual experiences (i.e., those that were mentioned by only a minority of participants and not emphasized) included intense physical sensation and orgasm and lust, desire, chemistry and attraction.

In summary, research and theory on sexual functioning to date has focused primarily on dysfunctional sexuality, with little consideration of normal sexuality and virtually none of optimal sexuality. This has created a dichotomy of sexual functioning [i.e., the functional and the dysfunctional (Schnarch, 1991)] that is limiting and does not reflect reality for many individuals and couples. It has also led to the marginalization of optimal sexual experiences as an area for research and/or theory. A few investigations have been done to date with the goal of defining and describing optimal sexual experiences (i.e., Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2007; Kleinplatz et al., 2009a) but so far, no research has been done to identify what leads to optimal sexual experiences. The result is an understanding of sexual experiences within the literature that is incomplete at best.

Contributors to Dysfunctional, Normal and Satisfactory Sexuality and Sexual

Improvement

Just as definitions of dysfunctional, normal and satisfactory sexuality have important repercussions for the definition of optimal sexuality, the causes of and contributors to dysfunctional, normal and satisfactory sexuality provide a context for understanding the contributors that are uniquely associated with optimal sexual experiences. There may be a

set of developmental, individual, relational and environmental contributors that affect sexual functioning across the continuum, from dysfunctional to optimal. Problems associated with a particular contributor (e.g., communication, sex education) to sexual functioning may result in dysfunctional sexuality whereas the optimization of that factor may be associated with magnificent sexual experiences. The contributors to sexual improvement may help an individual travel along the continuum of sexual functioning from dysfunctional sexuality towards normal, satisfactory or optimal sexual experiences.

The bulk of existing research has focused on the causes of specific sexual dysfunctions, with very little information available on what might lead to “normal” sexual experiences. A relatively large number of studies have been done on the factors associated with sexual satisfaction, however. This research tends to be correlational and so it is not possible to draw causal inferences. Information about sexual improvement derives primarily from media sources and from the sex therapy literature.

Factors underlying sexual dysfunctions. Our current understanding of the etiology of sexual dysfunctions is far from complete. There is a dearth of empirical studies in this area (Heiman, 2002; Metz & Epstein, 2002) and there are conceptual and methodological deficiencies in some existing studies (e.g., Laumann et al., 1999; Laumann et al., 2005). In most cases, the research is cross-sectional and correlational; therefore, causal inferences cannot be drawn (Heiman, 2002).

There have been some common, causal factors identified across several sexual dysfunctions. The contributors that are linked causally to several types of sexual dysfunctions may be more relevant to understanding the spectrum of sexual functioning as most sexual dysfunctions are the result of a combination of factors (Crowe, 1995) and there

tend to be high rates of comorbidity among sexual dysfunctions (Nobre, Pinto-Gouveia & Gomes, 2006).

A variety of individual contributors are associated with the experience of sexual dysfunctions. These include certain intrapersonal attitudes (e.g., having narrow definitions of sexuality, focusing on performance, holding stereotyped views of masculine and feminine sex roles) (Nobre & Pinto-Gouveia 2006; Sanders, Graham & Milhausen, 2008; Tiefer, 1988; Zilbergeld, 1999), mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety) (Bancroft, Loftus, & Long, 2003) and developmental contributors (e.g., parental attitudes, childhood sexual abuse) (Dennerstein, Guthrie & Alford, 2004; Firestone, Firestone & Catlett, 2002; Najman, Dunne, Purdie, Boyle & Coxeter, 2005; Walser & Kern, 1996) as well as health, lifestyle and medical factors (e.g., systemic medical conditions, iatrogenic conditions) (Laumann et al., 2005; Meston & Bradford, 2007; Shifren et al., 2008)

A variety of interpersonal problems have been associated with greater likelihood of experiencing sexual dysfunctions (Metz & Epstein, 2002). These include communication problems, lack of trust, resentment, anger, discrepancies in sexual interests or preferences, everyday conflicts, traumatic experiences or abuse, not feeling understood, lack of common interests and lack of closeness and intimacy (Crowe, 1995; Hyde, DeLamater & Byers, 2004).

Contributors to sexual dysfunctions identified within the research literature include personal attitudes and beliefs, developmental experiences, problems related to physical and/or mental health and interpersonal difficulties. However, the relationship between the contributors to dysfunctional sexuality and the contributors to optimal sexuality remains unclear. Perhaps those factors associated with sexual dysfunctions would need to be avoided, minimized, overcome and/or treated in order to bring about wonderful sexual experiences. It

is also possible that contributors to sexual dysfunctions (e.g., increasing age, deteriorating physical health) may not represent an impediment to achieving optimal sexual experiences (Kleinplatz et al., 2009b) due to the effect of mediating or moderating factors (e.g., attitudes and beliefs about sexuality).

Factors underlying ‘normal’ sexuality. Little attention has been paid within the research literature to the “causes” of normal sexual functioning as normal sexuality has long been assumed to be the default position in the absence of sexual dysfunctions (in the same way that sexuality research has focused on the “causes” of homosexuality and ignored the “causes” of heterosexuality). The prevailing conceptualization of normal sexuality is rooted in conceptions of pathology (DeLugach, 1999) and little is known about the factors that might underlie normal sexual functioning. The sparse research that has been done in this area has been focused at the developmental and individual levels.

Sexual development. Little is known about what constitutes normal, healthy sexual development (Bancroft, 2006) and how this might relate to future sexual functioning. The assumption within the research literature appears to be that normal sexual functioning is the natural result of normal, healthy sexual development. Elements of normal sexual development are thought to include learning about intimacy, understanding roles and relationships, reacting to physical changes and modifying the body schema, adjusting to and integrating erotic feelings, learning about social expectations regarding sexual behaviour and understanding the reproductive processes (Bukowski, Sippola & Brender, 1988).

More research is available about the impact of sexual education on a variety of indices, including adult sexual functioning. Children who are raised in a sex-positive environment and who receive comprehensive sex education show better sexual functioning as adults (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). This finding has been demonstrated through

cross-cultural research in which sex-positive cultures (e.g., France, the Netherlands) are compared to more sex-negative cultures (e.g., the United States) (Advocates for Youth, 2009).

Models of sexual response. A variety of models of sexual response and functioning have been proposed (e.g., Basson, 2000; Kaplan, 1974; Masters & Johnson, 1966; Walen & Roth, 1987; Zilbergeld & Ellison, 1980). However, an element common across these models is that their authors have neglected to specify the pre-requisites necessary to experience the components of sexual response; (in essence, we have been provided with a picture of the finished dish without a list of the necessary ingredients). It is not known whether improving particular elements of sexual response outlined within these models will result in an overall improvement in sexual response. Recent research has shown that women are equally likely to endorse Masters' and Johnson's, Kaplan's or Basson's model as representative of their own sexuality (Sand & Fisher, 2007), suggesting that these models are incomplete at best. Perhaps there is no model of sexual functioning universally applicable to men and women. If that is the case, there may be multiple contributors to normal sexual response rather than a set of shared, universal contributors across the spectrum of sexual functioning.

Very little research has been done to date on normal sexual functioning, whether this is for the purpose of defining it or for identifying and understanding the contributors to it. The relationship between the contributors to normal sexual functioning and the contributors to optimal sexual experiences is likewise unclear. Optimal sexual experiences may require specific developmental experiences or possibly the ability to successfully complete one of the many models of sexual response that have been proposed.

Predictors of sexual satisfaction. Research on sexual satisfaction remains the closest approximation in the literature to incredible, wonderful or optimal sexual

experiences. To date, a significant proportion of the research on sexual satisfaction has been devoted to the factors that impede sexual satisfaction rather than promote it (e.g., Bridges & Horne, 2007; Nelson, Choi, Mulhall & Roth, 2007; Phelps, Albo, Dunn & Joseph, 2001; Rellini & Meston, 2007; Schover, 2000; Serretti & Chiesa, 2009). However, some potential contributors to sexual satisfaction have been identified at the individual and relational levels.

Although most of the research on sexual satisfaction has been conducted at the level of the relationship, some contributors at the level of the individual have been studied. These include individual attitudes as well as skills (e.g., general and sexual self-esteem, sexual assertiveness) (e.g., Hally & Pollack, 1993; Larson, Anderson, Holman, Niemann, 1998; Ménard & Offman, 2009) as well as developmental experiences (e.g., being raised in a sexually open and nonreligious home) (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997). Relational contributors to sexual satisfaction include relationship satisfaction (Barrientos & Paez, 2006; Gossman et al., 2003; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Purnine & Carey, 1997; Santtila et al., 2008; Sprecher, 2002; Young, Denny, Young & Luquis, 2000), good communication about non-sexual subjects (e.g., Byers, 2001; Byers & Demmons, 1999), good communication about sexual subjects (Bridges et al., 2004; Byers & Demmons, 1999; Ferroni & Taffe, 1997; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; MacNeil & Byers, 1997; Ménard & Offman, 2009), satisfaction with sexual communication (Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Cupach & Metts, 1995) and sexual compatibility (Offman & Matheson, 2005; Purnine & Carey, 1997).

As with dysfunctional and normal sexuality, the relationship between the facilitating factors of satisfactory sex and those of optimal sexuality is unknown. The two may share a common set of contributors that differ in intensity. Perhaps more of these factors are present during wonderful sexual experiences as compared to satisfying sexual experiences or

perhaps these factors are optimized in their expression (e.g., sexual communication is taken to a much higher level). Perhaps these same contributors to sexual satisfaction form a foundation for optimal sexual experiences: They are necessary in bringing about optimal sexual experiences but are not sufficient unto themselves.

Contributors to sexual improvement. Sex therapy is supposed to help individuals or couples remediate their sexual problems and improve their sex lives. It might be expected that the ultimate goal held by sex therapists would be to help their clients create optimal sexual experiences. However, the outcome goals of sex therapy are rarely stated explicitly within the research literature. Instead, inferences must be made about the ultimate goals of sex therapy based on the treatments that are employed or the symptoms that are targeted. On this basis, the purpose of most sex therapy approaches seems to be to “fix” the functioning of a damaged body part, i.e., the genitals, thus somehow restoring “normal” sexual functioning (Kleinplatz, 2001a; Tiefer, 1996).

Whether these treatments and techniques actually lead to sexual improvement is questionable. Research on the effectiveness of sex therapy is lacking in many cases and inadequate in many others. There has been little research on the underlying assumptions and principles of sex therapy (Wiederman, 1998) and little research on the efficacy of particular treatments (Heiman & Meston, 1997). In general, randomized trials of different techniques are lacking, treatment approaches have not been compared, control groups are usually not included and long-term follow-up is not done (Althof et al., 2005; Heiman & Meston, 1997; LoPiccolo, 1985; Rosen & Leiblum, 1995).

In theory, the interventions of sex therapists could lead clients to discover or rediscover better sexual experiences. In practice, the goals and techniques of sex therapy reify the notion that sexual functioning falls into one of two discrete categories:

dysfunctional or functional (Kleinplatz, 2001b; Schnarch, 1991; Wincze & Carey, 1991).

The possibility of travelling beyond satisfaction into the realm of optimal sexual experiences remains unexplored territory for most sex therapists. Undergoing sex therapy may lead to sexual improvement but it is not guaranteed (or perhaps even likely) to lead to optimal sexual experiences, however a person defines it, given the lack of attention to this idea within the research and theories generated by sex therapists.

Based on the existing research literature, there seems to be a set of common contributors across the spectrum of sexual functioning. Dysfunctional, normal and satisfactory sexuality are all affected by developmental contributors (e.g., sex education), personal characteristics, attitudes or beliefs (e.g., self-esteem, erotophilia/erotophobia), health/lifestyle factors (e.g., mental/physical illness and/or disability) and relational factors (e.g., communication, compatibility). However, the relationship between these developmental, personal and relational contributors and optimal sexual experiences has not been explored, leaving considerable gaps in the literature. Research focused specifically on what leads to wonderful, amazing sex would be necessary to address to what degree the elements associated with other kinds of sexual experiences might be relevant. It is also possible that different levels of sexual functioning are associated with unique sets of contributing factors: The contributors to dysfunctional sexuality may be qualitatively different from those associated with normal, satisfactory or optimal sexual experiences.

Contributors to Optimal Sexual Experiences

The existing knowledge of the factors that might lead to or be associated with optimal sexual experiences has been produced by sexologists, primarily sex therapists and other clinicians. They have hypothesized about a number of developmental, individual, relational and environmental contributors that might be relevant for the experience. None of

these hypothesized contributors were identified through research with individuals and/or couples. Authors who have written about the contributors to optimal sexual experiences have done so from a theoretical standpoint, basing their observations on clinical work with individuals and couples who are, at least initially, *not* having great or even good sex. These theories provide a foundation and important clues for further investigation of optimal sexual experiences. However, research is necessary to confirm or disconfirm whether these factors are connected to optimal sexual experiences and if so, how. There may be important differences between clinical observations and the accounts from those who have had optimal sexual experiences.

Individual qualities. A variety of individual qualities have been hypothesized to contribute to optimal sexual experiences. These include developmental experiences, beliefs and attitudes and personal skills. There also appear to be certain factors that become particularly relevant during a sexual experience.

There may be important developmental factors associated with optimal sexual experiences. Developing the capacity for wonderful sexual experiences may require confronting and beginning to heal childhood wounds (Shaw, 2012). Optimal sexual experiences may require personal differentiation and maturity (Schnarch, 1991, 1997; Shaw, 2012) so that one may develop the capacity for self-soothing of anxiety, fears, helplessness or pressures to conform to the demands of others (Schnarch, 1997; Shaw, 2012). Incredible sexual experiences may be more commonly-experienced among older adults, who have had time to mature and differentiate. It may also be necessary to remain open and accepting as one's experiences of sex change, evolve and expand over time (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Morin, 1995; Shaw, 2012). In order to experiment and grow, a

person's sense of integrity must take precedence over his/her desire for acceptance from his/her partner (Schnarch, 1997).

Optimal sexual experiences may be strongly connected with a person's attitudes and beliefs. First and foremost, it may be important for an individual to consciously pursue better and better sexual experiences and aim high rather than settle (Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005). An individual may need to develop his or her own personal, individualized definition of what constitutes optimal sexuality (Broder & Goldman, 2004). Individuals who have the capacity for amazing sexual experiences are believed to have a positive attitude toward sex (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Ogden, 1999), seeing it as an important part of their lives (Ogden, 1999) and feeling comfortable with their sexuality (Broder & Goldman, 2004).

Optimal sexual experiences may require an individual to develop certain skills or capacities. Individuals who wish to bring about wonderful sexual experiences might be encouraged to stretch their personal limits and embrace the unknown (Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Ogden, 1999; Schnarch, 1991). It may be necessary to increase one's self-knowledge and knowledge of one's partner (Shaw, 2012) and practice self-acceptance of one's body and one's sexuality (Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Ogden, 1999; Schnarch, 1997). Connection to oneself, trust in oneself (Ogden, 1999), openness and flexibility (Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Zilbergeld, 2004) may be key characteristics of individuals who have had optimal sexual experiences as well as a sense of playfulness, curiosity, creativity and the capacity for surprise (Shaw, 2012). Clinicians emphasize that the most important sex organ is the mind (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Morin, 1995) and repeatedly stress the importance of intrapsychic and interpersonal processes over techniques or behaviours (Kleinplatz, 1998, 2004; Schnarch, 1991). Individuals and couples would be

encouraged to explore the sexual territory that lies beyond orgasm (Schnarch, 2000). Being open and stretching one's limits is likely to require a certain level of personal courage to be literally and figuratively naked before one's partner (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996a, 2005). It seems likely that individuals who have been forced to step outside of mainstream conceptualizations of sexuality due to their sexual interests or orientation may be more likely to have optimal sexual experiences.

During a sexual experience, certain qualities of the individual may be especially relevant for making the encounter wonderful. An individual may need to give him or herself permission to experience pleasure and be fully present during the moment (Broder & Goldman, 2004). This may involve experiencing higher levels of sensitivity and awareness (Ogden, 1999). Letting go of oneself and of other people's expectations may be important (Ogden, 1999), which would necessitate holding on to one's sense of self first (Shaw, 2012). The capacity for having optimal sexual experiences might also demand a willingness to be vulnerable, to let go, release control and to surrender (Kleinplatz, 1996b; Ogden, 1999; Schnarch, 1997). Emotional transparency and letting oneself be known by another may be key (Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Schnarch, 1997). To let a partner inside to that degree, it may be necessary for an individual to feel good about him or herself and not anxious about unresolved issues (Schnarch, 2000). It is important not to focus on performance, sexual goals, orgasm or the genitals exclusively as this may inhibit the experience of optimal sexual experiences but to focus on pleasure instead (Broder & Goldman, 2004). Ultimately, an individual is responsible for his or her own pleasure and so it may be necessary to educate one's partner about one's emotional, physical and spiritual needs (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Lee, 1996).

Relationship qualities. Relational qualities may be important predictors of optimal sexual experiences, both outside of sex and while an encounter is unfolding.

Key elements of the relationship in which optimal sexual experiences take place may include trust (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Ogden, 1999), caring, safety, respect (Kleinplatz, 1996b), empathy (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b; Metz & McCarthy, 2012), intimacy (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Schnarch, 1991, 1997), connection (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Ogden, 1999; Schnarch, 1997) and extensive communication between partners (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b; Morin, 1995; Zilbergeld, 2004). The bond between partners may be characterized by compassion, consideration, mutuality and integrity (Schnarch, 1997) as well as playfulness and forgiveness (Metz & McCarthy, 2012). It may be necessary for partners to know one another well, to continually strive to know one another better (Kleinplatz, 2005; Shaw, 2012) and to accept one another (Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Zilbergeld, 2004). This depth of intimacy may require self-confrontation and self-disclosure (Schnarch, 2000). It may be necessary for partners to continue exploring possibilities and potentials together as well as to experiment (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b; 2004) and to integrate sexuality into their daily lives (Metz & McCarthy, 2012). The creation of optimal sexual experiences may involve a lot of attention, forethought, effort, prioritizing and preparation (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 2005; Zilbergeld, 2004). Couples may be advised to broaden their repertoire of sexual styles and meanings to allow for greater flexibility of approaches (Schnarch, 2000). Over time, it may become necessary for couples to resolve issues related to fears of engulfment, rejection, deprivation and of losing the sex that has been discovered together (Schnarch, 1991). It may also be necessary to deal with

tensions and difficulties and increase the capacity for love and desire of one's partner (Schnarch, 2000). It might be expected that couples who have been together for many years may have a greater capacity for optimal sexual experiences as they have had the time to develop their knowledge of one another and develop their capacities for trust, empathy, intimacy and communication.

During a wonderful sexual experience, it may be important for partners to relax in a context that is leisurely, playful and pleasure-focused rather than goal-oriented (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Metz & McCarthy, 2012). Partners might want to reduce situational distractions (Schnarch, 1997), build anticipation (Broder & Goldman, 2004), increase desire and physical lust during sex (Ogden, 1999; Schnarch, 2000) and introduce novelty (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Schnarch, 1997). Eroticism, the heightening of arousal and pleasure for its own sake, may be a key element of optimal sexual experiences (Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Schnarch, 1991). Partners are advised to go beyond focusing on the sensations in their body and tune in to their lovers, deepening their emotional involvement and connection (Schnarch, 2000). It may be necessary for couples to balance the giving and taking of pleasure (Castleman, 2004; Ogden, 1999). Couples might also increase the duration and variety of their encounters (Schnarch, 2000).

The individual and relational qualities identified here are based solely on clinical theory and observations. To date, there has been no empirical exploration and/or verification of these theories and no attempts have been made to organize these ideas into a coherent and comprehensive set of contributors to optimal sexual experiences. As it stands, the academic literature on optimal sexual experiences is based almost entirely on clinical observations that have not been analyzed in a systematic way and were gleaned from a population that only aspires to experience the phenomenon in question. This is akin to studying Olympic-level

excellence in sports by recruiting non-athletes who report being motivated to become more fit and who are preparing to embark on a new fitness regime. There may be additional factors associated with optimal sexual experiences that have been left out (i.e., the factors outlined above are necessary but not sufficient). The contributors to optimal sexual experiences may be described or defined differently by those who have had such experiences compared to theoretical descriptions provided by clinicians. There may be unexpected nuances in the expression and interplay of these factors. These authors may have identified factors as necessary for optimal sexual experiences that are, in fact, unimportant. For example, physiological functioning may be relevant for dysfunctional sexual experiences but the relevance of functioning genitals and properly-timed orgasms to optimal sexual experiences needs to be determined empirically.

The current investigation represents the first attempt to produce a comprehensive description of the contributors to optimal sexual experiences that is based in research. As such, the results of this study will provide a much more solid foundation for future research and theory in the area of optimal sexuality. Results from this study will address the gap in the research literature while also serving as an empirically-based alternative to the potentially-damaging myths and misinformation from media sources.

Contributors to Other Kinds of Optimal Experiences

Given the lack of research on optimal sexual experiences, the relevance of contributors to other kinds of optimal experiences (e.g., passion, peak experiences, flow) to the promotion of optimal sexual experiences should be considered. It seems possible that optimal sexual experiences and other types of optimal experiences may share certain characteristics and components; there may therefore be a common set of predictors or contributors between sexual and non-sexual optimal experiences.

Passion. Only a few studies (i.e., Mageau et al., 2009; Vallerand et al., 2006) have explored the contributors to passion rather than the consequences of holding a harmonious or obsessive passion. One study investigated the role of personality and activity valuation in a group of college athletes. The results showed that having an autonomous personality orientation (e.g., the individual engages in activities out of pleasure and/or choice) combined with high levels of activity valuation was more likely to lead to a harmonious passion (i.e., one in which there is no conflict between the passionate activity and the person's other life activities) (Vallerand et al., 2006). In a series of studies with children and pre-teens (Mageau et al., 2009), a variety of personality contributors to passion were identified. Participants who would go on to develop a harmonious passion for an activity were more likely to identify with the activity, prefer to specialize in activities, have parents who valued the activity and have support for their personal autonomy from parents.

The research on passion so far has focused primarily on passion for sports or gambling. The possibility has not been considered that some individuals and couples might be passionate about sex. However, if being passionate about sex is related to developing the capacity for optimal sexual experiences, research on the reasons and ways that people develop a passion for something may be relevant. Predictors associated with developing a passion that might also be relevant for bringing about optimal sexual experiences could include valuing sexuality highly and having an autonomous personality orientation (i.e., choosing to pursue optimal sexual experiences out of interest or pleasure). From a developmental perspective, having sex-positive parents in childhood and adolescence may also be important for the development of future optimal sexual experiences.

Flow. Csíkszentmihályi developed his theory of flow, a type of optimal experience, based on a combination of methods, including questionnaires, interviews and the Experience

Sampling Method (i.e., participants are paged at random times during the day and asked to complete a questionnaire about the activity they were doing and their thoughts and feelings around it). From this research, he identified personality characteristics that are associated with more frequent flow experiences. These individuals may have greater abilities to focus their attention, ignore distractions and concentrate on the activity in which they are engaged (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, 1993). They are likely to translate personal difficulties into challenges, are successful at matching their personal skills to challenges in their lives, set manageable goals for themselves, notice and read the most subtle feedback and are not afraid of losing themselves in an activity or experience (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, 1993). A variety of studies have been conducted to clarify the personality characteristics demonstrated by elite athletes who regularly experience flow. Personality characteristics associated with a greater number of flow experiences among elite athletes include having the motivation to perform, achieving the optimal level of arousal before competition, having pre-competitive and competitive plans and preparation, focusing, confidence and positive attitude, avoidance of negative thinking, good control of thoughts and emotions, relaxation, appropriate activation levels, goal setting, use of imagery and positive self-talk and having previously experienced flow during sport (Jackson, 1995; Jackson, Thomas, Marsh & Smethurst, 2001).

Csíkszentmihályi has dismissed sexual activities as a context for flow experiences (in some cases, equating sex with watching television or eating [1990, 1997]). However, qualities of the individual that facilitate flow such as the ability to focus, ignore distraction and concentrate, the ability to notice and read subtle feedback and a willingness to lose oneself in an activity may also facilitate optimal sexual experiences.

Peak Experiences. Maslow identified a number of characteristics of people he termed “self-actualizers”. He believed that such individuals had peak experiences more

frequently, intensely and perfectly than average people (1968). According to Maslow (1968), self-actualizing people demonstrated a superior perception of reality; greater acceptance of self, others and nature; greater spontaneity, problem-centring, detachment and autonomy; greater freshness of appreciation; better interpersonal relations; a stronger identification with humanity; greater creativity; and less need for honours, prestige and rewards. Self-actualizers were more open to experience; showed a greater integration, wholeness and unity of their person; had a firm, autonomous and unique sense of self and a democratic character structure.

Within the literature on peak experiences, sex is usually seen as a trigger for an ecstatic experience rather than an experience that may be ecstatic in and of itself (Laski, 1961). However, there are similarities between the characteristics and components of peak experiences and optimal sexual experiences. Therefore, it seems likely that some of individual qualities that facilitate peak experiences (e.g., acceptance of self, spontaneity, openness to experience, cultivation of absorption, making growth choices, surrendering of the self) may also have relevance for peak sexual experiences.

Peak Performance. Several studies have been conducted on the personal characteristics associated with peak performances in non-athletes. Research on college-level and competitive athletes demonstrates the importance of having a clear focus on the process rather than the outcome of the event and on the self; being intensely involved in the moment; experiencing flow; and being relaxed, in control, self-confident, energetic, determined and fearless (Cohn, 1991; Jackson & Roberts, 1992; Krane & Williams, 2006; Privette 1981, 1983; Privette & Landsman, 1983).

Peak performances share many characteristics with optimal sexual experiences, including feelings of absorption, a sense of joy and a feeling of detachment from time and

space. Therefore, the two experiences may share a common set of antecedents. Skills and attitudes such as having a clear focus, being intensely in the moment, focusing on the process and not the outcome, relaxing and having a positive attitude may be key contributors to both peak performances and the experience of optimal sexual experiences.

Optimal experiences of all types may be facilitated by similar skills and individual qualities such as being absorbed, focused and involved in the activity, ignoring potential distracters and being spontaneous and open. However, there are important distinctions between optimal sexual experiences and other kinds of optimal experiences. One of the major distinctions is that optimal sexual experiences usually involve two (or more) people together while most studies of optimal, non-sexual experiences tend to focus on solitary, peak experiences or performances. There may be contributors to optimal sexual experiences that may only be possible within the context of a relationship. Also, many of the activities in which these optimal experiences may occur are goal-directed whereas the authors who have theorized about optimal sexual experiences stress the importance of eliminating performance goals to focus instead on factors such as pleasure, eroticism and connection. Given these distinctions, it seems clear that research would be necessary to uncover those contributors that are specific to optimal sexual experiences.

Objectives of this Investigation

The goal of this study was to answer the question, “What contributes to optimal sexual experiences?” in the broadest possible way. This missing piece from the literature is a critical topic for investigation for a number of reasons.

The results of this study would be invaluable to members of the general public who want to have optimal sexual experiences. It seems clear from representations in popular culture, including magazine covers, self-help books and websites, that there is a strong need

for information of this type (Rye & Meaney, 2007). This desire for better sexual experiences is also illustrated by the length of many sex therapists' waiting lists. It would seem that many individuals and couples value the sexual component of their lives and are interested in improving or optimizing the quality of their sexual experiences. However, despite this interest from a large number of people, there are currently no empirically-based guidelines from the academic literature that they could use to guide their journey. Moreover, media sources on "great sex" tend to promulgate myths and misinformation on the subject of sex (Zilbergeld, 1991). In this way, sex is set apart from other human endeavours such as sports or arts. Whereas other fields of human experience may be characterized by easily-obtainable, empirically-based guidelines that allow those who wish to do so to improve the quality of their experiences (e.g., running, cooking, playing piano), individuals or couples who wish to pursue better-quality sexual experiences have very little to go on and, in fact, may be led astray by incorrect or faulty information. Currently, the lack of empirical information about optimal sexual experiences means that many individuals and couples may find it difficult or impossible to develop their capacity for this type of experience.

Currently, the academic literature says almost nothing about the upper end of the continuum of sexual experiences. The results of this investigation might inspire people to help them discover what is possible and, more importantly, what they really want for themselves as individuals as opposed to an unattainable, uniform ideal offered by the media. For those who are interested, the results of this investigation may allow them to develop a better understanding of sex, sexuality and themselves. Information about optimal sexual experiences may be relevant for those who wish to experience them; it may also be relevant for those who wish to improve the quality of their sexual experiences without aiming for optimal per se. At present, the process of achieving optimal sexual experiences can only be

speculated about, which is not a sufficient foundation to enable individuals and couples to pursue them.

Findings from this investigation would also benefit sex therapy clients who wish to improve the quality of their sexual experiences and sex therapists, who could help set goals for their clients beyond merely “functioning”. Currently, the research literature is focused overwhelmingly on the causes and contributors to sexual dysfunctions. As a result, sex therapy interventions have often been focused on alleviating the largely physiological symptoms of sexual dysfunctions, with the implicit assumption that good sex will be the result. However, research and theory on HSDD suggest that physiological functioning alone does not guarantee optimal sexual experiences and may, in fact, be irrelevant in determining the quality of sexual experiences (Bancroft et al., 2003; Ferenidou et al., 2008; Frank et al., 1979; King et al., 2007; Shifren et al., 2008). It is simply not enough for sex therapists to focus on helping their clients avoid bad sex, with the unspoken expectation that good or optimal sex will automatically fill the vacuum. Results of this study could help clients and therapists to create a vision of sex worth having and provide guidelines towards achieving that. Similarly, sex educators could use this information to help their learners develop a more comprehensive understanding of sex, sexuality and sexual functioning.

Information about the contributors to optimal sexual experiences would add significantly to the body of knowledge concerning optimal sexual experiences; it might also add significantly to our understanding of the nature of sex itself. At present, our understanding of sexual experiences is incomplete because we do not understand all possible expressions, including those at the higher end of the spectrum. The variables identified to date that are associated with sex and sexual functioning may only be relevant insofar as they relate to dysfunction. For example, while gender differences may be important and relevant

in terms of dysfunctional sexual experiences, these same differences seem to disappear at the level of optimal sexual experiences (Kleinplatz, Ménard, Paradis, Campbell & Dalglish, in press). Factors associated with sexuality may vary in importance relative to the quality of the sexual experience. For example, a focus on body parts may be more salient with regards to dysfunctional sex whereas consideration of attitudes, thoughts and emotions may be more relevant for optimal sexual experiences. There may also be additional contributors related to sexual experiences that have not been considered or whose importance has not been understood because they are specific to optimal sexual experiences and not relevant to other peak experiences. Learning more about optimal sexual experiences will teach us more about the nature of human sexuality itself. Both dysfunctional and “normal” sexuality may need to be redefined when they are re-contextualized alongside optimal sexual experiences.

This research might also lead to a better understanding of optimal experiences in general. To date, research on sex and sexuality has excluded the optimal end of the continuum whereas research on optimal experiences has excluded sex as an activity that might be associated with optimal experiences (in some cases, equating it with eating or watching television; Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, 1997). In the same way that our understanding of sex is incomplete because we have no understanding of the upper echelons of experience, our understanding of optimal experiences might also be incomplete because we have left out an entire category. There may be important contributors related to optimal experiences that have been neglected or deemphasized because sex has not been considered as a potential context for optimal experiences. Various humanistic or positive psychologists (e.g., Frankl, Maslow, Csíkszentmihályi) have suggested that optimal or peak experiences may give meaning and structure to our existence and ward off psychic entropy. For many individuals

and couples, research results that might help them bring about optimal sexual experiences may provide the same benefits as those associated with other kinds of peak experiences.

Method

In this section, the purpose and scope of the current investigation will be summarized. Key features of descriptive phenomenology, the paradigm used in this study, will be described. The rationale for selecting specific participant groups will be outlined. The procedure used in this investigation will be explained as well as methods by which data was analyzed. Finally, demographic statistics of the participants will be presented.

In order to determine what leads to optimal sexual experiences, it was necessary to understand and define the term “optimal sexual experiences”. Unfortunately, there were no existing definitions in the literature, whether based on theoretical consensus, clinical work or research evidence. Therefore, it was first necessary to define the term “optimal sexual experiences” to ensure that participants’ responses were comparable, i.e., that they were answering questions concerning the same type of phenomenon. This definition was produced by Kleinplatz et al. (2009a) and included components such as being present, deep connection and extraordinary communication (see p. 12).

Purpose and Scope of the Investigation

The goal of this study was to identify the broadest possible range of factors that bring about or predispose some to have optimal sexual experiences. We also aimed to elaborate on the specific nuances within these factors. Contributors might be identified at developmental, individual, relational or environmental levels and could occur at any point within a person’s timeline (e.g., from childhood to the present) or at any point before, during and after a sexual experience. Factors that might enhance or improve sexuality to optimal levels were considered in addition to those factors that establish or generate optimal sexual experiences. These factors might contribute to optimal sexual experiences directly or indirectly. They might contribute to a specific aspect of optimal sexual experiences or to the Gestalt of

optimal sexual experiences. Contributors might vary in their importance: Some may be desirable but not crucial, others may be necessary but not sufficient and still others may be absolutely critical.

Descriptive Phenomenology

The most obvious way to answer this research question was to consult with individuals and couples who had developed expertise in this area so that they might explain what they had done (or not done) that helped them to create these experiences. Descriptive phenomenology, which focuses on producing descriptions of previously-unexplored phenomena, seemed to be an eminently suitable choice of research methodology.

The purpose of phenomenological investigations is to produce clear and accurate descriptions of the structure and essences of a previously-unexplored phenomenon (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdrige, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1994; Valle & Mohs, 1998). Within phenomenological research, understanding of an experience is pursued for its own sake (Langdrige, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Valle & Mohs, 1998) and the focus of the research is on discovery within previously-unexplored areas (Camic, Rhodes & Yardley, 2003). According to phenomenological psychologists, experiences are understood to be the basis for all knowledge (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1994). Ultimately, the result of phenomenological analysis is a clear, accurate, complete description of the experience as it appears to those who have experienced it, including the essential constituents and their variations (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1994).

The goal of phenomenological investigations is not to uncover objective truths, even if these could be said to exist. Phenomenological research is a discovery-oriented methodology and as such, not concerned with making generalizations or predictions (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1994). In keeping with this approach, phenomenological

investigations are not characterized by the formulation of hypotheses a priori (Langdrige, 2007). Rather, the goal is to get closer to the truth by investigating the richness of a phenomenon from different subjective realities (Camic et al., 2003). The results of phenomenological investigations are intended to be descriptive, rather than prescriptive. The findings of a given phenomenological study may be true for situations that differ from the one in which the data were collected but universal applicability of findings is not assumed nor desirable (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdrige, 2007). Within this methodology, objective measures are not used in order to avoid circumscribing the phenomenon a priori. Therefore, in the current investigation, no hypotheses were generated, no psychometric measures were used (it is not clear what, if any, would be appropriate) and no attempts were made a priori to limit the scope or number of potential contributors.

It is also important to note that there may be significant variations between individual practices of descriptive phenomenology. There is no single agreed-upon “correct” way of practicing phenomenological research (Giorgi, 1985a; Hein & Austin, 2001). This belief is both expected and accepted as phenomenological psychologists would prefer not to reduce their chosen methodology down to a set of mechanical procedures and therefore lose sight of the richness in the data (Langdrige, 2007).

Participant Groups

Participants in phenomenological investigations are chosen based on their personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation and their ability to describe it thoroughly (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1994). Unlike quantitative studies, the purpose of qualitative investigations is not to generalize findings to other participants or settings (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1994; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The random selection of participants that characterizes many quantitative investigations is *not* considered desirable in

phenomenological investigations as the goal is to find participants who have expert knowledge regarding the phenomenon being studied. External characteristics of the participants (e.g., ethnicity, religion, SES) are not considered relevant as long as the individual in question has experienced the phenomenon of interest. It is believed that the essential constituents and meaning of the experience remain constant despite variations in the subjective manifestations among participants (Polkinghorne, 1994). Rather, participants are selected based on first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon and with sufficient variation from one another that the researchers are able to determine which aspects of the phenomena are invariant across those who have experienced it (Langdrige, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). In this investigation, participants encompassed a variety of demographic characteristics (e.g., sex, sexual orientation, relationship status, age, education, current ability/disability status) (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Recruitment of diverse groups of participants may enhance the validity of findings through data triangulation (Patton, 1999): When the responses of individuals from a variety of different perspectives converge on a common set of themes, study results gain additional credibility. It was hoped that convergence in participants' answers would indicate support for research findings.

The two participant groups were selected based on clues in the research and theoretical literature on sexual and non-sexual optimal experiences. Participants of different backgrounds were recruited; all had developed some expertise in the area of optimal sexual experiences, whether as individuals or as part of a couple. It was considered desirable to speak to people who had achieved their expertise via different routes and individuals who had accrued a great deal of expertise. Participants consisted of a) individuals over the age of 60 who have been partnered for 25 years or more and b) self-identified members of sexual minority groups. The rationale for seeking out participants from these groups follows.

Older individuals in long-term relationships. Based on the developmental literature on self-actualization, older individuals may be more likely to report having had peak or optimal experiences (Maslow, 1970, 1971). Maslow believed that self-actualization was more common among older individuals, specifically, those at mid-life or beyond. He felt that young people had not had sufficient time to achieve identity and autonomy, find their calling or develop a “post-romantic” love relationship (1970). For self-actualizers, satisfaction with love and sexuality increased proportionately with the length of the relationship (1970). Rollo May also believed that with maturity came greater complexity (1958); similarly, Jung associated differentiation and maturity with a healthy personality (1956). Research has since confirmed that higher motives (e.g., honour, family, idealism) are more often associated with more mature individuals (Reiss & Havercamp, 2005).

However, within popular culture, the predominant message is that great sex is the exclusive province of young, attractive and able-bodied individuals (Duran & Prusank, 1997; Ménard & Cabrera, 2011; Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008). Although long-term marriage is not only accepted in Western society but expected and idealized, the sexuality of older individuals has historically been marginalized and/or pathologized. Within the public consciousness and the academic literature, older individuals have been treated as asexual (Walz, 2002). If the sexuality of older people is considered, it is assumed that they must be experiencing one or more sexual dysfunctions (DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Laumann et al., 2005; Nicolosi et al., 2006) and therefore require treatment of some kind, usually in the form of medication or hormones (Shah & Montoya, 2007). Historically, the picture of older sexuality that has been painted within the research literature is dismal, at best.

Recently, several studies have shown that older individuals can and do enjoy sex throughout their lifespan (Beckman, Waern, Gustafson & Skoog, 2008; Lindau et al., 2007;

Ojanlatva, Helenius, Rautava, Ahvenainen & Koskenvuo, 2003; Rosen & Bachmann, 2008).

This provides empirical validation for the work of clinicians such as Shaw (2012) and Zilbergeld (2004) who have suggested that there may be much to learn from those who pursue satisfying, good or even optimal sexual experiences well into their old age.

Individuals who have been able to maintain optimal sexual experiences within their relationships for 25 years or more are likely to possess valuable knowledge. Therefore, we decided to interview individuals over the age of 60 who had been partnered or married for 25 years or more and who reported experiencing optimal sexual experiences.

The decision to interview individuals over the age of 60 was based in part on past studies on the sexuality of older individuals in which 60 was used as a cut-off (e.g., (e.g., Bergstrom-Walan & Nielson, 1990; Martin, 1981; Pfeiffer, 1977; Pfeiffer, Verwoedt & Wang, 1968; Starr & Weiner, 1981; Trudel, 2002; Weizman & Hart, 1987). In addition, Trudel, Turgeon and Piché (2000) suggest that this is the point in life at which pronounced signs of aging may become evident. Outside of the sexuality literature, research on long-lasting relationships has used many different cut-off lengths, ranging from 15 to 50 years (e.g., Dickson, 1995; Schlesinger, 1982) so there is no universal standard within the field. Many previous investigations have used 25 years as a cut-off point to define long-term relationships (e.g., Goodman, 1999; Roizblatt et al., 1999; Sharlin, 1996) and this was the chosen as criteria for participation in the present investigation.

Sexual minorities. Another important factor in bringing about optimal personality development and therefore optimal experiences may be an individual's willingness to experiment, to take risks and to question conventional thinking (Csíkszentmihályi, 1993; Maslow, 1968). Maslow believed that self-actualization required the ability to leave familiar circumstances and explore new possibilities (1968). Others have also theorized that

advanced psychological development may require a person to engage in challenging life events and be willing to restructure their worldview (Cook-Greuter, 2000). These theories about optimal personality development informed the selection of groups who might be more likely to have had optimal sexual experiences.

If older, married individuals represent the socially idealized mainstream, individuals who differ from the norm because of their gender identity, sexual orientation or sexual practices may represent the other extreme. Both historically and at present, the behaviours and beliefs of individuals who identify as homosexual, bisexual, transgendered, queer, polyamorous or kinky have been deemed pathological by some psychologists (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Klein & Moser, 2006; Kolmes, Stock & Moser, 2006; Wright, 2006) and group members have been marginalized within society.

However, there may be much to be learned from studying marginalized groups, i.e., those deemed by society as “other” (Kleinplatz, 2005; c.f., Masters & Johnson, 1979). Writings produced by self-identified SM practitioners suggest that their activities played a part in bringing about optimal sexual experiences (Brame, 2000; Califia, 1983, 1988, 1994, 2001; Califia & Sweeney, 1996; Easton & Hardy, 2004; Jacques, 1993; Miller & Devon, 1995; Samois, 1981; Scholder & Silverberg, 1991; Wiseman, 1996; Wright, 1998). These writers emphasize the need for deep levels of trust and communication in the practice SM; individuals who have developed these capacities may be predisposed towards optimal sexual experiences, as sex therapists have frequently emphasized the importance of these qualities (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Morin, 1995; Ogden, 1999; Zilbergeld, 2004). Clinicians have also theorized that experimentation with one’s own limits and boundaries can help develop sexual potential (Kleinplatz, 2006; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006; Schnarch, 1991; Webster, 1992). Due to their sexual orientations or

preferences, it seems likely that many sexual minority group members may have been forced to re-evaluate the relevance of normative sexual scripts for them. There may be much to learn from those who have had the courage to step outside the prevailing cultural sexual scripts.

Procedure

The procedure for this study was based on questions, prompts and “leads” from a study originally conducted in 2006 but with an entirely different research question, focus, data, analysis of data and focus from that of previous studies. As such, different participants were used from those used in previous studies, different answers to different questions were studied and data analysis was conducted with all prior knowledge or assumptions bracketed.

Transparency of the research protocol, an important criterion in evaluating the reliability of qualitative results, is furthered by the preparation of an audit trail; this is a documentation of the research process through journaling, memoing, documenting, establishing a chronology of research activities and recording data analysis procedures (Cresswell & Miller, 2000; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). This was done by Dr. Kleinplatz and me.

Research team. Conducting phenomenological research within a larger research group may help members of the team become aware of their own personal biases, enhance their abilities to bracket pre-existing assumptions (Langdridge, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1994). The inclusion of multiple team members may also increase the reliability and validity of the research findings through “analyst triangulation”, i.e., the use of multiple researchers to independently analyze the data set and compare findings.

In the current investigation, analysis of interview data was conducted within a six to eight-person, multi-disciplinary research team that included individuals from psychology,

medicine, education, human kinetics and counselling. It was hoped that having multiple perspectives from individuals with different personal and professional backgrounds would help to reduce bias and assist each of us in bracketing our assumptions more fully during the analysis (Hill et al., 2005). Team members, besides the interviewers, were kept blind to the demographic information of the participants (e.g., sex, age) in order to enhance the bracketing of assumptions.

In cases where a phenomenological investigation is conducted by multiple researchers, consensus among team members is not necessarily expected nor desired (Giorgi, 1985b). Instead, disagreement may be resolved by examining and clarifying the researchers' biases. Phenomenological analysis is meant to be practiced within a 'context of discovery' rather than a 'context of verification' (Giorgi, 1985b). When confusion or disagreement arose regarding research methodology, consultations were made with three external auditors (Hill et al., 2005), i.e., individuals with expertise in qualitative approaches who could evaluate research practices and provide ongoing feedback.

Bracketing. The goal of phenomenological research is to represent accurately participants' experiences and actions (Polkinghorne, 1989). To that end, qualitative researchers attempt to set aside their own perspectives as much as possible through the process of "bracketing." Previous thoughts, biases, presuppositions, assumptions, judgments and beliefs about a phenomenon are set aside by the researchers in order to approach the subject from a fresh and naïve perspective (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1994). This is referred to as epoché or bracketing, the suspension of the belief that there is an independent, objective reality outside of consciousness that can explain the experience in question (Langdrige, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1994). Proper bracketing involves rigorous self-reflection (Hein & Austin, 2001); however,

it is not assumed that researchers will be able to completely dispense with assumptions and presuppositions as new ones may be uncovered during the research process (Langdrige, 2007). Also, as beings-in-the-world, it is not possible to completely break away from our own particular perspectives (Langdrige, 2007). It is understood that the design and completion of a completely unbiased investigation could never be achieved (Elliot et al., 1999). Rather, bracketing is done in order to achieve a fresh perspective on the phenomenon being studied (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), and not necessarily because previous knowledge is incorrect or faulty (Wertz, 2005).

One of the most difficult issues in terms of bracketing during this investigation was determining how to balance the need to bracket personal biases through openness and discussion and the need to respect the privacy of research team members because of the sensitive nature of this investigation. In most cases, the decision was made to err on the side of respect for the privacy of team members. It was felt that the value added to the research process by the inclusion of multiple individuals was greater than the potential limitations.

Ethics. The following method was approved by the University of Ottawa Research Grants and Ethics Services on September 5, 2007 (file 07-07-05). Data collection for this study began in September, 2007 and continued until August, 2009. Data analysis was based on the interviews conducted during that two-year period.

Recruitment. Older individuals in long-term relationships were recruited from associations, social and community groups based on advertisements placed on bulletin boards and online (see Appendix A). Individuals from sexual minority groups (i.e., SM, GLBTQ, poly) were recruited from a post on a listserv for self-identified SM practitioners (see Appendix B). In each case, the advertisement or listserv post generated a “snowball” in

which further participants were recruited beyond the initial set of participants (Neuman, 2004).

The recruitment notices were specifically designed to bracket (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Langdrige, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1994) any preconceptions the researchers might have had about the phenomenon under investigation. The term “great” sex was the most neutral term we could find in order to allow participants to define the contributors to optimal sexual experiences so as to reflect their own unique experiences. The decision was made not to use more specific, leading words (e.g., “erotic” sex, “hot” sex, “fulfilling” sex) nor to define optimal sexual experiences for participants in order not to circumscribe participants’ responses a priori, thereby limiting the richness of the data. In the recruitment notices, there was no “cut-off” regarding at what point optimal sexual experiences began in a participant’s life. In fact, this varied considerably among participants from 25-year olds who reported having had “great sex” to 65-year-olds who reported that their optimal sexual experiences began in mid-life. Likewise, individuals could participate on the basis of one optimal sexual experience or on the basis of hundreds or thousands. However, in this case, most participants reported having had a high number of optimal sexual experiences.

There is an expectation that qualitative researchers be thorough enough in their data collection so as to be able to answer the original research questions (Whittemore et al., 2001) and to justify their interpretations of the findings (Williams & Morrow, 2009; Yardley, 2000). However, the focus in qualitative investigations is shifted from participant numbers to richness and depth of the information collected (Patton, 1990). Phenomenological studies typically involve approximately six participants (Langdrige, 2007; Morse, 1994) due to the rigorous and intensive analysis that is done on transcripts. However, a greater number of

participants will likely result in greater variations in the descriptions of the phenomenon, which may enhance the ability of the researchers to determine the essential features of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985b). Cresswell recommends the inclusion of between 5 and 25 participants for phenomenological investigations (1998). A research investigation focused on establishing benchmarks for saturation found that virtually all important themes identified in their investigation had emerged during the first twelve interviews (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

The current investigation included six participants per group (i.e., older individuals and self-identified sexual minority group members) for a total of 12 individuals. Had we been using a grounded theory approach, we would have hit the “saturation” point, i.e., the point at which no new themes were being raised during the interview (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), long before the completion of the 12 interviews.

Interviews and transcription. The principal method of gathering data within descriptive phenomenology is the unstructured or semi-structured interview (Giorgi, 1985b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdrige, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1994). Semi-structured interviews may be ideal as they provide a balance between consistency and flexibility (Langdrige, 2007). Descriptions by participants are considered adequate when distinctive structures of the phenomenon are evident within them (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Informed consent forms (see Appendix C) were mailed or e-mailed to participants depending on their preferences. To preserve anonymity, participants were asked to check a box indicating their willingness to be interviewed. This procedure guaranteed that those who wished to keep their names and other identifying information private were still able to participate. On the form, participants were asked to indicate a telephone number and convenient times at which they could be reached. It was hoped that conducting the interview

over the phone might have increased participants' comfort levels as it ensured a greater degree of anonymity. Participants were then e-mailed or telephoned to set up an interview time.

A semi-structured interview protocol was generated by the two interviewers, an experienced clinical psychologist and a graduate student. To further counteract bias, the interview questions were reviewed by three sexologists prior to the commencement of interviews. The first three interviews, (i.e., after receiving ethics approval but before initiating the series of interviews cited in this study) were considered "pilot interviews" and modifications were made to the interview protocol following suggestions from these participants. The usage of a semi-structured interview protocol made it possible to add or modify questions during an interview if necessary so that different contributors to optimal sexual experiences might be thoroughly explored and understood.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over the telephone by Dr. Kleinplatz and me. Informed consent was verified twice orally; once prior to recording the interview and then again at the end of the interview. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the interview or at a later date by contacting one of the researchers. The interviews lasted between 42 minutes and 110 minutes with an average length of 80 minutes.

The semi-structured interview format was chosen for its flexibility and adaptability. Efforts were made to further develop the bracketing process during subsequent interviews. Participants were encouraged at the outset of each interview to add questions, to modify existing questions as they saw fit or to not answer particular questions. Many of the modifications that they recommended were incorporated into subsequent interviews. Participants were also asked for additional comments at the end of the interview. Certain

questions were retained from earlier studies (see Kleinplatz et al., 2009a) but the interview protocol was adapted for each individual participant (see Appendix D). Specific prompts (e.g., “At what point in your life did sex become great?” or “What leads to great sex?” or “Did you learn to have great sex?”) led to additional questions (e.g., “What led you to seek out great sex in your life?” or “What do you do that helps to bring about great sex?” or “How did you learn to have great sex?” or “What does it take to have great sex in the way of the environment, the participants, activities, sex acts, individual qualities, relational qualities, etc.?” or “What impact, if any, did this first extraordinary experience have on your subsequent experiences of great sex?” or “Do you think that people who have had great sex have always had great sex?” or “Is the great sex you are having at this point in your life the same kind of “great” as your earlier experiences of great sex?”).

Following the interview, participants were e-mailed or mailed a debriefing form (see Appendix E). If participants wished, they were also sent copies of their interview transcript and were invited to provide additional feedback, corrections, suggestions or comments.

Interviews must first be transcribed before data analysis may begin within a phenomenological research paradigm. For this study, identifying demographic information was deleted from the recordings prior to transcription. To safeguard participants’ anonymity, transcripts were identified by number. Interviews were transcribed by members of the research team following a phenomenological transcription approach, that is, transcriptionists were encouraged to stay as close to the speech of the participants as possible so as not to lose valuable information (Langdrige, 2007). Each transcript was then verified by one of the original interviewers to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. Transcriptionists were asked to include speech descriptors (e.g., “amused tone”, “hesitantly”, “quietly”) as well as bolding, italics, or capital letters to reproduce more accurately the emotional nuances of the

interview (Polkinghorne, 1989). In addition, both interviewers were always present at all research team meetings to provide additional information about the emotional context of the participants' statements when needed. The average length of each transcript was 31 double-spaced pages.

Data analysis. Within phenomenological data analysis, the transcripts of interviews are first read for a sense of the whole (Giorgi, 1985b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003); this should be done with an attitude of discovery and openness so that no details go unnoticed (Langdrige, 2007). The purpose for researchers in reading the transcripts is to emphasize the structure and creation of meaning for the participants (Moustakas, 1994). After reading, important meaning units are then identified (Giorgi, 1985b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The identification of meaning units should not be restricted only to manifest content but the depth of the participants' responses should be considered (Giorgi, 1985b). These meaning units are then translated into psychological meanings (Giorgi, 1985b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Imaginative variation is practiced, in which the researchers attempt to determine whether a particular element is essential to the experience, i.e., whether the structure of the experience would be radically changed if this one element were to be removed (Giorgi, 1985b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The researchers then attempt to synthesize the meaning units into a statement regarding the participant's experience (Giorgi, 1985b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Given the depth and complexity of the research question, we decided to first organize the data into broad categories of contributors before identifying specific themes within each of the larger categories. Independently, seven members of the research team first read the interview transcripts several times (Giorgi, 1985b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Langdrige, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Members of the research team then developed a general list at the broadest level of contributors to optimal sexual experiences (e.g., personal contributors,

relational contributors) for each participant and then attempted to find commonalities between these themes across participants (Giorgi, 1985b; Polkinghorne, 1994). Several meetings were held to discuss these themes; these meetings were followed by a return to the data by each member of the team. This iterative process is characteristic of traditional phenomenological investigations, in which researchers go back and forth between their prospective category systems, the data, and one another in order to better incorporate all of their impressions of the themes that emerge from the data and to be as inclusive as possible (Giorgi, 1985b). New data in the form of previously-unseen participant transcripts was incorporated throughout this development process. Members of the research team then attempted to cluster together conceptually-related themes to form the broad categories of contributors to optimal sexual experiences. The results were a preliminary list of the broad factors that facilitate great sex (e.g., “relationship contributors”, “developmental contributors”).

Once a preliminary list of the broad contributors to optimal sexual experiences was agreed on, the procedure outlined above was repeated within each category. Depending on the complexity of the data being analyzed and the complexity of the factor itself, it took anywhere from eight to fifteen meetings of the entire research team to develop a complete, transparent and coherent category system for each element (Yardley, 2000). Transcripts were read and re-read. Members of the research team identified a preliminary list of the themes within a particular factor and then attempted to find commonalities between these themes across participants (Giorgi, 1985b; Polkinghorne, 1994). Conceptually-related themes were then clustered together to form the sub-contributors within each larger contributor to optimal sexual experiences (Giorgi, 1985b; Polkinghorne, 1994). The research team met several

times to discuss these clusters of sub-contributors followed by a return to the original data between meetings.

Interrater reliability, defined by the degree to which two or more individuals agree on their observations of a phenomenon, has not often been used in qualitative research and still less often in conjunction with phenomenological studies (Marques & McCall, 2005). However, the decision was made to assess interrater reliability in this study due to the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation, the unusually large research team that had been assembled and to enhance the validity of findings. Eisner (2003) recommends that this value be calculated by large research teams in order to enhance analyst triangulation. A percentage agreement value was calculated at every stage of this investigation, i.e., during the initial development of the overall categories of contributors and then again when identifying themes within each of the seven major categories. Percentage agreement was used to calculate a value for inter-rater reliability by dividing the total number of agreements between raters by the total number of agreements and disagreements and multiplying the result by 100 (Araujo & Born, 1985; Posner, Sampson, Caplan, Ward & Cheney, 1990). At each step, percentage agreement was calculated using a sample of previously-unseen participant statements (Marques & McCall, 2005). Before any classification system was considered final, percentage agreement among a minimum of five raters (including the two interviewers) was required to be at least 70% (Hunsley & Mash, 2008) and in this study ranged from 70% to 93%. Although the research team usually consisted of between six and eight individuals, data analysis was conducted over a period of five years so it was not always possible for every team member to be available for coding.

Participants

A total of 12 participants were interviewed, including six older individuals and six self-identified members of sexual minority groups (i.e., BDSM practitioners, polyamorous, GLBTQ).

The group of participants who self-identified as sexual minority group members consisted of three women and three men with a mean age of 41.3 years ($SD = 11.6$). Three identified as heterosexual, two as homosexual and one as bisexual. The majority were polyamorous ($N=5$), with one participant identifying as monogamous. The average length of their longest relationship was 12.1 years ($SD = 9.0$). Most participants were able-bodied ($N=5$), with one participant identifying as disabled. One participant had finished high school only, three had achieved a Bachelor's degree and two had received a Master's or PhD.

Of the six individuals recruited on the basis of their age and experience in long-term relationships, three were men and three were women with a mean age of 67.7 years ($SD = 7.3$). Most older participants identified as heterosexual ($N=5$) with one participant identifying as bisexual. Four considered themselves polyamorous and two participants were monogamous. The average length of their longest relationship was 40.8 years ($SD = 12.4$). Four participants stated that they were able-bodied and two identified as disabled in some way. One participant had finished high school only, two had completed a Bachelor's degree and three had completed a Master's or PhD.

Results

A phenomenologically-oriented content analysis of individual transcripts yielded seven major contributors to optimal sexual experiences, two minor contributors and two pathways across the contributors (see Table 1). Specifically, major contributors consisted of developmental contributors, individual qualities overall, individual qualities in-the-moment, skills, relationship qualities, relationship qualities in-the-moment and environmental contributors. Two pathways across the contributors were identified, which were relational qualities that contributed to individual qualities (pathway A) and individual qualities that contributed to relationship qualities (pathway B). Finally, there were also two minor contributors: Individual proclivities and miscellaneous contributors (i.e., ideas that could not be easily categorized anywhere else). For a complete list of contributors and themes, see Appendix F.

Within descriptive phenomenology, the focus of the investigation is on the nature and characteristics of the phenomenon of interest rather than on the participants. Again, the generalizeability of research findings to a larger population is neither assumed nor desired (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1994; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). As such, the goal of the current investigation study was not to identify a universal set of contributors to optimal sexual experiences or to identify and explore between-group differences among participants as these approaches are not in keeping with the philosophy underlying descriptive phenomenology (Langdrige, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1994). Rather, the purpose of this investigation was to generate a comprehensive, conceptual and empirical model of the phenomenon that would encompass possible variations of factors that facilitate optimal sexual experiences. In other words, the goal of this study was to identify a full buffet of contributors to optimal sexual experiences rather than a set menu.

Results from a previous study had shown that the components of optimal sexual experiences did not vary across participant sub-groups and in fact were virtually universal among participants (Kleinplatz et al., 2009a). However, in the current investigation, expectations and assumptions about the phenomenon under investigation were bracketed by research team members and the possibility was left open that the contributors to optimal sexual experiences identified by older individuals would differ in an obvious way from those identified by self-identified members of sexual minority groups. However, this was not found to be the case. All participants in the investigation identified and discussed each of the major categories identified through content analysis (i.e., developmental contributors, relationship contributors overall), although not necessarily on every sub-theme within the larger groupings. Given this finding, results from both groups will be presented together.

Table 1

Overall Contributors to Optimal Sexual Experiences

Major Contributors

Contributor 1: Developmental contributors

Contributor 2: Individual qualities overall

Contributor 3: Individual qualities in-the-moment

Contributor 4: Skills

Contributor 5: Relationship qualities overall

Contributor 6: Relationship qualities in-the-moment

Contributor 7: Situational, preparatory and environmental contributors

Pathways

Pathway A: Relational context that facilitates an individual quality

Pathway B: Individual quality that facilitates a relational quality

Minor Contributors

Contributor 8: Individual proclivities

Contributor 9: Miscellaneous

Major Contributor 1: Developmental Contributors

For the majority of participants, the capacity for experiencing optimal sexuality developed over their lifespans. In other words, interviewees expressed the belief that great lovers were developed, rather than born. Many believed that a variety of elements (e.g., being open, learning, questioning, letting go and changing over time) had contributed to a steady improvement in the quality of their sexual experiences over time. A few described this gradual improvement as a particularly pleasant surprise for them. As one older male participant put it, “I think it’s better as you get older. I never would have thought I’d say that but I swear to God, it gets better as you get older.” Several participants, including those 60 years of age and over, spontaneously remarked that they believed that their best sex was yet to come.

Within the larger category of developmental contributors, six major themes emerged. These included letting go, overcoming, unlearning; seeking, choosing, practice; fortuitous triggers; personal development, growth, maturity; relationship, partners, a special person; and openness to experience, paying attention, focusing (see table 2).

Table 2

Major Themes within Developmental Contributors

Major theme

 1a – Letting go, overcoming, unlearning, deconstructing, relinquishing

1b – Seeking, choosing, pursuing, setting out on a journey, choosing, practice

1c – “Fortuitous triggers”: Luck, opportunity, early positive messages, events that echo, pivotal moments

1d – Personal development, growth, maturity, change, unfolding

1e – Relationship, partners, a special person

1f – Openness to experience, paying attention, focusing

Letting go, overcoming, unlearning, deconstructing, relinquishing. Letting go, overcoming, relinquishing or deconstructing (i.e., unlearning) (theme 1a) was a necessary step for many towards beginning to have optimal sexual experiences. Many participants reported having learned destructive messages about their body-image, their sexual orientation, their sexual interests, their gender identity and/or sex itself as children, adolescents and young adults. These messages came from a variety of sources, including parents, teachers, early partners and the media. Most participants identified prevailing Western cultural scripts around sex and sexuality as problematic. (Early negative messages seemed to be particularly problematic for those participants who identified as homosexual from a young age). An older woman described the inauspicious beginning of her sex life:

When I was a young woman and I didn't know a lot about relationships and about, I, I bought into sort of a Hollywood myth....I went to parochial school, Catholic school, so I had a lot of guilt around my sexuality, around my feelings about sex. I thought,

you know, a lot of my desires were perverted and, and I'm not, I'm not talking about anything but masturbation, you know, that, that was so wrong and that my partners, uh, I could never tell my partner who I really was because, you know, if they knew they wouldn't like me.

Letting go of these destructive messages and working through shame were recurring elements in participants' answers. An older man described his beliefs about the process of overcoming sex negativity:

It really is important for people to become liberated from that sex negativity in order to, um, to continue and to attain better and better what you might call 'great sex'.

And that takes work, that takes psychological work and self-evaluation and understanding where your hang-ups are, what your fears are and dealing with them and however that might happen so that you become free of them to be totally human. And that's one of the reasons why, why sex for older people is better than for younger people. Younger people are still socialized into a mold of expectations that, um, are sometimes very difficult to overcome. I certainly was.

A female participant explained the point at which sex in her life became optimal: "Once I allowed myself the freedom to let it be what it could be, and I didn't continue to, um, fall within societal definitions and expectations."

Participants who experienced a change in their life circumstances due to illness and injury found it necessary to let go of previously-held beliefs about sex and sexuality. One man who had been diagnosed with a neurodegenerative disease explained his experience:

I'm not even sure I had a definition of great sex until a few years ago. It's like, uh, you know, there was sex and I don't think I would classify most of it as great....sometimes it would feel better than others, but I don't think I would have

classified much of it as ‘great sex’ if somebody had asked, and, um, and then I sort of lost the ability to do, to do that.....after I was sort of forced to accept that, um, my previous definitions of sex weren’t working, and I just wasn’t, you know, and just kind of gave up on trying to do that. And was, became much more open to experimenting and, and communicating and, and, um, responding to what [my wife] wanted....Sex was much more intense than it ever was before. And I like that, even though, I mean, even though I still wasn’t, um, um, having erections or orgasms myself, but the whole experience as a whole was, I thought, was much greater than anything I had back then.

Seeking, choosing, pursuing, setting out on a journey, choosing, practice. The majority of participants reported that the presence of optimal sexual experiences in their lives was the result of deliberate pursuit and cultivation of sex and sexuality (theme 1b). They described seeking out experiences, making choices and practicing the skills that contributed to creating optimal sexual experiences. The word “exploration” and references to “setting out on a journey” came up frequently in participants’ answers. “We explored many, many different kinds of opportunities and just sort of lived, uh, lived fully, uh, a life of sexual exploration and adventure and excitement” said one older man, speaking of his 40-plus year marriage.

The active pursuit of optimal sexual experiences included both sexual and non-sexual experiences. Formal learning, in the form of workshops or reading, was one approach that a minority of participants had found helpful. Others described deliberately setting out to improve their skills in non-sexual areas, such as learning communication skills or massage techniques. One older woman described learning more about the energy that she saw as central to her optimal sexual experiences:

I learned some great sex techniques along the line and some great sexual variations but the how to have it, gosh, you could never really predict it. Um, but I guess I would say I learned how to have it by learning more about this energy because through that exploration of the telepathic and the Tantric aspects of human sexuality, I became really aware that that's the part you need to work on if you're gonna have a good sexual experience with somebody.

Another man described his developmental process, which had involved getting to know a new group of people and pursuing some classes in sexuality:

Uh, well, there came to a point where, you know, doing a bunch of courses and doing a lot of different things, I met somebody who had some women friends around him and they seemed turned on and happy and communicative and approachable and just fun. I just thought, 'What is he doing, what are they doing different than what I've been doing?' So I asked and he, they directed me towards a group that then teaches around, teaches educational around, um, education around, um, friendship. So I decided to take some courses from them.

When asked how optimal sexual experiences became possible in their lives, many participants spontaneously and independently replied, "By having a lot of sex!" Having identified the types of sexual experiences or partners that were most relevant to them, participants developed their capacity for optimal sexuality through practice, repetition and refinement. An older man said:

I think it comes through experience. I guess you do learn it....Lots of practice, I guess would be the best way to put it [laughing]. Uh, by repeating the process and, and, uh...I don't – I guess there's just no way I can explain it. The more you do it, the better you enjoy it, the better you become at it.

Learning from partners and learning with partners was another common experience across participants. An elderly widower described the journey towards sharing optimal sexual experiences with various partners:

I guess I learned over time. I always enjoyed sex from the time I was a boy masturbating, uh, through my marriage, through premarital affairs. Not many, but some....I taught my wife that kind of thing and I certainly taught my, and have been learning and teaching – I don't mean it in a didactic sense, my God – but in any case, uh, learning and imparting what I know to my current girlfriend and, uh, we have, uh, we learn from each other.

The majority of participants emphasized that the pursuit of optimal sexual experiences was an ongoing journey. Some individuals described coming to new realizations and insights at every stage of their lives. Most said that they were still in the process of learning new things about themselves, their partners and sex itself even in their 60s and 70s. An older man explained:

Well I wouldn't say I expect to be continually surprised 'cause I don't, but I do expect that there's more stuff I don't know. So [pause], I guess before any of them happened I was worried that I knew it all [laughs]. I'm very relieved to find out that there was more I had no idea of. And following, you know, each one that it, it becomes more the case that I realize sort of like the, my concept of the greatness of human experience and of my potential doesn't just double, it, you know, goes up by factors. So my experience is not only that I experience something more fabulous, more uh, expansive and energetic and engaging a larger horizon, but that I become aware that there are other horizons that, that, you know, I'm, that I'm climbing a hill and every time I think I see a crest it's really just another one of these experiences

where I come up over a crest which I thought was a crest and then it turns out the mountain is looming higher in front of me.

Fortuitous triggers. For some participants, there was an identifiable event in their lives, a turning point, after which optimal sexual experiences became possible (theme 1c). This often came in the form of a special person, a pivotal moment or a one-time event that had long-lasting repercussions. An older woman described meeting her husband:

He walked into my dance class one evening, and I tried to keep remembering to breathe.... I had been single for a number of years...my friends all said, 'You're not going to meet a man dancing'. And I said, 'Well, golly it's what I love!' and lo and behold, the man of my dreams walked in.

A female participant, who did not experience orgasm until quite late in her life, read a book that changed her life:

Before then, I really didn't know what I was doing. I think I had reached a sort of a plateau, and, but there was one more peak to climb and I never knew that peak was there because it was hidden behind the fog. And so I was happy, having reached the plateau. Once I discovered that peak, and how to get there, that changed everything.

A lucky few participants had been born to families or attended schools where they received positive messages about sex and sexuality from an early age. (Many more participants described making a deliberate attempt to instill such messages in their own children). Others described themselves as lucky or blessed with opportunities in their life. A male participant stated: "A big part of it is being in the right place at the right time and having the opportunity." He elaborated:

Now, uh, when Eisenhower was asked what qualities he wanted in his generals, he said, 'I want my generals to be lucky.' And if I was to say what qualities do I want

[laughing a bit] to have in my children in terms of their opportunity for a rich sexual life, I'd say, 'I'd like them to be lucky.' I'd like them to not get involved in some kind of a life or world in which they were closed off from opportunities.

In some cases, participants described a pivotal change in their lives that allowed them to live more authentically, which often had a domino effect on the quality of their sexual experiences. A gay male participant described a series of opportunities in his life that interacted to allow for optimal sexual experiences to occur in his life:

After my divorce from my wife, um, when I, when I got more and more involved in, uh, in gay sex, in kinky sex, and *then* in, I guess what would loosely be called transcendental meditation. Those three factors....that was a turning point.

Another older, gay participant had a similar discovery that led to optimal sexuality:

Well, it took me a while to figure out about relationships and, well, you know, being gay in the early sixties wasn't – I never knew any people I knew were gay and I didn't even know it was a possibility until it happened the first time, and then the common wisdom seemed to be that it was always uh, accidental, furtive, and between unrelated, you know, it had nothing to do with any kind of ongoing relationship or deepening of feelings. And so, when I discovered that actually you could have a relationship with someone that also included great sex, that made, under the context, made great sex a lot more exciting.... know that it would actually build a life for me and enrich it, you know, keep enriching yourself every day and have a, an effect that mm, carried on and multiplied. That uh, was just, a big transformation for me when I discovered that.

Personal development, growth, maturity, change, unfolding. Personal development, growth and maturity were important developmental contributors to optimal

sexual experiences (theme 1d). Participants stated that personal change and growth, both sexually and non-sexually, played a key role in improving the quality of their sexual experiences. They described becoming more in tune with themselves and more authentic as they got older. One woman said:

Because as you continue to get older, you're acquiring more experience, you're becoming a deeper, richer, more complex person, yourself, your skills improve, your empathy improves, your, um, you can dance the dance a whole lot better.

Personal development often involved a change in how participants saw themselves. On a physical level, most of the older participants reported illness, injury, disability or the simple effects of aging. Despite this, the transition they made over time was usually from a more negative view of self to a more compassionate, positive appraisal. An older female participant, who had undergone a mastectomy, described the process for her:

I've gone from repression, self-loathing, shame into feeling like this glorious creature [laughs] that owns her own body. I mean I, I don't have a right breast. And you think it – when I was nineteen or a younger woman, the last thing I would do is take off my clothes and let anybody see me, let alone see me without a right breast. I'm *very* comfortable with myself. I think that's age too.

Participants described how their understanding of “great sex” and indeed of sex itself had changed significantly over time. For some, this involved a shift from a focus on the physical aspects of sex during their youth to a greater focus on the spiritual qualities of the experience or the importance of the relationship in which it occurred. Many specifically singled out the diminishing relative importance of orgasms for experiencing optimal sexual encounters as they got older. One woman explained her change in view:

So, the big difference is in realizing, when you're young, sexuality is much more about what's physical. I think as you get older, again it's a finite number of tabs and a finite number of slots and the things you really want to do, you know, you want to try this and try that and see if you can have a three-way and, you know....whatever, you know, little, um, experiences you wanted to have on your list, as you get older you kind of check those things off your list and at the point that you've checked a lot of them off, you realize that it has to do with transcendence and awareness and acuity and clarity, um, so it becomes really different when you're older. And personally, I think, extremely, um, a lot better in a certain way.

An older man described his transition from being more focused on the physical aspects of sex to being more interested in the relationship:

I think initially I would have said great sex is...uh...is...eh, reaching an orgasm. Myself, is having an orgasm with, uh, a beautiful woman or a hunk of a man, and...but the primary...um, criterion probably would have been, uh, orgasm. And now I don't...feel that way. I mean, I don't feel that one necessarily has to achieve an orgasm. It's nice, but I think, uh, it's more important, the intimacy and, um, the relationship-building and being with someone that you really want to be with.

Relationship, partners, a special person. For many participants, a specific person was a defining contributor to their optimal sexual experiences (theme 1e). This idea can be distinguished from relational contributors to optimal sexual experiences (see pp. 102-146) because the locus of the contribution to is within the individual rather than the relationship. The length of the relationship might last anywhere from one night to 40 years but the impact on the interviewee was enduring. The individual might then carry this personal change into

future relationships, which might allow for optimal sexual experiences to happen in those relationships.

In a few cases, the special person acted as a catalyst, changing how participants viewed themselves or opening new doors from a sexual perspective. A minority of participants identified the first time they had orgasms with someone else as being crucial. Others stated that finding partners who shared their interests (e.g., BDSM, polyamory) or who introduced them to new experiences was key. One woman stated that optimal sexuality became part of her life when she met her first husband after a sex-negative childhood:

He was the first partner I ever had who was so comfortable with their, his body, umm, and, and sensed that I was coming from this place.... he allowed me to open up and blossom and encouraged me and, and was never ever umm, critical, he was always saying to me things like, 'How could you be hurting anybody? This is so wonderful!' and it just started changing my attitude.

For other participants, their journey to optimal sexuality was undertaken hand-in-hand with another individual and could not be separated from the relationship in which it occurred. One woman described the evolution of optimal sexual experiences over time, with a partner:

I was listening to a Sade song the other day, I've got one of her albums with her greatest hits and in this song it, that I totally disagree with, she says 'It's never as good as the first time,' and I certainly feel like the first time is usually not as good as it gets, as you get to really experience the other person, get to know each other, get to open up with each other, fine-tuning things. I mean [sighs] I think sex gets better with time, with a partner.

Many others agreed that the quality of sex improved over time in a long-term relationship.

An older widower described his optimal sexual experiences with his late wife:

I would say early on in my marriage, uh, it was good. And then, into my marriage, which, as I say, was thirty-plus years in length, uh, I would say as time developed it got good-er and good-er so at some point it became great....

Although some individuals described optimal sexual experiences within the context of long-term, monogamous relationships, others maintained long-term relationships that involved participation in swinging or polyamory. These participants also expressed the belief that a special relationship or partner was crucial to the development of optimal sexual experiences in their lives. When asked what made sex great, an older man responded as follows:

My partner. And my *partners*.... I just got in with the right person and together, um, partied a lot, did a lot of things, played a lot together, had great sex together all the time for, for years.

An older woman, also polyamorous, described her male partners as “incredibly lovely teachers.” A male participant described the pursuit of optimal sexuality with his partners using a musical analogy:

It takes practice. You know, a great symphony, um, a great concert.... has a conductor who knows what he’s doing, has a score that’s well-written, and has an orchestra that is professional and knows what they’re doing....and perhaps a great concert hall. But you put those four things together all at once and they don’t know each other, it’s going to take practice to produce that great symphonic concert.

Openness to experience, paying attention, focusing. Whereas the theme of seeking, choosing and practice was framed as a more active endeavour (see p. 58), the majority of participants also believed that it was important to be open to experience and opportunities as

they occurred (theme 1f). In this way, participants both sought out opportunities and took advantage of unexpected experiences that might not have been planned or anticipated. The importance of paying attention and focusing were emphasized. One man explained this concept, “I feel you learn something from every sexual encounter that you have, from every person that you're with, uh, is a teachable moment if you choose to pay attention to it.” A female participant expressed a similar sentiment:

And if I had to say that I was taught great sex by anyone, I'd have to say everyone I've ever had. Even the worst lays in history taught me about good sex. [Interviewer: You're very generous.] Well, if nothing else, they're good for a bad example. [laughter] 'Oh look, that's not great sex.' You know, I don't think I'll do that again. Process of elimination, trial and error.

For participants, it was important to pay close attention to their sexual encounters and their partner(s) and learn from them. An older man described how this aspect of his sexuality had changed over time:

And as I get older, I find that I'm much less, uh...worried about things and much more able. I've learned more to communicate I guess is what I would say [chuckles]. So, uh, and, uh, and learn much more to be able to just ask for what I want and ask and, and much more open to what is, what is wanted. And I have learned, the other thing – I don't know how to describe this but – is patience. I've learned patience. And learned that, you know, uh, time and connection really is, has become much more valuable to me.

Major Contributor 2: Individual Qualities Overall

Two different categories of individual contributors to optimal sexual experiences were identified. Specifically, there were individual qualities and characteristics that were important for bringing about wonderful sexual experiences (pp. 68 to 80) and there were qualities and characteristics that became relevant while a sexual experience was occurring (major contributor 3, pp. 81 to 92). These two categories will be addressed separately. Although participants sometimes made the distinction between their own qualities or those of their partners, this was not usually the case for the majority of participants. Therefore, individual qualities, whether attributed to self, partner, or other individuals who might have optimal sexual experiences, were analyzed together.

It did not appear that all of these qualities were present all of the time in any one participant and/or in their partner(s); neither was it true that all interviewees touched on all of these themes. Rather, it seemed that some of these qualities were relevant for some of the participants some of the time. Participants often expressed the belief that specific personal qualities had changed in relevance over their lifespan. Certain qualities became less important, others became much more important and, in some instances, new and relevant qualities were discovered, either in themselves or in their partners.

Within the larger umbrella of individual qualities, eight major themes emerged. These included attitudes and values towards life; being sex positive/sexual enthusiast/erotophilia; comfort with self; goodwill towards partner; willingness, readiness and being posed for experience; maturity; centering abilities; and miscellaneous traits and attributes (see table 3).

Table 3

Major Themes within Individual Qualities Overall

Major theme
2a - Attitudes and values towards life (“joie de vivre”)
2b – Sexual enthusiast/erotophile
2c – Comfort with self (“Bien dans sa peau”)
2d – Goodwill towards the partner
2e – Willingness/readiness/being poised to/for experience
2f – Maturity
2g – Centering abilities
2h – Miscellaneous individual qualities/attributes

Attitudes and values toward life (“joie de vivre”). Participants expressed the belief that their non-sexual attitudes and values toward life were important contributors to optimal sexual experiences (theme 2a). A minority of participants described themselves as generally optimistic, enthusiastic, “glass half-full” types with a zest for life. The ability to find enjoyment in their activities was important. It should also be noted that the content of their answers to interview questions, their enthusiastic style of responding and their laughter radiated “joie de vivre.” An older man described his attitude towards life:

...we wake up every morning and we put in the positive energy that rewinds the clock and keeps things going and moves the universe forward. And it’s sort of like the half-full, half-empty thing except it’s really not about that but the glass. It’s like about if you look at a glass, do you see the smudges on the glass, do you see, you know, do

you, like, have judgments about what's in the glass? Or do you just enjoy the fact that a blade of light comes through the glass and the fact that there's something in it which you can then take into your body and it will create more life in yourself which you can then multiply many-fold and put that back into.

In response to the question "What do you do to have great sex?", one older woman answered:

Think [laughing], I think myself into trouble! Um...actually, I think that's probably what happens is that I think myself into it, because I always seem to be very much of an optimist and I always think the glass is half-full and I always think I'm going to have a wonderful time. And sometimes I do and sometimes I don't, but more often than not, I think I do, because I am telling myself that I'm going to.

Several participants independently used the phrases "adventurous spirit" and "passion for life" to describe both themselves and the partners with whom they had had optimal sexual experiences. A minority expressed the belief that it might be possible to identify other individuals with this type of attitude based on vitality in their movements, liveliness or a spark in their eyes.

Several participants said that a key aspect of this positive, optimistic stance was having no expectations of other people, of sex or of life itself. They described letting go of "shoulds" and "musts." One man explained how this changed for him over time:

I have more of an understanding of being able to, um, well, slow down is not quite the right word, but let, let things happen at their own pace and then sort of give the pot a stir when it needs to happen. Um, like realizing that great sex is not something that I can, it doesn't happen when I try to make it happen.... If I go into it saying, 'This is going to be great sex,' you know, often times that just makes it not happen.

If I go into it with the attitude of, ‘Well, you know, let’s have fun and let’s see what happens and make sure that everybody’s enjoying themselves,’ then it’s a lot more likely...

When asked what led to optimal sexuality for her, one participant replied:

I think that – believe it or not – the biggest thing that I do is to not expect it to be great. I go into every sexual experience with no expectations other than I’m going to have fun [laughs], hopefully try and help my partner have fun, um, as much as I can, and just be responsive and in the moment.

Sexual enthusiast/erotophile. When asked which individual qualities might be important in bringing about optimal sexual experiences, participants often stated that the most salient individual quality was that they liked sex and had a strong desire for this type of experience (theme 2b). One man explained this very succinctly:

Well, my individual qualities are that I really like to have sex. My sister thinks I’m a, what did she say to me once, ‘Well you just like to fuck everyone you meet,’ or something like that, which is maybe not too far from the truth. But I think being positive about it is a good thing and I enjoy it and I don’t make any secret about it.

Many described themselves as “sex positive” or “sexual people”, who placed importance on taking the time for sex and making it a priority in their lives. “It’s like we swim through great sex from birth to death and it’s just our ability to embrace it that determines whether we experience it,” explained one male participant. It was clear that virtually all participants enjoyed and delighted in sex and their own sexualities.

Some participants described going on “an active journey” to find certain types of sexual experiences and partners. They highlighted the importance of eagerness, willingness,

curiosity and being non-judgmental. Fearlessness with respect to sex, connection and intimacy was a recurring idea. A male participant said:

I think there has to be some sort of...dedication to it. Some sort of, you know, thought. For me, I think it's the feeling that it's, as it were, I should imagine, you know, for, for people that are religious, that go to church, it's an ongoing thing, you know, that you do every day. You don't necessarily have sex every day but you sort of think about it every day and you think about the possibilities and you think about the different people that you might have sex with and you pursue it, in a way.

Participants described being open to sexual pleasure, immersing themselves and revelling in it. Both giving and receiving sexual pleasure were valued by those who experienced optimal sexuality. An older woman described her favorite sexual partners, "They're really in it to experience the entire gamut of pleasure..." Feeling entitled and worthy of "great sex" was an important element. A female participant explained:

If we can believe that sex is our entitlement, that good sex, great sex is our entitlement and that there's *nothing wrong* with enjoying our bodies and that turning on the lights is a good idea and making noise is also a good idea and being expressive and adventuresome and trying something new, um, would be just be a terrific thing, to, to do tonight, then good sex happens and, um, and, and we enjoy it. If we, if we don't be in our own way then sex gets better and better.

Comfort with self ("Bien dans sa peau"). In the original interview questions, participants were asked about the *impact* of optimal sexual experiences on body image. However, the majority responded that having a good body image and feeling "bien dans sa peau" were better conceptualized as *contributors* to optimal sexual experiences (theme 2c).

Participants believed that it was important to feel comfortable, embodied and grounded in themselves. One man stated:

I used to, many years ago, say that you could, you could see someone and feel that they were comfortable inside their own bodies as they walked down the street. You could feel that they kind of occupied their bodies as opposed to they just happened to be in their body....

Some described their partners or themselves as being unselfconscious with respect to their bodies. As one man said of his favourite partners, "They're not afraid to, to reach out and grab whatever body part they have an interest in. They're not afraid to show every body part they have." An older woman described the beginning of a romance characterized by optimal sexuality:

We were at his cottage, you know, at the lake so he ran around in his swimming suit all week. So that was pretty much all the clothes he wore. And he was just so comfortable in his body and so at ease and he just was so attractive to me for that, um, that I started looking at him in a totally different light than I had been previously.

An interviewee's comfort with his or her body (or that of his or her partner) was not predicated on adherence to mainstream standards of attractiveness. Many participants spontaneously remarked that neither they nor their partners would be judged attractive by Western standards. According to one female participant, "[Individuals] don't have to have a fabulous body or be particularly beautiful in a standard beauty kind of way, but when they walk into a room, heads turn." For the majority of participants, feelings of comfort with their bodies had developed over time. Some participants had undergone significant, life-changing illnesses or injuries and their treatments (e.g., cancer and mastectomy, multiple sclerosis, emphysema) that had affected their appearance. Several of these participants said they felt

better about their bodies at present, despite these changes, than they had when they were younger. A female participant in her forties described how her feelings of comfort with herself had changed over her life:

At my current age, I am *way* more sexy than I was at, at, uh, 29 or even at 18. My image of myself as a sexual being increases with time. Umm, part of that was the positive feedback I got from my partners but also part of it was being in an environment where I saw a lot of different body types, um, naked. Um, you know, being at dungeon parties, and being at different places where people would play naked and realizing that, you know, everybody has their little bumps and bulges and stuff but I would be looking at a woman and going, 'My God, she is sexy' and then realizing that classically, she's around 100 pounds overweight but she is still, you know, in my opinion, sexy. And that, you know, helped me realize that, you know, I had my own, you know, sex appeal.

Goodwill towards the partner. In order to bring about optimal sexual experiences, it was important for participants to feel a sense of goodwill towards their partners, where this feeling was targeted towards a specific partner, rather than feeling goodwill towards people in general (theme 2d). This contributor can be differentiated from "feelings towards the other", a relational contributor, [see p. 115] by the focus and source of the feelings. Feeling goodwill towards the partner was intrapsychically rather than interpersonally oriented: The focus of the participants was on their *own* sense of self and experience of their *own* feelings. One woman explained, "Our partner's pleasure is of primary importance and we can count on the other person to feel the same way."

Participants described caring for their partners and taking an interest in them. Respect, consideration and sensitivity were important dimensions of this goodwill.

Participants often described having trust and faith in their partner. One man explained, “A kind of profound respect for the other person’s experience and a fundamental curiosity about them and a really open desire to explore them.”

Willingness/readiness/being poised to/for experience. Having the willingness to experiment, explore and experience was an important individual quality thought by the majority of participants to contribute to optimal sexual experiences (theme 2e). Whereas the quality of attitudes and values toward life (p. 69) involved a more active and exploratory approach, this idea of willingness could be better conceptualized as a more receptive openness. (Essentially, it is analogous to the difference between ordering something unusual or different off a restaurant menu but knowing what dish you will receive versus ordering the “chef’s surprise”, which could be anything at all.)

Being open, fearless, and willing to surrender or abandon one’s self to the experience came up repeatedly as descriptors of this quality. A male participant said, “You gotta be willing to try things you didn’t try before.... it takes the ability to be free, to be experimentive, to be inquisitive, to be daring.” Participants described being poised and ready for whatever came their way. A male participant struggled to find the appropriate language to convey his idea:

I think this is one of those places where we don’t have a very good language for it.

Um, there’s a being able to let go of the attachment to the outcome. That’s one way of being able to let go. And there’s being able to let go in terms of not needing to be in control of the situation, you know, and, and let it be a dialogue rather than a monologue.

Another described this as, “a willingness to let oneself go into, into the process...”

Participants were prepared to welcome and enjoy experience and they deliberately invited

the unexpected into their lives and their bedrooms. One woman described, “Being open to the spontaneous.” A male participant described his ideal partner:

A person who is willing, who is open-minded enough to be willing to do things that she had always, always, always imagined her mother would roll over in her grave if she did that.

A male participant described his favourite partners:

They were willing to learn and to go to another depth of participation. I saw them as people who were here to grow, and that also carried into a lot of other things about their lives. ‘Here, I’ve shown you this and now let me show you this, this and this. Have you ever heard flamenco music? Let’s go hear it. [Starts laughing] Have you ever done this? Let’s go do it!’

Maturity. Maturity was deemed an important contributor to developing the capacity for optimal sexual experiences (theme 2f). This included the flexibility and willingness to change and grow over time. This seemed especially relevant for some older participants, who expressed the belief that the ongoing development and progress of maturity over their lifespans had been important for their ability to start or continue having optimal sexual experiences. Being able to self-soothe and being able to tolerate anxiety were considered valuable individual qualities and were sought after in partners. One woman stated, “When you feel threatened, you can manage that inside yourself. You have resources to develop yourself...” Maturity was thought to involve supporting, validating, affirming, respecting and trusting oneself. An older male participant emphasized the importance of trusting oneself:

You have to be able to trust that whatever this is it’s going to be the right thing, you know, it’s going to work. Whatever it is, it’s going to be the appropriate situation because if you start worrying about what’s going to happen or ‘Am I doing this

right?’ or ‘Should I be doing this?’ or ‘Is it going to be okay?’ then, you know, then you take your attention away from enjoying the flowering of the, of that sexual relationship.

Self-esteem and confidence were closely intertwined with conceptions of maturity. Participants described themselves as being in charge of their own lives and responsible for the positive and negative consequences of their behaviour. A male participant stated that he was most attracted to older, mature women because “[they] know who they are.” He went on to say:

I can think of each one, each of the women that I’m involved with right now and they’re, they’re very, they’re all different but they all have this core strength, they all have, uh, a gift of, of confidence and confidence in themselves when they’re, and in their bodies and they, um, they know who they are.

Centering abilities. The ability to center oneself so as to be present and connected was thought to be a significant contributor to optimal sexual experiences (theme 2g). For many participants, these centering abilities appeared to be closer to core traits or individual attributes than merely skills (c.f. skills, pp. 93 to 101). The majority of participants valued self-awareness strongly and being present in all areas of their lives, both sexual and non-sexual. This involved being present across all levels: mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally, etc. Participants described cultivating an intense focus on themselves and their partners that involved blocking off or deliberately shutting down internal and external distractions. One man described this as, “the capacity to slow down, the capacity to take time, the capacity to [sighs] just be in touch with each moment.” A female participant described the ongoing practice of centering and re-centering herself:

It's the presence that's really the important thing and I've, that is something that I think I've known ever since the beginning but over years, you kind of forget it as you get really busy with your life and it has to be brought back to you again, it seems like over and over again to, because it's a lesson that you keep learning – at least, I keep learning myself.

For participants, centering abilities in the context of optimal sexuality involved accessing their inner worlds and staying attuned to them. Self-awareness was crucial: Participants emphasized again and again that optimal sexual experiences must come from within. A few described an ongoing process of checking in with themselves and mulling over their own thoughts, emotions and reactions after each sexual encounter. The result of this process was a mental and spiritual groundedness. For one participant, this awareness on the part of their partners was what elevated the experience of sex from mechanical to optimal:

Their degree of awareness. The more sophisticated their awareness, the greater the sex, the more evolved they are as a spiritual being, the greater the sex. [pause] Sex with unevolved people is not very interesting. There's a, there's a finite number of tabs and a finite number of slots and a finite number of ways those can be combined and the rest of it is awareness, so. It's the awareness that makes it interesting and the awareness that distinguishes between mediocre and great sex.

A kinky woman stated that centering abilities contribute not only to optimal sexual experiences but also to quality of life overall:

I think that actually transcends sexuality in order to have a great life, you have to be fully present in every moment and that can be difficult to do in a world where we've created as many distractions as we have. But then again, what better way to acquire

discipline and focus than being surrounded by distractions and deliberately choosing to be present in that moment. It's the sand in our oyster, eh?

Miscellaneous individual qualities/attributes. Participants listed a variety of individual qualities that might be helpful in bringing about optimal sexual experiences (theme 2h). In many cases, these characteristics almost seemed to represent a "laundry list" or a personal ad describing their preferred partners. However, participants again emphasized that not all of these qualities were essential or even likely to exist in any one person. Rather, participants shared their list of ideal qualities or characteristics that could contribute to optimal sexual experiences.

Having a sense of humour, creativity and imagination were important individual qualities that might facilitate optimal sexual experiences. One man noted, "When I see the inner-child in somebody, a male or a female, but somebody who has playfulness and delight and spontaneity. I, I find that's intensely attractive." Participants valued generosity, kindness, patience, sensitivity and attentiveness in their partners. Other key qualities included being flexible, open-minded and non-judgmental. Intelligence was valued highly by several participants, although those who did were quick to point out that intelligence need not correlate with education or IQ. One woman explained:

I think there are a wide variety of intelligences. I personally prefer someone who's well-read, who has some sort of a background in film and art, especially as it relates to popular culture.

Or, as a male participant said, "They gotta be someone that you can, uh, have a decent conversation with."

Self-confidence was a key element. A female participant explained how she could recognize those individuals who might have the capacity for optimal sexual experiences:

They come in with a presence. They perhaps wear bright colors or they have a stride about them. They, um, there's a confidence, uh, um, an attitude. Not haughtiness but they are a comfort, and you can, you can hear it in their voice. They speak with a volume, with, um, an assuredness. Um, and it, you can hear it in their laughter.

Self-confidence was closely tied to having good self-knowledge and self-awareness. Several participants stated that it was important to have the capacity to trust and have faith in other people on a general level. Being passionate, having a caring nature and being courageous and daring were cited as important qualities.

A minority of participants were very specific about their expectations (e.g., someone in touch with his/her animal side, ability to dance). A few people described their preferred physical characteristics (e.g., tall, short, blonde, heavy, slim) but these participants were in the minority. In the majority of cases, when participants provided specific descriptors, they would often qualify these descriptions and say that these were optional; that is, they were merely preferences, rather than necessities.

Major Contributor 3: Individual Qualities In-the-moment

The third major theme of contributors to optimal sexual experiences consisted of qualities an individual might experience, draw on or demonstrate *during* an optimal sexual experience. This contributor can be differentiated from the second contributor (individual qualities, see pp. 68-80) from a temporal perspective: Whereas major contributor 2 consisted of individual qualities of those who had had optimal sexual experiences, major contributor 3 consists of the activation or expression of individual qualities while a sexual experience was occurring.

Most elements within this contributor did appear to be linked at a theoretical level to some fundamental individual attribute, quality or skill. It seems reasonable to theorize that those contributors that are important during an optimal sexual experience must have their origin within the individual and reflect an established individual skill or quality. For example, individuals who believe that optimism, “*joie de vivre*” and enthusiasm for sex are important contributors to optimal sexual experiences might also believe that feeling enthusiasm during sex was an important contributor. Similarly, individuals who, in general, have the capacity to center themselves may find this ability relevant to being embodied and being present during an optimal sexual experience. As with individual qualities and attributes, participants seldom differentiated between the qualities that they required from themselves and those qualities that they required from a partner(s); therefore, these themes were grouped together.

Within this larger contributor, eight major themes and one minor theme emerged. These were: being embodied; being engaged/focused; going beyond oneself; feeling good about oneself; being expressive, receptive, attentive and responsive with partner(s); being

Table 4

Major and Minor Themes within Individual Qualities In-the-moment

Major theme
3a – Being embodied
3b - Being engaged/focused mentally
3c – Going beyond oneself
3d – Feeling good about oneself
3e – Being expressive, receptive, attentive and responsive with partner(s)
3f – Being open/opening up to oneself, one’s partner(s) and the experience/being emotionally available
3g – Feeling enthusiasm
3h – Experiencing intense pleasure, high levels of arousal and build-up
Minor theme
3i – Fantasy

open/opening up to oneself, one’s partner(s) and the experience; feeling enthusiasm; and experiencing intense pleasure, high levels of arousal and build-up (see table 4).

Being embodied. The first major theme to emerge from the data was called “being embodied” (theme 3a). This theme described participants’ feelings of being connected within themselves as well as feelings of connection to their partners or within their relationships.

Participants associated feeling connected within with words such as savouring, luxuriating, basking and revelling. The majority of participants said that feeling completely

absorbed during a sexual encounter was important. One woman believed that sex was enhanced by, "...really experiencing the sensuality, the sensation in the moment." A few participants were familiar with the results of research conducted by Csíkszentmihályi [1990, 1993, 1997] and deliberately used his term, "flow", to describe this feeling. (Flow is defined as, "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" [Csíkszentmihályi, 1990, p.4]). One woman described this feeling as being, "...completely taken in the moment. Um, you're in that moment and there are no, um, interfering factors."

Some emphasized feelings of embodiment within the relationship. Participants talked about the importance of being fully present in the connection with their partners; some described this as "sharing a headspace." An older man described his experience of losing himself with a partner as: "A distinct loss of self, self-awareness in the sense of, uh, separateness from the other." Another older man used an analogy from art to describe feeling embodied with his partner:

...the kind of thing that happens where you just are completely in the flow and yeah, you know intellectually that you're separate people, but everything in your immediate experience is as if you're completely... the, the, all of the outlines have dissolved and it's like the umm, the Klimt painting, where you really can't tell where the bodies are, that they just all merge and all you feel is the flow.

Being engaged/focused mentally. Participants reported that their minds as well as their bodies needed to be completely engaged, focused, committed and present during their optimal sexual experiences (theme 3b). As one woman stated, "It isn't just the genitals, it's total body and total mind. It all connects with this other person, total body and total mind."

Most participants used the term “being present” and stated that it was important that this occur at multiple levels: emotionally, physically and spiritually. A few participants compared the experience of being fully present during sexual peak experiences to non-sexual peak experiences. One older woman described her experience of being present, “You are all focused rightly there at, uh, at the task of sexuality [amused tone] at the expression of sexuality, at the moment of sexuality instead of thinking about your hair or the kids or the food or the meeting next week or the office or whatever.”

A key aspect of being engaged and focused for participants involved shutting out internal and external distractions. The majority of participants described focusing their minds on the experience at hand and eliminating worries about work, children or household chores for the duration of the encounter. A female participant stated:

...you’re in that moment and there are no, um, interfering factors. You’re not juggling a bunch of thoughts in your head, you really have, um, given yourself, not necessarily consciously but, um, to that moment of connection with yourself and, um, the other person. So I think it has to do with interference, it has to do with really being there. And somehow being able to, to lose the rest of your worldly concerns for that moment...

Going beyond oneself. The third major theme within the larger theme of individual qualities in-the-moment was the participants’ experience of going beyond themselves during optimal sexual experiences (theme 3c). Many believed that feelings of transcendence and otherworldliness were key contributors to optimal sexual experiences; this was true even for some participants who did not identify as religious or spiritual. (Some participants seemed to experience difficulty in using spiritual or religious terms to describe their experiences. One man stated that he did not like using these types of words but felt that he had no choice

because they were the most apt.) A minority of participants stated that optimal sexual experiences were impossible without feeling that they had transcended the mundane. One older man believed that optimal sexual experiences required a connection to “the creative heart of the world or...the life force.” One woman stated:

...when you feel connected to another person on some incredibly deep existential level and there’s this, you know, um, almost otherworldliness to it – and I’m not talking about the moment of orgasm and, and, the, um, and that kind of, the ecstasy of that moment or the rapture of that moment. It’s just the kind of union, um, that you can feel with another, another human being, um, that can be quite inspiring and moving.

A few individuals who had experienced and practiced meditation believed that there were similar individual qualities involved in both activities. One male participant stated, “I began finding that when I did a good meditation, I did it right, and you know, when I had a real deep meditative experience, it approached the same experience.”

Feeling good about oneself. Participants reported that feeling good about themselves during optimal sexual experiences was important (theme 3d). They talked about feeling comfortable and at ease with every part of themselves, including their bodies, their desires, their ability to express themselves and their capacity to give and receive pleasure. Many said that during optimal sexual experiences, they felt that they had something to offer to their partners or to the experiences themselves. Others emphasized the importance of being nonjudgmental with themselves and allowing themselves to enjoy pleasure. One woman stated it was important to, “...really give yourself permission to be, to be sexual, to feel sexual.”

A key aspect in participants' feeling good about themselves seemed to involve knowing their own limits or boundaries and communicating these to their partner(s). Trusting themselves was a key part of feeling good about themselves. As an older man put it:

I think the first thing you have to do is trust. You have to trust yourself 'cause you have to let go and you can't, you can't *control*, I mean if you think that letting go, you know, could be embarrassing or.... You have to be able to trust that whatever this is it's going to be the right thing, you know, it's going to work.

The majority used some variant of the phrase, "knowing it's okay" and stated that during an optimal sexual experience, they felt safe. The willingness to be honest with themselves was important. A female participant emphasized, "...acknowledging what really turns you on rather than what you think is supposed to happen." Another woman said:

...both people are in a really good, confident headspace. They are, um, not only confident about their ability to give, but they're confident about their ability to receive and there is a, uh, an, a, a confidence of being able to be open to the moment, of, um, being able to say, 'You know what? I'm going to go into this with the plan that we're going to do X, Y, and Z but I'm not going to worry about it if when I do X, I end up going into L and M instead. Um, that that, I'm just going to know that whatever happens is exactly what's supposed to happen. If I find myself doing things that are totally out of character for me, I'm not going to freak out, I'm just going to go with it [laughing].

One of the questions included in the proposed interview protocol was, "What is the impact of great sex on a person's body image?" The majority of participants spontaneously remarked that this question had been phrased backwards: They reported that having a good

body-image was an essential contributor to optimal sexual experiences rather than a result of the experience. Some stated that feeling desirable significantly enhanced the quality of their sexual encounters. One woman stated:

I think great sex involves a certain amount also of, how can I put this, um, finding oneself attractive and I think, um, from a woman's perspective anyway, sometimes I think that's almost more important than finding the other person attractive or that they find you attractive...

Being expressive, receptive, attentive and responsive with partner(s). Participants believed that an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences was being expressive, receptive, attentive and responsive with their partner(s) (theme 3e). This was deemed an important contributor coming both from oneself and from one's partners. The idea of being expressive and responsive during sex is closely related to communication skills that reside within the individual (see major contributor 2, p. 68). On a conceptual level, the distinction is primarily around timing, i.e., during the sexual encounter itself. In addition, being expressive and receptive in the moment represents the putting into practice of a theoretical skill: A person might possess communication skills but might not take advantage of these in all of their sexual encounters. One man explained the difference that being expressive made to his sexual encounters:

I find sex to be better for me and [unintelligible] partners who are being more, um, who, again, are more vocal about what they're enjoying – or what they're not – but in particular, um, a certain amount of 'Yes, this is working for me' expressed however vigorously really, really does add a lot.... it's kind of exciting, to be part of having your partner become aroused and excited.

Being expressive was key to communicating interest and enjoyment. According to one older woman:

Um, be open and responsive...and interested in what you're doing....if you're an active participant and you let your partner know that you're enjoying him and having a good time and what he's doing is right, um, I think that adds to the whole thing.

The majority of participants felt that paying attention and being receptive to a partner's communications or reactions were essential contributors to optimal sexual experiences. A male participant described himself as "emotionally perceptive" and emphasized the importance of paying attention to the other person's body language and tone of voice. One woman provided a helpful illustration of paying attention:

Um, [my partner] has some nerve damage down his left side. And I noticed fairly early in the relationship how, if I would run my fingers down his arm, he would hold his breath. And, and from one second to the next, he would either gasp or, or his eyes would close or something, some little sign that something there was happening and it was because, because of the nerve damage he can feel my hand and then not feel it and then feel my hand, and so that's become, kind of a fun thing to do because he never knows when he's going to feel that touch. It's paying attention to little things. Little things that, that get a reaction or don't get a reaction or get a negative reaction...

Being open/opening up to one's self, one's partner(s) and the experience/being emotionally available. Participants reported that being open to themselves, their partner(s) and the experience were important (theme 3f). The majority of participants believed that the ability and willingness to be emotionally available and vulnerable during sex were key elements. One man described this as, "I guess something you could call vulnerability, just a

kind of exquisite tenderness out of, out of which a joyous intensity can arise.” Many stated that for optimal sexual experiences, it was necessary to let go, give in and go with the flow. One man described the openness and vulnerability he experienced during optimal sexual experiences as “non-risky.”

Participants emphasized the importance of being flexible, trying new things and being willing to make mistakes. When asked to describe the greatest sexual experiences of her entire life, one female participant described an unusual experience that had caused her some initial feelings of fear:

Um, but it did say to me, be open to, to whatever comes your way, you know, don't close the door because you never know, uh, even if it seems a little scary....it taught me, uh, the fun of some spontaneous, unexpected experience, um. It taught me to just, you know, stay open to the possibilities.

Feeling enthusiasm. Many participants believed that being enthusiastic was an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences (theme 3g). Being enthusiastic involved both the intention and eagerness to have optimal sexual experiences in the future as well as diving in energetically during sex.

The intention to create optimal sexual experiences required desire and enthusiasm from participants. As one man said, “...having the physical energy and the desire and disposition to having good sex tonight....it does take some kind of commitment because sometimes it's just easier to get off then it is to have great sex.”

Participants talked about diving in, having fun, feeling playful or, as one woman put it, “being happy to be there.” Another man felt that optimal sexual experiences involved, “...just being totally high on being with a person....” Participants talked about being

fearless, having an adventurous spirit and pushing or challenging themselves. Others described feeling inspired, creative and energetic during the experience.

Experiencing intense pleasure, high levels of arousal and build-up. Many participants felt that feeling intense pleasure, heightened sensuality and high levels of arousal and build-up were all important contributors to optimal sexual experiences (theme 3h). For one man, getting to this point involved a combination of “joy and relaxation and, um, and a sense of ecstasy.”

Many stated that optimal sexual experiences involved a sense of great physical satisfaction, gratification and release. A minority of participants mentioned strong, intense arousal and orgasms as important contributors. An older man said that during his greatest experiences, “I am able to pull back into just pure sensual pleasure.” One woman described her very best sexual experiences as reaching, “That unconscious place, you know, where you just give it up during the orgasm, you know, that inevitability place where you’re no longer thinking.”

Participants also mentioned the importance of anticipation and desire. One woman believed that during her optimal sexual experiences, “...desire for each other stays high. You feel fulfilled but yet still open to more sex.” Another man described one of the best parts of the experience for him:

There’s a point when I’m with someone who, uh, I know that whatever we’re doing is going to lead to a sexual encounter and that is, it’s a *delicious* part....that’s the first great sex moment is when the mouth goes dry, the knees get a little bit weak and there’s this tingling in my groin.

Fantasy. Fantasy was included as a minor theme within the category of individual qualities expressed during optimal sexual experiences (theme 3i). A minority of participants

felt that this was crucial for optimal sexual experiences; others felt that fantasizing signified that they were *not* having optimal sex. The lack of consensus among participants led to identifying this as a minor theme, relevant and important to some but not to the majority. Some participants believed that fantasy was a key contributor to great solo sex but not partnered sex. Others felt that fantasy could be a helpful contributor to optimal sexual experiences if partners were communicating about and sharing the fantasy. One old man stated:

I think that's part of creating that atmosphere, reaching out, you know, sort of reorganizing the world around as one tends toward a great sexual moment. The, it's not just the physical things but the mental stuff and the projections of one's mental patterns on the external pattern of everyday life. So that, part of having great sex is uh, transforming the relationship to the physical environment in which you're having sex, from a non-sexual to a sexual one....fantasy is a big deal for me. It just, but it comes along with like, it's not like something that I can work at. It's just something that as my mind opens, then my engagement broadens out sort of like the whirlwind, expands, it uh, engages psychic dimensions as well as physical ones.

Several participants believed that fantasy enabled them to be more present and attuned to their partners during optimal sexual experiences. One man explained:

One of the things I think I fantasize about during sex is not fantasizing about a particular fantasy or role-play but actually just imagining what my partner is feeling as we're having sex. And that fantasizing about that is one of the, one of the most powerful things I think.

Another man said:

I love fantasy, I love role play, I love all of that because it's, because it continually challenges those folks to be, um, involved, or if I'm by myself, the active engagement of thinking about a particular fantasy is, is a lot to connect me to my brain and my body and my desires and all of that.

Major Contributor 4: Skills

Participants identified a variety of skills that might contribute to bringing about optimal sexual experiences. These skills could be organized into five smaller themes: fundamental knowledge of technique and anatomy, skills specific to the partner or relationship, self-awareness, communication skills and specialized technical skills (see table 5). Again, the majority of participants did not differentiate between their own skills and the skills that they valued in a partner(s); therefore, these themes were grouped together.

Table 5

Major Themes within Skills

 Major theme

4a – Fundamental knowledge of techniques and anatomy

4b – Knowledge and skills specific to the partner(s)/relationship

4c – Self-awareness

4d – Communication skills

4e – Specialized technical skills

Fundamental knowledge of techniques and anatomy. Within the area of skills, the first theme that was identified consisted of having a fundamental knowledge of techniques and anatomy (theme 4a). This included knowing a variety of basic skills related to stimulation techniques; touching, kissing and massage skills were cited as well as skills related to oral sex, manual sex and intercourse. An older woman believed that kissing skills were particularly important:

I think kissing is a lovely behaviour amongst humans and, uh, can be very poorly done or well done. When it's well done, I think it opens up and wakes up those erotic channels in our being that can let that energy start to flow. Um, a good use of hands is also very helpful; hands are amazing tools and, uh, can do so many lovely things [laughs].

Participants also believed that having a good, basic understanding of male and/or female anatomy was useful. One older woman explained:

I think umm, great sex requires a certain knowledge of anatomy. What you can do and can't do and how it feels. Umm, you know, what part of, what parts of the body

are so sensitive they have to be touched very carefully and what parts can take more pressure, and how you can increase the pressure as the person is getting more turned on.

Participants also talked about having a good understanding of intensity, style, speed and repetition as they relate to touch. Several believed that having a good comprehension of timing and rhythm could be an asset. (A few participants expressed a penchant for sexual partners who were musicians and/or dancers.) An older woman valued, "...that understanding of rhythm and when to change it, how to change it, how to build it, how to intuit from your partner what their rhythm is and how it interacts with you."

It should be noted that the majority of participants minimized the importance of technical skills relative to other skills or qualities. As one woman explained:

It helps to have an awareness of your skinsuit and a basic functioning modality of the other skinsuit or skinsuits you're playing with but if I had to put communication and anatomical information next to each other, screw the anatomy. You can figure that part out, it's standard equipment on most folks.

A male participant stated, "So there's not a like, 'magic great sex skill'. Great sex skill where if you just learn this one skill and use it then you're bound to get to great sex." Others felt that skills were important but only within a broader context. As one man explained, "It's less about the technical skills, and more about the confidence that can come from somebody knowing that they've got skills."

Knowledge and skills specific to the partner(s)/relationship. A key skill that contributed to optimal sexual experiences was having the ability to tailor general knowledge and technical skills to a specific partner (theme 4b). While many participants expressed the belief that a basic knowledge of technique and anatomy was important, a fundamental

component of this skill was the knowledge that one could not go out and apply these generic skills to every sexual partner without adaptation. In fact, the majority of participants who mentioned technical skills also added that doing the same thing to everyone would likely *preclude* optimal sexual experiences. A male participant explained the relationship between having general knowledge and techniques and tailoring them to partners:

...you may be sexually competent, I think, with one person and totally inept with another. So it's almost like you start all over again. Um...but I do think it helps to have, uh, some understanding of the body and especially, for me, relating to the woman, it is important to understand, um, uh...the body of a woman and what, and at the same time being individual. Individualizing it...

Another man described how he tailors his skills to different partners, "...if I need to learn the skills to have great sex, a lot of times it's as much about learning to have great sex with so-and-so...."

It was also true that skills and knowledge relevant to one long-term partner might require modification over time. One man described his experience in a long-term relationship:

...the last thing I can think of is really understanding deep down that, you know, just because something works with one person, or worked at a given time with this person, doesn't mean it will work right now. Like no matter how much you know someone, things change over time. Um, the, the way that my partner and I have sex after 17 years looks very different from, or, you know, we do very different things. Uh, you know, like for example, within the, within the general category of oral sex, the things that we like have changed over time. So, yes, I mean, they may both look similar to the outsider but to us, it's clearly very different. Um, and so being able to

recognize that and not take it personally. It, it's not a statement about my masculinity that the way that she enjoys oral sex is different now than it was 15 years ago.

Being able to tailor general knowledge and skills to partners was made possible by communication and being able to read a partner's verbal and non-verbal responses. A female participant stated, "The skill is not something you just go out and do the same thing to everybody, but it's, it's knowing what the other, being able to read or to ask what the other person really likes." Another woman explained how she made the adaptations:

I've always just done a lot of asking: 'Does this feel good? Does that feel good?'

You know, and kind of just tailoring whatever I'm doing to them. 'Do you like my legs up here? Do you like them down there?'

Self-awareness. The majority of participants believed that self-awareness and self-knowledge were critical skills (theme 4c). They stated that it was important to know your own sexual desires, preferences and interests. A male participant described this skill as, "...the ability to figure out what's working for you, um, and [pause] make that happen." A kinky woman said, "I do have to be self-aware enough to know that, you know, I have these submissive tendencies so there's certain, certain things that can happen that will always, you know, kind of take me right over the edge."

This skill was also strongly tied to communication: Participants believed it was impossible to communicate your interests and preferences to another person without being aware of themselves. For one female participant, self-awareness and communication were completely intertwined:

I gotta go back to communication...and self-awareness. You have to know what works for you and you have to be able to communicate that to your partner in one way or another. You can say, 'No, I'm sorry dear. Your finger needs to be two

centimetres up and slightly to the left. The speed increase needs to...happen a little bit here and a slight bit of less pressure. Great!

Communication skills. When asked about the skills that might be relevant for bringing about optimal sexual experiences, almost all participants mentioned communication skills; for many, these were the most important abilities of all (theme 4d). This communication could be verbal or non-verbal and could take place at any time, before, during and/or after the sexual experience. A female participant described different approaches to communication:

...communication can be verbal, it can be vocal sounds that are not words, it can be nonverbal cues, something very overt like picking up a hand and putting it someplace else. Um, but communication is, in all its forms, is an essential skill.

Participants considered communication about any and all aspects of the sexual experience to be very important. The content of communication might include likes, dislikes, preferences, interests, desires, fantasies, feelings, thoughts and other intimate details. Some found verbal communication more challenging and preferred non-verbal communication where possible. As one man explained, "So, non-verbal communication and then if that isn't working, then succinct and to-the-point verbal communication which doesn't take too long to figure out or talk ourselves out of the mood." A female participant provided some helpful examples of communication:

It's the communication, it's the ability to go 'Hi! I find you remarkably attractive' or some variant thereof. 'You look like dessert, I'd like to see how you taste'. Or 'I'd like to see how you look dressed up in screams and leather.' That's communication, that's an approach.... Their ability to communicate, their awareness of their body and their ability to convey that information to me.

For some participants, the ability to communicate took some time to develop or was particularly challenging because of early experiences. One man described the long journey he had taken to develop his communication skills:

And one of the things that has come, become very clear to me but never came into practice until relatively recently because I found it difficult, and that was being able to talk. Not just before and after, but during. Being able to say ‘That feels good,’ or ‘More of that please,’ or ‘I’d rather not do that right now,’ or ‘How would you feel about,’ or whatever....I think the biggest the biggest ingredient that I would say has presented itself through work – not just naturally but through pushing it – is communication and I, I think that communication and honesty – because communication isn’t always honest – but communication and honesty, uh, to me are, are the most cherished, um, incendiary ingredients to great sex.

A fundamental aspect of communication skills was the ability to read and respond accurately to a partner’s verbal and non-verbal messages. The majority of participants emphasized listening carefully and paying close attention. One man explained:

...what’s required is a willingness to pay attention. So, if I’m having sex with a partner, I mean I’ve never really had sex with a partner who didn’t pay attention to me in some way. But, I suppose that if I had sex with someone who was so intent on, just, whatever, doing whatever that they need to do or they want to do to me, and wasn’t paying attention to my breathing, or what I’m saying or how I’m moving, ah that would be bad sex.

Being sensitive, responsive, empathic and aware of one’s partner were fundamental. A female participant described the importance of awareness: “Awareness. Um, ability to be sensitive to the other person’s arousal....But mostly that sophisticated awareness, that

intensity of intent.” Another woman agreed that awareness was vital for optimal sexual experiences:

I find if there’s too much focus on technique or skills or anything other than each other’s response to the moment, um, it loses it. I think that the most important thing for the other people to have would be an awareness of. All the partners have to be aware, I mean *really* aware of each other and how they’re responding in the moment.

One woman believed that her ability to read and respond to her partners was her most valuable skill:

Well I think that the best skill a lover can have is, like I said, taking direction well [laughs] and being responsive and, um, observant. I mean, so much, so much I know of what I feel and what I’ve heard from partners makes me a good partner is that I’m able to see by breathing or how their body is flushing or muscle tension or whatever, I can sort of read a person. When you know a person well enough, that sort of comes, hopefully, second nature, not all the time. But, um, so being observant and responsive to, to the other person.

Specialized technical skills. For a minority of participants, optimal sexual experiences were enhanced by specific equipment, activities, fetishes or practices (theme 4e). For those individuals, knowledge and skills related to their particular preferences were essential. Some participants mentioned knowing how to use lubricant and/or sex toys. Many of the participants who identified as kinky mentioned specific BDSM skills such as flogging, bondage, spanking, fisting and/or genital and nipple torture. Those with interests in particular fetishes mentioned skills related to their particular interests (e.g., boots, leather). One woman described her husband’s specialized skills:

Spanking is a skill. You have to learn – I mean – and the wonderful thing is I, kind of, basically taught him how to spank me. How I want it. And that’s probably why I love it so much with him, uh, and not so much with other people because there’s certain – you really do have to hit a person’s rhythm, do you know what I mean? And give it the way that they want it. So anytime you’re talking about any sort of D/S stuff, you know it’s huge. Tying somebody up, you know, getting flogged, umm, the skill really comes in.

Major Contributor 5: Relationship Qualities Overall

Qualities of the interpersonal relationship were very important contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Although the relationships that participants described varied tremendously in terms of their external characteristics (e.g., number of years together, sexual orientation, open/monogamous), there did appear to be a core set of relational qualities that were common across participants. As with individual contributors to optimal sexual experiences, two broad categories of relational contributors were identified: those that were important overall (pp. 102 to 128) and those that were particularly relevant during a sexual encounter (pp. 129 to 146). Again, these two categories will be addressed separately.

Within the larger category of relationship qualities, six major themes emerged, including atmosphere and tone of the relationship, attitudes and beliefs within the relationship, feelings within the relationship, feelings towards the other, behavioural intentions between partners and structure and depth of the relationship. A seventh theme, empathy, was labelled a free-standing “super-ordinate theme” because it seemed to be a part of almost all of the themes; however, in addition, the importance of empathy resonated throughout participants’ descriptions of most themes. Empathy represented an essential and indispensable relational contributor to optimal sexual experiences. Finally, respect and consideration, could be considered parts of the atmosphere or tone of the relationship, attitudes or beliefs espoused by the partners or feelings experienced while together depending on the context of the participant’s statement. To maintain clarity and readability, respect and consideration will be described under a separate subsection, with the understanding that the description of these contributors could potentially fit under each of three themes previously enumerated.

Table 6

Super-ordinate Themes, Major Themes and Sub-Themes within Relational Qualities Overall

 Super-ordinate theme

 5a – Empathy

 Major theme

5b – Atmosphere and tone of the relationship (e.g., trust, safety, humour, spontaneity, respect)

5c – Attitudes and beliefs within the relationship (e.g., valuing and nurturing the relationship)

5d – Feelings within the relationship (e.g., bonding, merger, unselfconsciousness, chemistry)

5e – Feelings towards the other (e.g., love, liking, respect)

5f – Behavioural intentions between partners (e.g., mutuality, discovery, communication)

 5g – Structure and depth of the relationship (e.g., good fit, growth, emotional maturity, depth)

Empathy. Within the larger theme of relational qualities, empathy was considered to be an absolutely fundamental contributor to optimal sexual experiences (theme 5a).

However, its importance was such that it could not be easily classified into any one particular theme (e.g., atmosphere, attitudes and beliefs, feelings, behavioural intentions).

Empathy seemed to be a major element in all of the preceding themes but not limited to any one in particular. As such, empathy stands as a relational contributor that was super-ordinate to other relationship themes. Empathy was considered a separate contributor to optimal sexual experiences as well as an element that coloured every other theme. It appeared to be the case that most other relational contributors were only possible because of the empathy that existed in the relationship.

The majority of participants stated that the ability to be sensitive, perceptive and attentive to their partners was crucial. One woman explained:

...people I think who are great in bed seem to have a, an almost uncanny ability not only to hear what's said but what isn't said. I mean my current partner, one time I told my current partner, 'You know, you're doing just what I wanted' and she said, 'Well, I'm watching your reactions'.

Empathy was sometimes defined as tuning in to the other, reading his or her body language or being on the same wavelength as the other person. One man described this as being able to feel into another person's space. One woman struggled to define what she meant by empathy and decided to try a different approach:

Let me talk about my husband. He has a particularly wonderful way of touching another human being. Doesn't matter if it's just for caring or making contact or whether it's sexually, there's just something that he knows, or that he has in his body that he does, which is just right, and, and not, not jerky, not uncomfortable, not awkward. And I've known him a very long time so that, that has always been present.

A male participant stated:

While I'm having great sex what we're doing is... focusing on connecting to my body and another person, um... trying to get – sometimes it feels like inside their brain or inside their being and you have some types of, some type of, um, connection together.

Responsiveness and flexibility were central characteristics of this deep level of empathy.

One woman explained, "Things change from time to time and circumstance to circumstance and what might have felt, worked great one time doesn't do it the next time." A male

participant described the balancing act between paying attention to his partner and being flexible and open to the moment:

So there's this balancing function, of balancing the animal pleasures of sexuality against the necessity of taking care of each other and so there's a certain – I would call that a skill. I would call that a skill, which requires, uh, empathy and uh, and uh, realization of people, who they are, and their needs, and so forth, at the same time that you would, uh, somehow be able to, transcend those in order to have a more freewheeling type of thing going on at that same time. So that's a, that's a fine art.

To achieve this level of empathy, it was necessary for both partners to be open and vulnerable with one another and to treat each other with care, compassion, consideration and respect. One woman described the joy she felt in sharing her partners' experiences:

Their willingness to share themselves with me. That turns me on more than anything...my focus is not all about my own self-pleasure, it's really, I get a lot of joy out of how excited and I, you know, if I, where I can take them if we, we're, we're on this road together but we have these moments where I'm, I'm in the middle of doing something for them that I enjoy doing but they're really having a wonderful time, that makes me really happy. [pause] Yeah I don't do things just for the other person, I do them for myself too.

Participants also emphasized the need for both people to be fully present during a sexual encounter as well as the willingness to connect on such a deep level. One female participant stressed that empathy between partners was a far more important contributor than technical skills:

I think the skills are more mental skills and emotional skills than they are physical skills because if you the, if you have the empathy and you have the, um, desire to

connect, you're going to be led in the right, you know, if you're, if you're paying attention to the feedback you're getting from your partner, nonverbal as well as verbal, that's, that'll give you the physical skills you need.

Atmosphere/tone of the relationship. Qualities of the atmosphere and tone of the relationship were crucial contributors to optimal sexual experiences (theme 5b). For the majority of participants, the emotional climate of the relationship was indispensable for creating optimal sexual experiences. Within this theme, participants focused on the importance of trust, safety and security; humour, playfulness and laughter; spontaneity, joy and imagination; and respect and consideration as being particularly important.

Trust, safety and security. The majority of participants stated that feelings of trust, safety and security in the relationship were absolutely fundamental to optimal sexual experiences. The level of trust described by participants existed across multiple levels: physically, emotionally, spiritually. For some participants, feeling utter trust in their partners was a key distinction between the relationships in which optimal sexual experiences were possible and those in which they were not. Many used the term “non-judgmental” to describe the atmosphere in their relationship. A male participant stated that “peace” was a good synonym for the sense of trust and safety he felt in his relationships. One woman, who had had many anonymous sexual partners over the years, believed that the relevance of trust within the relationship had increased for her over time:

...nowadays I definitely need a relationship where I, I, umm...I trust the other person enough to tell them what gets me off so that they understand, umm, you know, what my process is.

A male participant believed that trust was both a contributor to and a result of optimal sexual experiences within a relationship:

But I think that with a partner, um, being able to experience great sex together can enhance a relationship because it creates more of a bond between people. And again, it's a circular thing because there has to be the trust and respect and communication beforehand. But experiencing this dimension of a relationship, I think, can further enhance it.

Humour, playfulness and laughter. Many participants described the atmosphere of their relationships as characterized by humour, playfulness and laughter. One man believed that “convivial conversation” beforehand helped to facilitate his best sexual experiences. Laughter and a light-hearted atmosphere were thought to enhance feelings of ease and comfort with the other person. One woman explained the role of humour in bringing about optimal sexual experiences within her relationships:

I think good lovers know how to laugh. Now that doesn't mean I think, you know, they're laughing through every sexual episode but, but that there's this kind of naturalness to the act that is unselfconscious and not ego-invested, so that if things don't go as expected, whatever that means that no one feels devastated or no one feels that it's the reflection on their personhood but that it's just the way the rest of life is. That sometimes it's great, sometimes it's middling, and sometimes it sucks and all of that's okay and that funny things do happen while you're having sex and, and that's fine.

A male participant described the connection between humour, comfort and intimacy within his relationships:

I often over-simplify it by saying that, that uh, um, I'm really in favour of relationships where it's possible to laugh in bed. [laughs] And, um, it takes a certain level of comfort for most people to, to be kind of at ease with what's going on

sexually and, and to have, to be able to simply laugh when something is absurd and it's really that comfort and intimacy that I think a lot of times uh, makes for great sex.

Spontaneity, joy and imagination. The role of playfulness and laughter in facilitating optimal sexual experiences was closely linked by participants with spontaneity, joy and imagination. In describing how her greatest sexual experiences came about, a female participant defined the type of spontaneity and joy that typified many participants' experiences:

Where just all of a sudden, you make eye contact, just that extra nanosecond longer than you would and all of sudden you, you know that both of you have suddenly switched your blood flow. Both are getting hot. And, where you didn't plan it, you didn't make a date. And it wasn't the right time, and it may not even be the right place [laugh], some of those are the most fun.

Another woman expressed the belief that both spontaneity and anticipation were important. When queried as to the relationship between the two ideas, she provided the following explanation:

You can have the anticipation that it's going to be spontaneous [laughing]. You can have the anticipation that, 'How is this going to go? What's going to happen here, I don't know but it's going to be good I bet ya!'

The ability to be spontaneous and experience such joy was often predicated on the comfort and ease within the relationship. For many participants, the degree of spontaneity in the encounter was a hallmark of some of their very best or most memorable sexual experiences.

Imagination and creativity also contributed to the kind of atmosphere within the relationship that had the potential to bring about optimal sexual experiences. One woman explained:

I think it um, my partner and I both have very creative imaginations and we have so much fun playing out fantasies or coming up with different ways to, to tweak each other and to, just set each other, kind to set each other up.

A female participant described the relationships in which optimal sexual experiences could happen:

We bring creativity and fun into intimacy. We are able to laugh together, not at or to one another, but together.

Attitudes and beliefs. Attitudes and beliefs within the partnership were important contributors to optimal sexuality (theme 5c). While individual attitudes and beliefs were also important contributors to optimal sexual experiences [see pp. 68-92], this theme pertained specifically to those beliefs about the relationship that facilitated the optimal sexual experiences. For example, whereas interest and enthusiasm for sexuality could predispose someone to optimal sexual experiences with different partners, an individual might also require a relationship in which sex is highly valued in order to for optimal sexuality to be possible. This theme included ideas such as valuing and nurturing the relationships, seeing sex as a way to further intimacy and respect and consideration (see p. 126).

Valuing and nurturing the relationship. The majority of participants expressed the belief that it was crucial to value and nurture their relationship in order to set the foundation for optimal sexual experiences. They talked about the importance of both individuals putting in effort, demonstrating commitment and bringing intentionality to the relationship. A few emphasized the difference between work and effort in bringing about optimal sexual

experiences. Mutual generosity and feelings of “good will” within the relationship were highly prized. One woman, who described having been raised in an unaffectionate household, spoke of cultivating this in her marriage:

But I do think that the affection, I think that the touching outside of sex – the connecting outside of sex – ‘How was your day at work?’ You know, I think all of that is really important to building the relationship, which you have to have to have great sex.

Another man explained the impact of entropy on his relationship and his attempts to combat the process.

So it’s not the, it’s not that, you know, connection and intimacy are constantly increasing, it’s that, you know, in a world that sort causes it to decrease every now and then sometimes you need to re-build in order to come back to the place where you were the day before...

Seeing sex as a way to further intimacy. Many participants stated that it was necessary to see sex as a way of furthering the intimacy within their relationship. Wanting sex to happen, prioritizing it, planning and setting aside time were all seen as important contributors to optimal sexual experiences. A male participant stated, “What leads to great sex for me is, again, I think it’s the approach of the person...it’s that we’re coming together with a similar goal in mind.” The term “special” was frequently used in reference to participants’ experiences of the sex within their relationship.

Feelings when together. Participants believed that the feelings they experienced while in the presence of their partners were important contributors to optimal sexual experiences (theme 5d). Without exception, participants emphasized the mutuality of these feelings. As one woman explained, “You know it’s got to be a partner that, that you feel...not

only warmth towards but I think warmth from.” Feelings identified by participants included bonding, intimacy, closeness, connection and warmth; merger, abandon, giving self over; unselfconsciousness, ability to let go and let loose, freedom; desire for one another, attraction, chemistry; and passion and intensity.

Bonding, intimacy, closeness, connection and warmth. The words “intimacy” and “connection” came up repeatedly throughout the interviews when participants spoke of important contributors to their optimal sexual experiences. The majority of participants stated that the feelings they experienced in relationships with their partners were absolutely crucial for the experience: Physical sensations alone were not sufficient to account for “great sex.” The combination of the physical with emotional intimacy and connection was what created optimal sexual experiences for participants. Many described a multifaceted bond that existed across several dimensions, e.g., physical, intellectual, spiritual, emotional. A male participant summarized his experience of intimacy as, “Being with someone you really want to be with.” Participants stated they felt very close to their partners and emphasized the warmth and nurturing within their relationships. By their descriptions, it seemed that many savoured the time they spent in the presence of their partners. Other words that came up repeatedly in participants’ descriptions of the connection they felt with their partners included “gentle” and “tender.”

Merging, abandon, giving self over to the partner. Participants believed that a sense of merger and giving one’s self over to the other person were important contributors to optimal sexual experiences. “Just getting lost in one another, consumed, lost,” was how one man put it. Essentially, this idea involved a sense of abandon within the connection to the other person. Several participants independently described the sensation as feeling like one person as opposed to two. One woman explained the importance of this merger:

That I have such a strong heart connection with the other person that it was really hard to tell where I began and left off; where there was just a feeling of it not really being two people anymore. That heart connection.

Unselfconsciousness, ability to let go and let loose, freedom. Participants believed that feeling unselfconscious and free within their relationships helped to facilitate optimal sexual experiences. One man described his experience of freedom and being able to let go:

The total freedom to do anything and everything and the feeling that that other person with you feels the same way, or those other people with you feel the same way, so that in the moment, something you didn't even think about might just occur. You know, you, I, I might be doing something with one person and all of a sudden feel somebody doing something else to me, and I'm thinking, 'Wow! That's neat! I didn't, didn't even think of that for the moment, but boy, that feels good!'

Many participants explained that the warmth, safety, trust, connection and acceptance within their relationships enabled them to let go and feel a sense of freedom. One man believed that the ability to let go was what elevated his sexual experiences from good to optimal:

I think in great sex there is a degree of intensity and gratification that goes beyond just, just what you might call good sex. Um, and that is, like I said in previous answers, um, facilitated by a sense of closeness and unselfconsciousness and connection with the person or people you're having sex with.

An older female participant expressed the belief that being able to let loose and feel free came with age:

I have several friends who have been married for thirty, forty, fifty, one of them married sixty years and they have fabulous sex, they said that sex is better than it's ever been, because their connection with each other is so deep and so strong that

there's no anxiety about rejection or inhibitions. They just can really let go and let loose and be intimately connected in a sweetness that they tell me they've not had before their seventies.

Desire for one another, attraction, chemistry. Desire, chemistry, lust and attraction were seen by participants as important contributors to optimal sexual experiences. This involved being interested in one another as well as being turned on and aroused by one's partner. One participant described the path from mutual attraction to optimal sexual experiences:

For me, it's usually, there's been an attraction that's gone on for a while and then, and then, you know it and you've talked about it and you know you're clearly both aware of it and you both intentionally decide that that is what you wanted. And then you go ahead and act on it. [laughs] That's what leads to it.

Participants described this feeling as “emotionally charged” or “an intense crush.” One woman explained:

I really want somebody to want me. You know, to kind of know me, to be infatuated with me in some way or have a crush or really have that desire to get closer to me.

Several participants spontaneously and independently connected the experience of chemistry, desire, lust and attraction with their partner's smell (on a metaphorical level). Some expressed the belief that optimal sexual experiences were simply not possible without chemistry or attraction. A female participant stated:

People can have really good sex with someone when you work on it but there's a certain chemistry between people and I don't know whether that's just purely, kind of, animalistic, physiological attraction or, you know, whether it's psychological

connection as well, um, that people will have with one relationship and not with another, one partner and not another.

Passion and intensity. Passion and intensity between sexual partners were frequently cited by participants as elements that could elevate a sexual experience from good to optimal. A male participant explained:

I guess there's a degree of emotional intensity that sort of occurs with what I would call great sex. That maybe isn't there with just sort of good sex. But, I don't know, an exhausted feeling at the end. You both look over at each other and... 'Wow.'

Participants described this as a feeling of freshness, excitement or energy. A couple of participants used the term "limerence." A polyamorous woman described her feelings of passion and intensity with her husband that contributed to the occurrence of optimal sexual experiences within their marriage:

When he walks in a room, my breath catches. Um, that, um, and I'll find myself, he's done the same thing, I'll, like, see him in a crowd and not recognize him and I'll be going, 'God, oh man, he's hot. Oh. I'm married to him' [laughing]. Not realizing I'm checking out my own husband. Um, that, that sort of freshness and, um, you know, kind of warm, mushy, you know, I've got a, the guy I've got a crush on is interested in me feeling has stayed.

In many cases, when asked what environmental contributors were important for optimal sexual experiences [see p. 146], participants would state if passion and intensity were present, environmental contributors were unnecessary. A few had had optimal sexual experiences in seemingly uncomfortable situations (e.g., in a back alley, while camping) because of the intensity of feelings with their partner.

Feelings towards the other. Feelings participants had towards their partners were a key contributor to optimal sexual experiences (theme 5e). This theme could be differentiated from the previous one (“feelings when we’re together”) based on physical presence: Connecting, bonding, merging, and feeling desire and passion tended to be feelings that the partners created, developed and experienced together, while *with* the other person. The feelings they experienced *towards* the other person were something they carried around with them and lived at all times; these included love, liking, caring, positive regard, acceptance and support as well as respect and consideration (again, see p. 126 for a description of respect and consideration).

Love, like, caring, positive regard, acceptance, support. Participants described a variety of positive feelings they experienced towards their partners that helped to bring about optimal sexual experiences. These included loving their partners, liking them and caring for them. The majority of participants expressed the belief that it was impossible to have this calibre of sexual experience with someone for whom they did not care deeply. A male participant described the nature of these feelings:

Sex, uh, for me is a heart-connection. In other words I can, I can feel, I can sort of feel into that person, give into the other person...I know that they care about me, you know. And it may not, it may not be love even – although at a certain level it is love – but not in love, if you know what I mean. Um, that they care about me, I care about them and we have, we have, uh, one another’s best interests in heart, at heart, that even, that even sounds too crude. We, we want to, we want to hold one another tenderly.

Although participants often described various qualities usually associated with “love”, the word itself did not come up often during interviews. In fact, the majority of participants

believed that real, genuine liking towards a partner was a more important contributor to optimal sexual experiences than loving. Participants often used several intensifiers and verbal emphasis to describe their feelings of liking and caring (e.g., “really”, “deeply”). A female participant emphasized liking her partners:

I like all of my lovers, it's not just I go out and I randomly have sex. And I think that that's part of it too. You know, if I look at the total number of partners that I've had, in my whole life – maybe a dozen, tops. And, but there's longevity with them, and I'm friends with them and I care about them as human beings. And I have great sex with them because I care about them and they're great human beings.

A male participant stated that optimal sexual experiences, for him, required, “Being with one or more partners that I truly enjoy as people. I don't have to be in love, but I really need to like them as people.”

However, for others, the experience of love was a crucial contributor. A female participant said simply, “When love's involved, it's, the best.” For many of these participants, one could have good sex without love but not truly wonderful sex. A female participant stated:

I mean, I've had good sex with casual lovers in the past but not great sex...I think for it to be great um, for me, for me anyway, I need to love him and I need for him to love me [chuckles quietly] and accept, accept each other with all our changes and all our challenges.

The words “care” and “caring” came up frequently as important contributors to optimal sexual experiences. A female participant described the nature of this caring:

You know, it's funny: I could liken this to – and this is just a bizarre thing but bear with me – it's sort of like when you're a baby and you don't have to say anything and

your mother or caretaker, whoever just knows what to do to make you feel better.

And a really good sex partner is like that [laughing]! So it's like this wonderful, visceral, there's like this depth there. Just again, primitive. It's primitive.

Participants described a mutual feeling of positive regard, appreciation, genuine acceptance and support within their relationships.

Behavioural intentions. Participants described a number of behavioural intentions that were key to developing the kind of relationship in which optimal sexual experiences might occur (theme 5f). Unlike other relational contributors that were based on feelings, beliefs or attitudes, ideas within this theme tended to be more action-oriented and concrete. Specific examples of behavioural intentions included mutuality, giving and receiving, meeting one another's needs and reciprocity; willingness to explore, experiment and learn, discovery, venturing into the unknown and taking risks; and communication, sharing and honesty.

Mutuality, giving and receiving, meeting one another's needs, reciprocity. The importance of mutuality, reciprocity and giving and receiving within the context of optimal sexual experiences was repeatedly emphasized by participants. Participants sometimes described this idea as having two components: respect for the other person's needs and a willingness to meet them. A female participant explained:

I think sex is a combination of a very selfish act and a very giving act. It's reciprocal. It can also be an even giving and sharing, a giving and taking, it, you know, it's not always reciprocal. Like, for me, it can be, uh, I mean, I think great – one feature of great sex is, for example, two people getting off really well at the same time. And that for me, takes time getting to know the person and learning to work your, your rhythms with, you know, me learning to work my rhythms with the other person to

try and work it so we both manage to really get off at the same time. That's a challenge.

An older man described this level of mutuality as, "You should be thinking of your partner, more than you, I mean, it should be reciprocal, give-and-take rather than take-and-give." A female participant explained the importance of both elements that comprise this theme:

Everybody's gotta be on the same page. Uh, you can't have an energy vampire to have great sex, so you can't have someone who's in it for only them and only in it to get off for themselves and aren't willing to contribute any energy to the exchange. Um, you also can't have pure altruists who are only there to give other people pleasure and derive no pleasure themselves from it.

Mutuality was characterized not only by the recognition and valuing of physical needs but emotional and spiritual needs as well. Another woman stated:

... for me to consider it great sex with a partner, it's got to be more than just physically satisfying. It needs to be, there needs to be an emotional – there needs to be a connection, there needs to be a give and take, a feeling of, um, that you both gained something from the experience.

For most participants, mutuality was absolutely key: Optimal sexual experiences were simply not possible without this contributor. This was true for one older woman:

I should be with somebody who's going to care about me and it's not all about me servicing them. It was a mutual give and take, that's all, that's the only way I, I enjoy being with somebody is if I can give as well as receive and the same thing goes for them.

For others, it was possible to have optimal experiences without great mutuality; however, high levels of mutuality and reciprocity could elevate the quality of a sexual experience from good to optimal. An older man described optimal sexual experiences in his marriage:

...the best ones are when it's mutual, there's a lot of mutuality....By that, I mean, I don't mean that we're like, you know, experiencing the same thing at the same time but I'm as focused and I think my wife is as focused on partner experience as they are in self experience.

Willingness to explore, experiment and learn, discovery, venturing into the unknown, taking risks. Participants believed that willingness to explore, experiment, learn, discover and take risks within the context of their relationship were important contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Experimentation in this context was defined very carefully. It was clear from their descriptions that this was quite different from the emphasis on novelty for its own sake depicted in pop culture. Rather, in the words of one participant, “The sense that whatever you're doing, you know, the sense of what you're doing is new, even if you've done it before.” An older man described his forty-plus year marriage as, “A life of sexual exploration and adventure and excitement.” His wife, who was interviewed separately, stated:

I think it's a wiser path to understand the mystery of our sexuality and go into it with that attitude between the partners of let's explore. Let's explore both of our fantasies and see where this leads us. And, you know, I think there's a more authentic, spontaneous experience to be had from that.

Communication, sharing, honesty. Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized and re-emphasized the contribution of communication to optimal sexual experiences within a variety of different contexts (i.e., as a skill, as a contributor in-the-

moment). Ongoing communication, verbal and non-verbal, sexual and non-sexual, within a relationship was seen by most participants as an important facilitator of optimal sexuality. Participants described the importance of clarity and precision in communication. They described communicating about boundaries, expectations, needs, desires and more. A male participant described the process of communication within his two long-term relationships:

What leads to great sex, well, the big one is communication with your partner about sex and about other things. But definitely specifically about sex and about what you both like and don't like....we regularly, sort of after sex will reconnect and talk about you know, what worked and what didn't work and what were you thinking when I did that and did I read that correctly so that we can kind of figure each other out and there can be more of that spontaneously doing what works instead of spontaneously doing something that ruins the mood or something like that.

A younger woman defined the type of communication within her relationships that lead to optimal sexual experiences:

Well like I just said, um, more than one thing going on at once, um, the ability to be vulnerable with a person is, I think, a *key* ingredient. And I don't mean vulnerable as in like being able to, to break down and share one's deepest secrets with the other person but more like the ability to share...real-ness of yourself. So real feelings, really what's going on and not, not have to go through the dance of communication that you have to in so many other times. Being able to feel comfortable and really say what you need or what you're getting, and all of that.

The purpose of communication varied significantly within the relationship: it could strengthen the connection between partners, further the intimacy or allow partners to push

their limits together and explore. For some, the relevance of communication in bringing about their optimal sexual experiences had increased over time.

Structure and depth of the relationship. In addition to the feelings, attitudes, atmosphere and behaviours within a relationship, there were also characteristics and qualities of the relationship itself that were important contributors to optimal sexual experiences (theme 5g). Many of the contributors to optimal sexual experiences within this theme were especially relevant to longer-term relationships. Elements of structure and depth included having common values, peerness, agreement and good fit; changing, evolution, growth, fluidity, maturing of relationship and shared relationship history; emotional maturity of the partners, ability to tolerate own anxiety in relationship, emotional independence in relationship and self-soothing; and knowledge of partner, knowledge of partner's body/desires/feelings/erotic wishes and depth.

Having common values, peerness, agreement, good fit. Participants emphasized that optimal sexual experiences require a relationship characterized by shared values, agreement and good fit. "Fit" was important across the entire spectrum: sexually, physically, mentally, emotionally, financially, spiritually, philosophically, etc. A male participant described the experience of finding this kind of alignment with a partner:

...sometimes, um, I'll meet somebody and there are a range of observable behaviours and a range of, sort of psychic bells that go off for me that just tell me, 'Yes, I'm on the same wavelength as this person,' and so, uh, there's a lot that doesn't even need to be said but you're, you're aligned. There's a, a degree of alignment on values and meaning and things like that that make it, you know, kind of open, opens the doors to the possibility of having a great sexual experience with each other.

Several participants described their optimal sexual partners as individuals who were their peers (and described lesser experiences with partners who did not fit this criterion). An older male participant expressed the belief that he could not have an optimal sexual experience with someone unless he could communicate with his partner's mind. He said:

You got to be on level. You got to be on an emotional level with each other, you have to be, I'd go so far as to say you have to be intellectually level....great sex is between equals.

Another older male participant reported experiencing a new level of sex with his lover in part because of what he referred to as the "peerness" of the relationship: "Ultimately what goes on is there's a great *peerness* that, that sex between us becomes genderless. That's never happened to me. It's fantastic." (This participant may have been using the phrase first introduced by Pepper Schwartz [1994] in her book *Peer Marriage*.)

For some participants, it was easier for them to have optimal sexual experiences with partners they met through the BDSM or polyamorous communities because there was an assumption of shared values and language.

Changing, evolution, growth, fluidity, maturing of relationship, shared relationship history. Many participants stated that a key aspect of optimal sexual experiences within the context of a long-term relationship was the growth and fluidity of that relationship. Change and evolution over time were expected and actively encouraged as the relationship developed. An older woman provided her equation for optimal sexual experiences, "...time coupled with a partnership that's a growing, that's a growthful partnership, where people are learning and it's so multifaceted..." The importance of accepting change and learning from it together was emphasized by the majority of older participants. And older woman stated:

And accepting change is a big one....Cause, you know the fact is that people, especially in long-term relationships, change, for physical reasons or other reasons. And part of the secret of a good relationship is being able to adapt together to those changes and that includes in sex. Things may not work the way they always did so do you just shut it off and say 'I'm not going to do this anymore because it doesn't work the way it should' or do you say 'Okay, let's find another way to express our intimacy'?

Many participants said that their shared history was a key part of what made their current experiences optimal. An older man explained how this was important in both his long-term relationships:

Every time that I'm with each one of them, part and parcel of what goes on during long, off-the-clock sex is historical discussion. And reflection on who we are, what our history has been, where we've been, where we are, where we hope to be and, and with the acknowledgment that, um, there's an awesome dynamic in what's going on between and amongst the people involved.

An older woman shared some memories from her marriage during the interview (e.g., hiking with her husband, battling cancer with his support). She described the importance of these events to their ongoing optimal sexual experiences together:

My husband I have had, have known each other all these years and all of the history that we have with each other has added so many beautiful memories to our, to us.... you build on it with good things and then the bad things can happen and there's still so much worth being around that other person that you're just glad you're able, being able to participate in no matter what's going on.

Another older woman, who was polyamorous, explained why her best sexual experiences were still with her husband of forty-plus years:

...we have been through so much and through so many changes and have so much history makes a relationship that is just rich beyond measure....We, we have become like the spiral helix. We have constructed our mutual DNA with each others’.

Emotional maturity of the partners, ability to tolerate own anxiety in relationship, emotional independence in relationship and self-soothing. Several participants emphasized the contribution of emotional maturity and the ability to self-soothe and tolerate anxiety to the occurrence of optimal sexual experiences. Maturity, the ability to take risks “in a safe way” and the avoidance of a “no-growth” contract within the relationship were seen as important contributors. An older man defined this level of differentiation as, “I would say that relationships that have gotten to a point of differentiation where they can really see the other for who they are.” An older woman described this kind of emotional maturity and explained its contribution to optimal sexual experiences:

[Partners] can tolerate discomfort, even though they don’t like it they can tolerate it – I’m not talking about physical discomfort here, I’m talking about emotional. Um, change is inherent in the relationship....Each person can manage their own anxiety and share their growth with the other one. A respect – I would say a respectful relationship between people who are maturing – I don’t know that we ever actually achieve maturity but, as long as we’re trying, or as long as we’re ahead in that way, I think a relationship can work. And great sex can happen....It gets better as you get older if you’re smart enough to grow into your capacity for being human. It’s not always pleasant, being human, you know, can be very painful, but if you’re open to your own personal growth you’ll find a partner who’s also open to their personal

growth and that's what makes the best partners. You know, as you grow, as you're both willing to grow, and learn, and grow and learn and stand the pain of growing and learning, then you know, you eventually, it does get better.

Knowledge of partner, knowledge of partner's body, desires, feelings, erotic wishes.

Many participants believed that optimal sexual experiences were easier with a long-term partner because of the knowledge they had accumulated about that person throughout the course of the relationship. (Some noted that long-term sexual relationships need not be exclusive or romantic.) Again, this knowledge covered a wide spectrum, from the sexual to the non-sexual. A female participant explained why she had lost interest in casual sex over time: "I would rather have great sex with somebody who knows me, understands what gets me off, really wants to, you know, dive in there with me." An older man explained the process of discovery:

I think that for the first however long, whether it's a week or a month or, or even longer than that perhaps that they spend time learning each other's reactions and each other's bodies and I think that after they have been at it for a while, practiced for a while, if you will, that certainly the odds of having great sex get better because they know each other better.

Depth. Participants, especially those who had been partnered for a number of years, expressed the belief that the depth of their connection was an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences. Depth was an adjective used to describe the connection, the intimacy, the love, the caring and the levels of trust, safety and communication. For some, the depth of the relationship was what distinguished good sexual experiences from optimal sexual experiences. One woman expressed the belief that optimal sexual experiences were not possible without this depth:

I don't think without a good solid relationship that, that you're gonna, you're gonna find it....I really think it's important to be able to enjoy each other and spend time outside of the proverbial bedroom. Um, because if that's all you've got, it's just not going to have the layers and the depth that you need.

Another older woman described the impact of depth on her sexual experiences over time:

I think that great sex is what happens between two people who have a good connection. Over time, it gets deeper, the connection gets, between the people, between the partners, gets deeper over time and they learn about themselves and each other more joyfully, physically, as they learn about each other in relationships and a lot of other ways.

Respect and consideration. Participants emphasized that respect and consideration were important elements in laying the groundwork for optimal sexual experiences (please see themes 5a, 5b and 5d on pp. 103, 106 and 110). For the majority of participants, respect was an integral relational quality without which optimal sexual experiences were simply not possible. Depending on the context of the statement, respect and consideration were considered qualities of the atmosphere and tone of the relationship, attitudes that partners held within the relationship and feelings they held towards their partners.

The importance of trust, safety and clear, honest communication were closely intertwined in participants' descriptions of respect. Participants talked about honouring their partner(s) as a person and honouring their sexuality as well as accommodating needs, desires and feelings. They emphasized that the respect must be absolutely mutual between partners and the need to honour limits, boundaries, and agreements was essential. The depth of this respect was characterized by some as "profound." One man described his experiences of respect:

And I think that's the important thing, is to make sure that...we all respect one another, we're not going to assume that just because I want XYZ you'd want XYZ, 'cause we've talked about that. We know what letters of the alphabet are okay and which ones are not. And we've agreed before we even got started, that, okay, that's gonna work and this won't work. So I think we need that kind of relationship. Again, that goes back to the honesty thing, that we need to be communicative. We need to be honest prior to getting into the physical thing and I guess if that defines a relationship, then that would be it. You gotta be honest, you gotta be communicative, respectful, um, you don't have to be re-, related, I mean, like married, man and wife or boyfriend/girlfriend. I mean, you could never have seen each other before for all I care, but I think when you're in that environment together you certainly have to comport yourselves respecting each other, respecting yourself, respecting the agreements you've made ahead of time, and not figuring that, 'Okay, well I'm here now, so I guess I'll just go ahead and do this, even though she said she didn't like it.'

Consideration was another important quality of the relationships in which optimal sexual experiences might occur. Several participants described their past or current partners as being more concerned for the other than for him or herself. One woman explained her approach:

I mean, if you, if you really care for your partner, you want that partner to be very, very satisfied and very happy and very content with what they're doing and what you're doing and happy that they're there so that you can be doing it. And if you really care about your partner, you will make sure that happens.

Another participant explained that consideration sometimes involved doing, “More than what you had intended to do to make sure the other person is as happy and satisfied as you are.”

Major Contributor 6: Relationship Qualities In-the-Moment

The sixth major contributor to optimal sexual experiences was labelled relationship qualities in-the-moment. More specifically, this contributor refers to those interpersonal elements that contribute to an optimal sexual experience while it is occurring. This contributor included two super-ordinate themes (i.e., themes that were part of every other team and fundamental contributors), consensuality and mutuality, and two major themes. The two major themes within this contributor could be further organized into two major groupings which were entitled “sexuality in relationship” and “relationship in motion.”

Table 7

Super-ordinate and Major Themes within Relational Qualities In-the-moment

Super-ordinate theme
6a – Mutuality
6b – Consensuality
Major theme
6c – Sexuality in relationship (e.g., heightened pleasure, intentionality, desire, eroticism)
6d – Relationship in motion (e.g., connection, swept up together, freedom, spontaneity, safety)

Mutuality. For the majority of participants, pervasive and all-encompassing mutuality was an essential contributor to optimal sexual experiences in-the-moment of their occurrence (theme 6a). Frequently, participants would discuss some other important contributor to optimal sexual experiences and would add some variant of, “But, of course, my partner also needs to be thinking/feeling/doing that.” Mutuality, in the majority of cases, seemed to be almost woven into the definition of optimal sexual experiences: “...if we are mutually inclined to face one another and ourselves, um, then I would call it great sex” said one man. Another man stated, “You can’t have a, a great sex...as I understand it without the mutuality.” Mutuality was an essential element of almost all other relational contributors to optimal sexual experiences in the moment of their occurrence.

Participants spoke of having mutually high levels of desire and arousal, mutual feelings of being present, a mutual sense of connection and being swept up together, mutual feelings of pleasure and enjoyment, mutual respect, mutual desire, interest and attraction,

mutual liking for one another and mutual satisfaction. For one woman, mutuality was what elevated so-so sex with her husband into optimal sex:

And another thing is that it...that it's completely, um, mutual. I mean, I know there are times when he's been having a way better time than I have and he's just much more there than I am. He does that really well. I have to work at it. Um, but the really great ones are when we're both all the way there and very alert.

And older woman explained why she needed to feel that both she and her partner were enjoying the experience.

You have to have somebody who appreciates you. It's no good to just perform oral sex on somebody and it's not being appreciated. You want things to be mutual. I think if there's a mutual chemistry and mutual, uh, my aim is to please....I only get really turned on if I see the man enjoy himself just as much as I do. And the point of no return is when he even gets more excited when he's just about there, that's what gets me going.

A male participant said:

I've mentioned the extreme degree of mutuality and by that, I mean, I don't mean that we're like, you know, experiencing the same thing at the same time but I'm as focused and I think my wife is as focused on partner experience as they are in self experience.

The importance of mutuality was not predicated on a long-term relationship but was true also of one-night stands, play partners and other types of casual relationships. Another woman stated:

There's still in that moment, um, even if you're never going to see each other again, the relationship, even if lasts for that half-hour, I think has to be characterized, um,

by a desire to pleasure and to be pleased and a, a giving of oneself even if you don't know the person's name.

A male participant said:

...presumably it could be somebody you just met. Um, so you might not know a lot at all, um, but there would be a kind of a knowing that the other is as invested as you are in this moment.

Consensuality. A few participants stated explicitly that consent was required for optimal sexual experiences to occur (theme 6b). In those cases, their wording seemed to suggest that consent was so basic and fundamental that it was easily forgotten during the interview. (For most participants, it was clearly a given.) One man stated, "It's, uh...consensual, for one, and, uh, I very much emphasize that it's got to be a two-way affair." Consensuality was a fundamental pre-requisite for the possibility of optimal sexual experiences. Another man stated:

But for me, I would not be comfortable in a situation where I thought I was exploiting somebody, that would take the edge off, that would, not enjoy it. I, I need to feel that it is, that it is, uh, safe, sane and consensual. Um, I need to feel that there is trust and that there, there is some caring.

A minority of participants deliberately made use of the phrase "safe, sane and consensual", which is considered a credo within the BDSM community. One man described how communication and consensuality were woven into his polyamorous relationships:

What can I do to ensure that I have great sex? The preplanning for me is, um... having people in my life that I connect with in a sexual way and having really clear, um, communication between myself and my partners. You know, you know, what's sort of our attitude for sex with each other, what's our attitude for sex with other

people. If I'm walking down the street and have the opportunity for sex in an alley because I light someone's cigarettes the right way outside of a bar, you know is that... sort of having all the logistical, would these things be consensual between myself and the important relationships in my life, um, beforehand. is a way to, I think, ensure that I will be having great sex.

Sexuality in Relationship. The theme “sexuality in relationship” was unofficially dubbed the “sexy part of optimal sexual experiences” by the research team (theme 6c). Many of the contributors to optimal sexual experiences seemed to have very little to do with sex per se. By contrast, this theme consisted of elements that were directly related to the experience of sex itself within the relationship. These statements could be grouped into four major sub-themes: heightened pleasure, enjoyment and satisfaction; intentionality; intensity, passion and desire and eroticism.

Heightened pleasure, enjoyment and satisfaction. Many participants mentioned that heightened pleasure, intense enjoyment and satisfaction were hallmarks of optimal sexual experiences. Intense pleasure and extraordinary levels of satisfaction were a key element of their optimal sexual experiences. One woman described, “...pleasure to the point of just floating almost without a body at the end of it.” And older man explained, “I think in great sex there is a degree of intensity and gratification that goes beyond just, just what you might call good sex.”

Another man described his most enjoyable sexual experiences:

A long period, lots of sex, lots of experimenting, lots of attention to one another, lots of responsiveness to one another, you know, whatever you want or if you like something, find fun at the moment... lots of time, lots of connection, lots of

communication. Usually I like interspersed periods of sex with interspersed periods of just, hanging out and talking and eating, whatever...

One man stated, "Great sex means great plateau."

Intentionality. Participants believed that intentionality was a key relational contributor to optimal sexual experiences in-the-moment. They considered and planned for important aspects of the experience, setting aside enough time and making sure that all participants were feeling good. The majority of participants described consciously pursuing optimal sexuality and being purposeful and deliberate about their sexual encounters. One woman talked about intentionality in the context of taking time with her partners:

...when we do get together and we do decide to have sex, it's because we want to have great sex, it's because we take the time to cherish one another, and cherish the time that we have and cherish the experience that we have.

It was important to clarify the purpose of the encounter, whether that was to create an optimal experience or experience pleasure or to build connection.

Um, so there's an intention to it. It may not be, the intention may not be to have great sex. The intention may be to have pleasure. But, you know, it's, it's having, having a clear intention is part of having great sex.

Another man talked about setting aside enough time and eliminating any obstacles that might intrude:

...really having set the time aside for it and really being into and not something else, not having other intrusions or interferences or time limits or, you know...leftover feelings from other things that have happened at other times or places in the day or week or whatever intrude.

An older man explained why setting aside sufficient time was crucial in the creation of optimal sexual experiences:

The more aroused you are...and sometimes – it depends on ability to put off the intercourse for – you have to have enough time to put it off for awhile, for a couple of hours to do all kinds of things beforehand is just fantastic. Whether it's bathing or showering or dancing or taking each other's clothes off and dancing together nude or, um, whatever it is. So then when you finally get to the point of actually penetrating her, *oh*, it just is... [Pauses] that's where we were going with all of that, kind of the culmination of everything that led up to it. But on the other hand, everything that led up to it is equally as important as sexual intercourse.

Intentionally setting aside a significant amount of time allowed partners to luxuriate in sexual sensations. "What I really loved was, was the doing, and the being, and, and how long can we just be *in* this state of trust and responsiveness," said one older man.

This theme can be distinguished from contributor 7 (situation, preparation and environmental contributors, see p. 146) based on the timing of the intention. Whereas contributor 7 was focused on cultivating a conducive interpersonal environment *before* the sexual experience took place, intentionality within this contributor was a much more immediate part of the experience *as it was occurring*.

Intensity, passion, desire. Intensity and passion were considered to be key contributors in bringing about optimal sexual experiences. Many participants stressed that intensity was an important element in differentiating between good sexual experiences and optimal experiences: Every moment was experienced more deeply and intensely during an optimal sexual experience. One man described a friend's optimal sexual experiences, "...in sex he would describe that the two of them would just go someplace that was beyond belief.

And he described just the feeling of physical, erotic, romantic connection was beyond belief.” An older man described how intensity contributed to his optimal experiences:

It's got to be with the willingness to appreciate the smallest, tiniest, gentlest contact from her to me or me to her, um, all the way up to things that are more, that, um, have more energy to them.

Important contributors that appeared frequently in participants' responses included “passion”, “attraction” and “chemistry.” As one older woman, who participated in swinging, explained, “I have to have an attraction. I just don't jump from person to person to person. I gotta have, um, there's gotta be a click there.” One man defined his use of the term “chemistry”: “Chemistry is, uh, kind of involuntary. It's like pheromones and things that are intangible.” Interviewees described how desire is high in all participants during an optimal sexual experience and remains high throughout. Passion was frequently mentioned by participants as well as chemistry, strong attraction and lust.

Eroticism. Participants believed that eroticism was a key contributor to optimal sexual experiences as they were happening. One older woman described her greatest sexual experiences as being highly erotic: “...from the top of my scalp to the ends of my toenails were just all erotically alert on the skin.” They talked about the erotic qualities of the seduction process, the anticipation, the contact and touch and the energy exchanged between partners and how these contributed to making an experience optimal. An older woman described different types of optimal, erotic sexual experiences:

I think behaviourally, you know um, some foreplay, some flirtation, those things that, um, builds the juices up, it's like a race car that sits at the, um, starting line racing their engine before they let off the brake. You know, you want to build that up and churn that up and then you've really got something to work with. Something that's

gonna plunge you out from that starting line and carry you across the finish line, hopefully. So, you know, that would be, I think, uh, it's not that foreplay is a big aspect of the behaviours of sex, but I think that the teasing and the build up, the anticipation is a really important part of it. That may not take a lot of time, you know what I mean? The anticipation could, could kind of swoop down on you in a, in a big sudden rush of energy and, you know, you fall into bed or off the desk or on the kitchen counter or whatever and and you have a great, great sexual experience.

An older man described how his sexual encounters begin:

The connection, the glance, the, the recognition, the mutual recognition that this is a sexual moment is complete and mutual and spontaneous and sort of sparks the interaction. Then there follows, once that awareness has come, some time of, like dancing around this sort of final conclusion like approaching and withdrawing and describing the outlines of the experience through gentle exploration in various ways....the really peak experiences always include that exploration and the, sort of a regard, a glance, oblique approaches, engaging more and more of the other person and uh, sort of begins to spin a, a web of excitement out from, like that, from that initial intention, sort of out in space and time around you, around it through the two of us and then it kind of takes the energy from not just our lives but the things that are happening beyond us but at that time, and pulls that energy into a sexual moment and makes it really more powerful and exciting.

Another man described the subtleties of initiating a highly-erotic sexual encounter:

The foreplay can be very subtle: It can be the touching of fingers across the table or when you ride in the car, you could touch the other, I could touch my partner's leg,

for instance, and that's the beginning of what eventually, within a reasonable time-span leads to us having, making love.

Interviewees talked about feelings of anticipation *during* the sexual experience. They described deliberately heightening their partners' arousal for its own sake, prolonging the experience and increasing desire. For some, this involved recognizing and allowing for the natural ebb and flow of the activity level during sex:

I think it's also the deliberate control of the energy level and the energy flow, both between you and as the two of you may be ending up relaxing or not doing much of anything for awhile but then getting started again...and having the lead go from her to me or me to her."

For a minority of participants, having sex in a somewhat dangerous context (e.g., where they could be discovered) heightened their enjoyment of the experience. Others spoke of heightening eroticism through transcending intrapsychic danger, taking the risk of being vulnerable and open with another person. Participants stressed that it was necessary to define eroticism on individual and interpersonal levels rather than to accept without questions what others defined as erotic. One man stated:

...part of what makes something highly erotic is the unpredictability of it. So people who do things or set up things that are really unpredictable, whether that's lighting, clothing, music, the kind of external stimuli like a, their special video or reading their favourite poem or whatever.

Relationship in motion. The second major cluster of ideas within the domain of relational qualities in-the-moment was entitled relationship-in-motion (theme 6d). The ideas within this theme were conceptually similar to contributor 5 (qualities of the relationship) with the main difference being the timing of the contributor. This theme was defined by the

activation of those relational contributors in the course of an optimal sexual experience. Sub-themes within this domain included connection and sexual merger; being swept up together; freedom, abandon and letting go; spontaneity, flexibility, going with the flow; communication; safety, comfort, trust and intimacy; and feelings for one another.

Connection and sexual merger. Most participants believed that an important contributor to their optimal sexual experiences was the feeling of connection they experienced with their partner[s]. A male participant defined connection as, "...[I] just feel like our, our cells and molecules are just merging." Another man compared his feelings of connection with his partner to improvised jazz music. Many participants described merging with the other person, feeling their personal boundaries dissolve, not knowing where their own body ended and their partner began. An older man explained how feelings of connection contributed to his optimal sexual experiences:

...we're not identical but we're participating together in sync in a way that feels not, not very effortful or doesn't feel effortful in the usual sense of diverting my attention when I want to divert it and can't. Um, it feels a great deal deeper, it touches my soul in a way that just having an orgasm doesn't do. [pause] The pleasure that I take is less focused on me and is more focused on us. Not even just focused on her. It's like there's a larger, feels like there's, the two of us together are something bigger than either one of us.

Several participants said that this connection involved every part of them – mind, body and spirit. Many referred to eye contact when talking about connection.

Feeling connected to their partners was what elevated the experience to the level of optimal for many participants. A woman explained the difference that feelings of connection made to her:

I guess, you know, um, you know, I can have a great physical experience with my vibrator. Um, I, for me to consider it great sex, um, with a partner, it's got to be more than just physically satisfying. It needs to be, there needs to be an emotional – there needs to be a connection, there needs to be a give and take, a feeling of, um, that you both gained something from the experience. That there wasn't, um, beyond just, um, meeting your physical needs.

A younger woman described how connection elevated sex from mundane to optimal:

...we have an intimate connection which brings us to a different level. So there's always, there's always more than one thing going on. It isn't just that we both want to fuck, it's that we both want to fuck and both really vibe on the same level of something else. Um, that's when the sex is really great.

Being swept up together. Many participants described feeling swept up together with their partners as something that elevated the quality of their sexual experiences. It was as though the moment of an optimal sexual experience created a bubble enclosing the participants and excluding the rest of the world. In the previous sub-theme, connection, participants described losing themselves in each other; feeling swept up together was defined primarily by participants losing themselves to the sexual experience and losing touch with the rest of the world. One man defined being swept up with his partner as feeling transported to another realm.

In response to the question, “How would you recognize great sex if you stumbled into it?”, one woman described her experience of watching pornography by referring to this theme:

...if they were giving oral sex to them they would look like that was the, there was nothing else they'd rather be doing right at that moment. That's, that's when I think I,

if I stumbled on that I'd say, 'Oh my God. These two people are *really* having a good time with each other.' That's, that's how I would know. If I could see the man's expression, and he looked like he was lost in what he was doing and he was loving it and the two of them were, you know, looking, their facial expressions were, it could be that agony look of ecstasy, but I could tell. I could sort of tell.

Many participants felt that the experiences of connecting to someone else and carving out a space together could happen with almost anyone, even someone with whom they had no prior experience. One woman explained:

I've actually had the experience of having an absolutely fabulous one-night-stand and never saw the person again but, you know, for that couple of hours, the universe clicked in all the right ways. So I think sometimes, it's a matter of just two people being in the right headspace at the right time together, being able to share that.

Freedom, abandon, letting go. During optimal sexual experiences, participants described feeling unselfconscious, able to let go, uninhibited and free to explore within their relationship. One woman described an optimal sexual experience with her husband in which their feelings of abandon together played a key role:

...and then another time it was, it was like a New Year's Eve so I'd had a bit to drink and we went back again – it was another hotel room – I got so loud that people were banging on the walls and we were laughing and having sex and in the morning the manager came over [laughing], he was trying to get us out of there. And when he saw us, he realized 'Oh my God! There are just two ordinary people!' He was so shocked, couldn't believe it.

A male participant believed that this element of emotional abandon was necessary for his optimal sexual experiences.

And then another point of great sex is once you've both achieved orgasm and we're lying there with our arms wrapped around one another and we're literally crying our eyes out, just having this complete, um, emptying of emotions and clinging to one another in the most emphatic and beautiful way.

Spontaneity, flexibility, going with the flow. Participants emphasized the importance of spontaneity and flexibility during optimal sexual experiences within their relationship. Being able to adapt, adjust, improvise and go with the flow were considered crucial relational contributors. Questions in the interview script about the contributions of activities and sex acts to optimal sexual experiences were often met with confusion. For the majority of participants, the actual sex acts that were performed were irrelevant; the more important factor was the potential for exploration, freedom and flexibility.

Participants emphasized the importance of flexibility and exploration in the context of cooperation and agreement. One woman explained, "You have to both be on the, a similar page at least or at least very willing to work towards a similar page." Another man described this as, "I think great sex is when both parties agree that there really aren't any boundaries. And you just both agree that you'll do what you feel like doing and there aren't any holds barred." A man noted:

Um, there's a sense of acceptance that, you know, whatever comes up that there's room for that and if we're in the middle of something and there's fear, there's room for that, and if we're in the middle of something and the fantasy shifts a little bit, there's room for that. Um, if we're in the middle of, of great sex and, you know, we need to leave, or somebody's penis has gotten soft, or, or whatever, whatever is there we can work into it and it's not the end of anything.

A male participant described the role of spontaneity and communication in bringing about optimal sexual experiences within the context of a long-term relationship:

And they were a result of our understanding one another to the point where she recognized that this was something that I really needed and wanted to do. And that she knew that I recognized the signs that she would give me that she really wanted to make love. And that's what made it great.

Communication. Communication between partners during an optimal sexual experience was an important contributor for most participants. The importance of communication was emphasized as an aspect of a number of different contributors within this investigation, i.e., as a skill, as a relationship quality, as a contributor during a sexual experience. In this context, participants seemed to be describing the choice they made to draw on their abilities to communicate in that moment, with that partner, to enhance the quality of the experience. In contrast, participants might possess communication skills that they choose not to employ, in a non-sexual moment or with the wrong partner. It might also be the case that a couple possesses overall communication strategies but these are not relevant contributors during every single sexual encounter.

Participants talked about sharing themselves and communicating about expectations, likes and dislikes, desires and fantasies, boundaries and limits as the experience unfolded. One man described the elements that brought about his ideal sexual encounters:

I like, I like lots of time, lots of connection, lots of communication. Usually I like, uh, interspersed periods of sex with interspersed periods of, with periods of just, you know, hanging out and talking and eating, whatever, you know.

Participants also emphasized the importance of reading their partners' verbal and non-verbal responses, listening, interpreting the information that was conveyed correctly and

reacting appropriately. The word “responsiveness” came up repeatedly in interview transcripts. The importance of adapting and adjusting to one’s partner and to the situation was stated many times. As one man said:

...there's a really strong sense of, either verbal or non-verbal feedback and adjustment, because if I'm not able to sort of get a sense of where my partner is or sort of how they're doing with what's going on, for me that's not great sex.

One man described his approach to creating optimal sexual experiences: “I would say that the greatest element of foreplay is in the eyes of the partner. You read the eyes.”

Safety, comfort, trust, intimacy. Feelings of trust, safety, comfort, intimacy and ease were key relational contributors during optimal sexual experiences. Participants talked about feeling genuinely accepted by their partners during sexual encounters, having faith in the relationship and feeling safe. One male participant explained, “...there are different kinds of trust. There's the trust that in that sexual situation, you won't be raped or hurt, and you can be vulnerable with that person in that little space of time, that 11 minutes let's say...” (This participant had illustrated his point by referring to Paulo Coelho’s erotic novel *Eleven Minutes* and recommended reading it.) Another man explained:

...even if it's, whether it's good sex or, or great sex or average sex there's, there's always the requirement to play safe. So that, uh, and, and you can really only, only do that if you can trust the other person. I mean, you know, you can't, you know, talk to someone about their sexual history, about who they're connected to and if they have STDs. You, you can only go by what they say. So and, and people can tell you anything of course so it's important that you're able to trust their words.

One man described optimal sexual experiences in his long-term relationship, “...there’s an incredible sense of trust with your partner, there’s a sense of security. And both of those

might just be a different way of saying peace, right?” He spoke at some length, as many other participants did, about the importance of love, trust, bonding, familiarity and intimacy during the optimal sexual experience. A male participant described the importance of familiarity and intimacy:

Most people are way too inhibited, um, and therefore don't have great sex. They see it as a dirty, shameful, filthy kind of thing subconsciously. And they're afraid of it. They're afraid of exposing themselves, um, and therefore hold back in many different ways emotionally, energetically, psychologically, whatever, physically and uh, um...and therefore it doesn't happen. And that's why with a familiar person, it's better because you have that bond, you have that trust, you got experience with each other, you know.

Feelings for one another. One of the relational contributors that enhanced optimal sexual experiences while they were happening consisted of the feelings that partners had for one another, which were often romantic, loving or caring feelings. One man described this as a “heart connection”:

...great sex is a heart connection where I, where I have, um, it doesn't have to be, I don't need to know someone for a *long* time, uh, to feel very intimate or, or heart-connected with them but I do need to have some kind of a heart-connection.

One male participant enjoyed going to swing parties with his wife but explained why he only had optimal sexual experiences with her:

It's because I love her! If I didn't love her, the sex wouldn't be the same. I mean, it's just, it's the feeling I get when I hold her as compared to the feeling you get when you hold somebody else that you don't love. It's just a closeness....you feel like one as compared to maybe feeling like two with somebody else.

In some cases, it was clear that the experience of these feelings was not predicated on having a long-term relationship. Many participants emphasized that it was possible to care for someone deeply even if you had only known each other a short time or had a very casual relationship (e.g., play partners).

Major Contributor 7: Situational, Preparatory and Environmental Contributors

The majority of participants mentioned the role of the environment in bringing about optimal sexual experiences. Their statements could be organized according to three major themes: the physical environment in which the experience took place, physical preparation and emotional environment between the individuals involved in the experience (see table 8).

Table 8

Major Themes within Situational, Preparatory and Environmental Contributors

 Major theme

7a – Physical environment

7b – Physical preparation

7c – Emotional environment

Physical environment. The first major theme within the domain of environmental contributors consisted of elements related to the physical environment (theme 7a).

Participants talked about creating a sensual setting that would be congruent with their individual preferences. However, most emphasized that they could only describe their *own* preferred environment and not anyone else's: Few participants believed that there could be a "one-size-fits-all" environment. As one older woman put it, "I'd say that the environment really is very dependent on each couple or each person's definition of what safety and comfort, child-free atmosphere is." A kinky man explained, "The ideal [environment] is going to be very, very personal depending on...the fetish and the tastes of the participants."

Most participants emphasized privacy, comfort, safety and lack of distractions and or/interruptions as being the most crucial elements. Several participants felt that they could only feel free to really let go if they were sure that they would not be interrupted. Virtually all of the participants who were parents highlighted the need to make appropriate child-care arrangements (with the exception of those whose children were adults and had left the home).

As one older woman stated,

I don't think anybody wants children in the room. Or, you know, infants or babies...I think they like to be able to make noise without worrying about other people coming in. My grandmother used to say everybody needs to have Vaseline when they're having sex – you put it on the doorknob.

Comfort was another crucial element. Participants said that the room temperature should be congruent with the participants' preferences and the surfaces (i.e., the bed or the carpet) should be soft and supportive. This was especially important for those participants who had chronic pain or other illnesses (e.g., arthritis). However, as another woman explained, comfort can be entirely relative:

Sometimes the bed, you know, nice, soft, comfy, horizontal surface works great, sometimes the kitchen counter and a cube of butter is all you need. So I guess to create great sex, the environment has to be compatible with the nature of the exchange.

Safety was mentioned frequently, although a minority of participants acknowledged that a risky environment (e.g., a public setting) could be conducive to optimal sexual experiences as well. An older woman defined safety for herself:

It takes really a safe environment. I guess that's different for everybody but for what I've heard and what it is for me, is it takes kind of a...just kind of a comfort, comfort level with what's around. It doesn't have to be neat and tidy but it's got to be clean and not scary.

The importance of minimizing distractions was mentioned frequently. One woman said, "...about the only thing I can say is [the environment] should be conducive to focus." Another woman emphasized, that the background needs to be nonintrusive, "...to allow the

experience to be foreground.” Some said that they made a special effort to keep their bedrooms tidy in order to minimize distractions. A kinky woman explained:

If you can make your bedroom an oasis, um, and not bring, um, you know, not put a desk in your bedroom, not put a TV in your bedroom, not, um, you know, I – One thing that I’ve been recently doing is making sure our bedroom is always clean so that I’m not looking around and going, ‘Oh fuck! I gotta to do laundry’....it’s an oasis and it gets you into the moment.

(Laundry was mentioned commonly as an example of a potential distraction). Prior to an optimal sexual experience, participants mentioned shutting off telephones, ignoring the doorbell and turning off electronic devices or “anything that blinks.”

For many participants, intentionality in their preparation of the physical environment was important. An older man stated:

You set up your environment so that you have in it the things that you will want to have in it, spend the time so that one person is not constantly running up and down stairs, and getting drinks....You set up your space intentionally and you spend time within an intentional sexual arena.

Several participants who liked to devote a lot of time on their optimal sexual experiences mentioned meal planning. An older man noted,

You get hungry, you need to eat occasionally. You need to eat something that you can throw in your mouth and not prepare. So we plan our food very, very well and we set it all out, everything is pre-cooked, and all you have to do is run to the kitchen and get a couple of slices of something.

Several participants said that they had deliberately set up their bedroom to be sensual. An older woman said:

Well, when we're preparing for really special sex, for example, it's a lot of, um, setting the scene and making sure that it's going to engage the senses in as many ways as possible....we always have something to drink and something to eat, not huge amounts of either, but, um, really careful thought about the taste and the spice and the fragrance of what's going to be consumed. And the fragrance, we have special fragrance that we reserve just for those times. And lighting a fire in the fireplace...

Other characteristics of the physical environment mentioned by participants included lighting (e.g., candles, natural light), music, mirrors, use of recording equipment and lingerie or special clothing. When a participant referred to the use of music, further details were sought by the interviewers. A range of music styles was mentioned including classical music (Mozart was singled out), new-age, Celtic music, Native American music, drumming, bluegrass, Middle Eastern dance music, rap, heavy metal, Metallica, Pink Floyd and industrial music. A kinky woman, who had a preference for music with a good beat such as drumming, explained, "It's easy to flog to."

Although many participants expressed a preference for their own bedrooms, one kinky woman explained, "It doesn't have to be in a bedroom but it has to be in a place that umm, lends itself to sex." She went on to specify, "Motel rooms, or hotel rooms are always sexy because there's nothing to do in them except, except have sex.... you don't have all kinds of other things nagging at you to do them."

Physical preparation. The second major theme of environmental contributors to optimal sexual experiences involved physical preparation (theme 7b). Individuals believed that a key contributor to optimal sexual experiences was taking the time to prepare themselves physically, including hygiene, clothing and personal grooming.

Many participants cited cleanliness as an important pre-requisite to their optimal sexual experiences, whether this meant a shower or a bath. An older man mused that modern technology, in the form of indoor plumbing, had made a significant contribution to optimal sexuality:

I have no idea how people got, had great sex before there was indoor plumbing. You know, cause all this, you figure all this joyous sex stuff that, you know, this all, both people just bathed, and you know they're clean and they don't have fleas all over them and they're not cold and hot. You know, they, they, you know, so many amenities we take for granted.

(He went on to specify that although he had had *meaningful* sex camping, he had not had optimal experiences because the setting was not particularly conducive.)

For a small minority, special garments contributed to their optimal sexual experiences. An older woman described the importance of her preferred outfit:

I mean the very best thing to do is to not get naked right away, but to dress in silk, because silk transmits body heat in such a tactile way, it's just really nice to be able to stroke somebody who's wearing silk.

An older man described his preferences regarding his partner's outfit:

I must admit that I really like suggestive clothing. Um, my current partner doesn't exactly have the body of a 19-year-old anymore but I still like her to, to wear some

nice frilly underwear. Not bordello-style just something a little more fancy than you get from the regular stores.

For a minority, the physical preparation for optimal sexual experiences involved care and cultivation of one's body. One woman had difficulty answering a question about the activities that contributed to optimal sexual experiences but explained why keeping in shape was important:

What does it take – what kinds of activities are good for great sex? [Interviewer: Yes] Well, you know, I almost want to throw this off to the side and tell you that, um – for example, one of my lovers, it was very important that I went swimming. Because when we were together, we would fuck and my arms would kill me and we had a long-distance relationship and she would leave and then I, I found that I really needed to continue swimming in order to maintain my shoulder muscles, which were really necessary to fuck her well when she came back again. So swimming would be an important activity but I'm not sure that that's the answer to your question [laughing]. I mean, keeping in good physical shape is very helpful because sex is like a recreational sport.

A few others stated that they deliberately kept themselves in good shape and sought out partners who were in good shape, believing that this was an outward sign that people respected themselves and their bodies. An older man was very specific about his personal definition of "in shape": "Not necessarily thin – I've met a couple of women who were probably a bit overweight – but they, the one criterion that stands out in my mind is that you got to have muscles." Another male participant described learning how to keep his fingernails perfectly groomed so that he might engage in fisting, a preferred sexual activity.

Emotional environment. The third theme within the domain of environmental contributors to optimal sexual experiences referred to the emotional environment created by the participants prior to sex (theme 7c). One participant explained, "...the sex is not what happens at the moment of the sexual encounter but often it's what's gone on before that." Participants talked about deliberately creating an atmosphere of warmth, closeness and connection with their partner. This idea can be distinguished from relational contributors in-the-moment (theme 6) based on timing. This theme refers to the creation of an emotionally conducive environment *before* a sexual encounter begins (i.e., prior to sex), whereas contributor 6 referred to qualities of the relationship that contributed *during* the sexual experience (i.e., during the actual sex). One woman explained, "For it to be *great* sex.... you *both* kind of have to in the same frame of mind... which is a very, ah, sort of open and receptive and warm kind of frame of mind." Participants emphasized the importance of creating an environment in which each person felt safe to let go and relax. The majority stressed that the mood going in to the encounter should be positive and several participants independently stated that they did not consider "make-up sex" to be great sex. One woman said, "...the feeling leading into sex I think has to be kind of warm and close, and feeling connected and the sex being a way of furthering that expression."

In order to achieve this emotional environment, interviewees said that both partners needed to make sex a priority and set aside time to be together in both sexual and non-sexual ways. A male participant explained why this was important:

For me, it's got to be, it's got to be at least, you've got to have a window of at least two hours, preferably four or five or more hours, um, so that things don't have to be rushed, you really relax. But, um, on a larger scale, having enough stability in the relationship so that I know that, um, we're going to have, you know... more than just

a few times of making love so that if on a particular time it's not great, that's fine because there will be many more possibilities, many more times to get there so it, it meets the level of, of relaxation about the whole process and that it, it kind of reduces the performance anxiety of like 'It's got to be great this time.'

Many participants stated that having good conversations before sex could be helpful. "Talking is foreplay," is how one woman put it. A male participant described it as, "...humour and, friendliness and, you know, helpfulness to one another...things that put, uh, people at ease." The majority of participants mentioned doing joint activities beforehand; examples included having dinner together, going to a concert, taking a drive into the countryside, giving one another massages, going to a political event or even cleaning the house. However, these activity preferences were specific to the individual. One older woman stated, "...any kind of activity that encourages people to focus on each other... anything that gets people to enjoy each other's company beforehand is likely to lead to good sex." An older man said, "just feeling relaxed and exciting and if we're both in the same place, that, that can clearly lead to a sexual encounter. Well, it could be any range of peripheral or external activities." Another older woman reported that working with her husband on an artistic project had resulted in a sustained period of really great sex. She attributed this improvement to the intensity of the work and the opportunity to be creative together.

Pathway A: Relational Context that Facilitates an Individual Quality

Participants identified many aspects of their relationships that contributed directly to bringing about optimal sexual experiences (see pp. 102 to 146). However, many participants stated that their relationships had also made *indirect* contributions to optimal sexual experiences by facilitating the development of specific individual qualities. The nature of the relationship in which participants found themselves allowed for the emergence of individual qualities that facilitated optimal sexual experiences directly. In essence, there was a pathway between relational and individual contributors to optimal sexual experiences. The trust, intimacy, safety, comfort, love and connection within the relationship enabled participants to be more authentic, to feel more comfortable with themselves, to explore, to let go, to be wild and crazy, to blossom, to feel accepted and to grow. These qualities, in turn, made optimal sexuality possible for the individual in that relationship and/or in others. One woman described this link succinctly as, “You have to feel safe enough to be wild.” A male participant felt that optimal sexual experiences became possible in his life after meeting his first serious partner:

I think that would be when I was about 21 and I had a partner, uh, who I felt really committed to and close to and who I felt was close to and committed to me. And so a lot of the stress that comes from having sex with people who, uh, you're not sure about sort of went away and we were able to just focus on having great sex with each other.

Many participants reported that feeling loved and accepted by someone else was a healing experience that led to greater self-acceptance and improved confidence. This was particularly relevant for those participants who had undergone some form of trauma,

including abuse, assault and/or stigmatization due to their sexual orientation, gender orientation, sexual interests, etc.. One man said:

I think that one person can just kind of be with someone who, um, gives that person just generally a level of, if you will, permission to just be themselves. And something can then take place in that context that the person wasn't able to do previously. They just kind of need a bit of encouragement mirroring, um, and somebody can be, I don't know, brought out, if you will.

A female participant explained how she helped her husband feel better about himself:

And what's happened now is, umm, you know, through accepting and through the fact that I'm, you know, I think he's amazingly sexy and I tell him that all the time. I can't believe that women aren't just crawling all over him and he laughs about it. He's just like 'Oh my God, the way you think of me it's, you know [laughing], it's not true' but I think that has kind of helped give him a bit of that fantasy that he wanted, you know, of being secure in his sexuality. Umm, and uh, so nowadays when we go out and we do things or even just have sex at home, he's much more – I don't know, in himself, you know, and not so much creating a fantasy in his mind that's satisfying him, it's what's happening that's satisfying him. So I think the fact that – again, I think, it's the acceptance that I gave him, the fact that I was willing to work through the problems with him, umm, and he's got a heck of a lot more confidence in his own sexuality now.

Trust within the relationship was absolutely crucial. One woman explained how optimal sexual experiences developed with a new partner:

When I met my current partner it was more of a, um, it became more of a DS thing, a dominant/submissive thing and that opened up a whole new world and opened up

new, um, new ideas on give and take and, and, [sighs] and how you can relax and be safe in a relationship of that nature and in sex and be able to say this is what I want to do or this is what I don't want to do.

Another woman, who had engaged in various BDSM-style activities throughout her long marriage, explained the connection between her relationship and her individual attributes:

And I think that uh, you know, my trust of my husband is what allowed me to just go exploring with him, 'Okay, let's see what happens if we do this, I've never thought about doing it, it doesn't really sound all that great but what the hell, let's give it a shot!' You know, and, uh, I think that people with an adventuresome spirit and, um, a willingness to try something new are most likely to end up having great sex.

Many participants talked about how being in safe relationships gave them permission to take risks and be more authentic. A female participant stated:

...going into a situation, if I feel licensed to be spontaneous, as opposed to feeling, uh, restricted by the expectations of a partner or a situation. If I feel licensed for spontaneous play, be playful, uh, then I am pretty capable of being that in my life. I am a playful person, and that's when uh, things seem to be magical. And that's what I would call the great sex.

Pathway B: Individual Quality that Facilitates a Relational Quality

In a similar fashion to Pathway A (relational qualities that facilitate individual qualities), certain qualities of the individual could have a significant positive on the qualities of the relationship that would, in turn, contribute to optimal sexual experiences. An older woman explained the reciprocal relationship between individual and relational qualities in the kinds of people who had optimal sexual experiences:

I think they probably look for those partners that they, you know, where they're attracted to the kind of people who will be able to provide that kind of, um, experience for them. So, I mean, even if they can't define it, what they're looking for in a sexual way cause either they're too young or they haven't been scripted well, you know, in their early years, I think they tend to look for the same things in their work and in their friendships and in their environments that they do, that they do in a sexual partner but they may not be aware of that. So I think they'll be attracted to those same qualities in somebody and that will allow them the ability to have great sex. I think it's all, it's all circular.

Participants also said that being able to make connections with other people helped them to bring about optimal sexual experiences. Individuals who were supportive, comfortable, present and authentic with their partners could help co-create an atmosphere of relaxed, comfortable acceptance within their relationships. Individuals who believe that sexuality takes work in a long-term relationship might bring that attitude and energy into the relationship, leading the couple to value and prioritize optimal sexual experiences together. An individual's openness and interest in the unexpected might lead the couple to explore together. An older male participant discussed the individual qualities he possessed that allowed him to create the kind of relationships in which to have optimal sexual experiences:

People have often found me very sexy just because I'm not afraid of it. And because I do like it and I think because I'm pretty relaxed and comfortable about that, it makes the other person much more relaxed and comfortable about it. Certainly at this age, you know, um, my partner calls me avuncular, he said I, I'm good because I'm avuncular. I'm not judgmental with people and I make people feel good. I give them good food and I give them good wine, make them feel good, and then I give them good sex if they're interested.

A male participant explained how partners who were able to self-soothe allowed him to be more present during optimal sexual experiences:

Um, one of the characteristics that I think is very important for me is that I need to be – I need to feel like the partner is very competent and capable of taking care of themselves. I don't, when I feel like I have to take care of the partner and worry if they're going to be like, okay afterwards or if something I'm going to do is going to *bother* them or *upset* them, then that either results in me just not entering into sex at all or being very sort of cautious about it and that tends not to result in great sex. Whereas if I'm with a partner that I feel that even if something goes *wrong* or something is *upsetting* or, you know, there's even a worst case scenario that it will be fine and we'll talk it over and we'll keep going, then that tends to result in me feeling more free to be spontaneous and do whatever I feel good and that tends to result in great sex. So a partner who has that quality is very important to me.

Another participant echoed this belief and described feeling free as a result to “ride the experience.”

When asked about the effects of optimal sexual experiences, many participants spontaneously replied that it was cyclical: optimal sexual experiences beget more optimal

sexual experiences. Optimal sexual experiences themselves could facilitate future optimal sexual experiences. An older woman explained the relationship:

Oh, well, I'm, it's a positive feedback loop. Usually, uh, if you have great sex then and you think about it because that's maybe a piece of it. I mean, the fantasy of sex is really good and you just really think about it afterwards, it's going to probably increase sexual desire. You want to do it again. If something feels good, you want to do it again. If it's a negative experience, you want to avoid it. So it can be self-, you know...self-perpetuating.

One male participant described a contributor to optimal sexual experiences for him, "There was a sense as the sex was happening, that it was destined for greatness. And, um, that sort of fuelled the fire for simply letting it be great." In contrast, an older male participant felt that less-than-optimal experiences could facilitate future optimal sexual experiences:

I mean, to me, sex is, is a form of self-discovery and it's, um, sometimes can be, um, sometimes can be quite disappointing. But it's, in the sense of disappointment, it is, um, it's also exciting. I see it almost like painting a painting. That sometimes you can paint a painting that, at the end of it, you feel it's not successful but the very fact of it not being successful is what sort of moves you on, drives you on to create another. So there's always this element of, of, of search, of wanting to find, uh, whether it's to find the right partner or to find the right intensity or to find a connection in some sense, a deep, deep, deep connection.

Minor Contributor 8: Individual Proclivities

For a minority of participants, some important contributors to their optimal sexual experiences were deeply personal and very specific. These contributors might include particular fetish activities (e.g., boot-blackening, leather), BDSM activities (e.g., spanking) or partner preferences (e.g., blondes, very intelligent). A few participants mentioned specific sexual acts that contributed to their optimal sexual experiences. Two female participants singled out fisting as being a particularly salient activity for them and a male participant mentioned that he and his partner were finding mutual oral sex especially helpful in creating optimal experiences. One male participant felt that he could only have truly optimal sexual experiences in a large group. Recreational drugs were identified by a few participants: One couple mentioned using LSD on occasion to help bring about optimal sexual experiences and another participant mentioned unspecified “pharmaceuticals”. In all of these cases, the participant stated that his or hers was a personal preference and did not recommend the particular interest as an essential activity for bringing about optimal sexual experiences for others.

Minor Contributor 9: Miscellaneous

A *few* participants touched briefly on contributors to optimal sexual experiences that could not be easily classified into any of the previously identified contributors. In the majority of cases, these contributors were de-emphasized and were not developed to the same extent as the other contributors. This category also includes some examples of contributors where participants described markedly different perspectives (e.g., orgasm, fantasy).

A small minority of participants felt that orgasm was an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences. Among those participants, many also expressed the belief that optimal sexual experiences were possible without orgasm. However, they believed that orgasm did enhance the quality of the encounter. An older woman explained:

I think it's pretty important. Although, I am not unlike, uh, many other women in believing strongly that I can have a really good sexual experience without having an orgasm. I think in order for it to be great, it would have to, um, include losing myself enough to be able to reach that height of excitement and then to release it. So kind of that unconscious place, you know, where you just give it up during the orgasm, you know, that inevitability place where you're no longer thinking.

Participants seemed to feel that orgasm was not entirely necessary in every instance and definitely never sufficient. By contrast, one woman said:

The greatest sex experiences that I have had did not involve orgasm or involved *denial* of orgasm, or involved the *deliberate* holding back of orgasm, in order for the arousal or so forth.

In terms of sex acts that contributed to optimal sexual experiences, a minority of participants singled out kissing as being an important facilitator. One older woman said,

“There is something about kissing and the intimacy of kissing, the passionate kissing that...that kind of creates a certain kind of arousal and connection.”

A few participants felt that fantasizing during sex, whether this was strictly personal or was shared with a partner, was an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences. Other participants felt that fantasy was a sign that they were having bad sex because they were not present in the experience. One woman explained the distinction for her:

I think fantasy can be a lot of fun.... fantasy can be really good fun with somebody who I'm already intimate with where we create personas and create scenes and situations and play within them. I'm not much into the fantasy though, I'm not at all interested in the one where you imagine that you're with somebody else other than who you're with. That one doesn't work for me.

An older man felt that *shared* fantasy was important for his optimal sexual experiences:

I think, that my partner and I are still together after 28 years is that we're comfortable sharing the fantasies and recognize that that's what it is – fantasy.

A few participants mentioned qualities of the partner that facilitated the emergence of certain qualities within themselves that lead to optimal sexual experiences. Unlike pathways A or B, this was not mediated through the relationship but rather seemed to occur at the level of social contagion. It was as though having a partner adopt a particular way of being (e.g., authenticity, enthusiasm) gave permission to the participant to take on this quality themselves. Some participants described this phenomenon as carrying their partners along with them. One man offered an example from his own life:

I, I've noticed that, um, that when, where I get really turned on, where I really enjoy myself sexually is when the other person is enjoying themselves. When the other person, the other person is just opening up and just, just, you know, allowing the

ecstasy, the feel, the, uh, the emotion, the, energy of ecstasy flow through them. Um, and, and just letting go and just being right there with me and we're just riding the wave of it together.

Participants also expressed different beliefs about whether one was likely to have optimal sexual experiences with a new partner or not. Most seemed to believe that longer time together improved the quality of experiences because of the familiarity and intimacy that developed. However, a few participants stated that having a new partner was likely to result in optimal sexual experiences. One man stated,

...when I have a new sexual partner... for some reason, the first time, it's great....Uh, usually they're great, I would say, because there's an element of freshness, uh, in terms of what we do or in terms of who I'm doing it with.

Discussion

In this section, the principal findings of the study will be summarized. Particularly noteworthy results will be considered and findings from this study will be compared and contrasted with existing research and theory. The implications of this work for the general public, sex therapy, sex education, theory and research will be discussed. Finally, the strengths and limitations of this study will be evaluated and directions for future research in this area will be explored.

Summary of Results

A phenomenological analysis was carried out on the transcripts of 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with six self-identified sexual minority group members and six older adults who had been partnered for 25 years or more, with the goal of determining the contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Seven major contributors, two minor contributors and two pathways which led towards optimal sexual experiences emerged from the analysis. Major contributors included developmental contributors, individual qualities overall, individual qualities in-the-moment, skills, relationship qualities overall, relationship qualities in-the-moment and situational, preparatory and environmental contributors. Within the larger themes of developmental contributors, individual contributors (overall and in-the-moment), skills, relationship contributors (overall and in-the-moment) and situation, preparation and environmental contributors, several more specific themes were identified. The two pathways that led towards optimal sexual experiences were relational qualities that facilitate individual qualities and individual qualities that facilitate relational qualities. Finally, two minor contributors consisted of individual proclivities and miscellaneous contributors.

The majority of participants touched on each major contributor at some point during the interviews, though certain contributors were more salient for some participants than for

others. For example, some participants emphasized individual qualities as important for their optimal sexual experiences, while others stated that relational contributors were the most important for them.

Noteworthy Findings and Connections between Contributors

Prior to this investigation, individuals and couples who wanted to have optimal sexual experiences, or even just better-quality sexual experiences, would have had difficulty finding accurate, comprehensive, scientifically-based guidelines for doing so. Information available from media sources (e.g., lifestyle magazines, self-help books) is often flawed and/or inaccurate. Research sources provide few guidelines with respect to optimal sexual experiences but instead focus on physiologically-based models of “normal” sex (i.e., non-dysfunctional sex), with the strong implication that “great sex” is a matter of functioning genitals and orgasms. Although sex is an extremely important component of many individuals’ lives, a contributor to their overall well-being and the long-term success of their romantic relationships, there was very little in the way of empirically-based, accurate information.

The results of this study showed that the contributors to optimal sexual experiences were deeper and more nuanced than suggested by either media or academic sources. Contrary to academic sources, which often seem to suggest that the major contributors to the quality of a sexual encounter are physiology and orgasms, this study showed that optimal sexual experiences required care and attention to a variety of different domains, from individual qualities to skills to relational qualities to environmental contributors. Contrary to lifestyle magazines, which suggest that “great sex” can be achieved in an evening by practicing simple tricks and techniques, results of this investigation showed that the creation of optimal sexual experiences may be a lifelong endeavour. Many participants stated that the

capacity to have optimal sexual experiences grew throughout their entire lifetimes, and was continuing to develop into their sixties, seventies and beyond. This was also true at the relational level, where participants emphasized that the time they had spent with their partners building and strengthening their relationships was crucial for the quality of their sexual encounters. Optimal sexual experiences could be, literally, years in the making.

These results provide empirical support for some of the hypotheses and speculations advanced by clinical sexologists. However, in other ways, these findings bring new ideas and contribute additional complexity to the existing discussion on optimal sexual experiences. For example, the pathways or links between contributors (e.g., relational contributors that facilitate individual contributors) was one of the most surprising and important findings of this investigation but had only been hinted at in the theoretical literature.

Perhaps one of the most important findings from this study is that optimal sexual experiences are not simply a matter of luck. Rather, the resounding message received from participants was that sex can be what you make it. Sex has often been compartmentalized and distinguished from other human endeavours in which we pursue excellence (e.g., cooking, running). Findings from this investigation suggest that this “cubbyhole” perspective on sex may be quite limiting. The quality of sexual experiences can be improved through attention and deliberate cultivation of contributors in a variety of different domains and at different times.

Developmental contributors, individual qualities overall and in-the-moment and skills. Several important themes were evident across the developmental and individual contributors to optimal sexual experiences, both before and during sexual experiences: These were deconstructing negative messages, developing greater authenticity, making the choice

to pursue optimal sexual experiences, learning and developing relevant skills and qualities and being open to experience. The need to grow continually and develop all of these contributors throughout participants' lifetimes was highlighted.

Deconstruction of negative messages. For many participants, one of the most fundamental steps on the journey towards optimal sexual experiences was overcoming, deconstructing and relinquishing negative messages and restrictive scripts. Participants had to wipe the slate clean in order to become the kind of people they needed to become and develop the kind of relationships they needed to develop. Many participants reported early negative life experiences in the form of neglect, abuse (i.e., emotional, physical or sexual) or assault; many others recalled feeling that they would be rejected by lovers, friends and family if they were to share the nature of their true orientations or sexual desires. Older participants often said that overcoming stereotypes about elderly people being asexual was important to pursuing optimal sexual experiences in to their sixties and seventies. It was clear by their tones of voice and the words that they chose that participants had thoroughly processed and resolved these negative messages so that they were no longer actively troubling. Many stated that the process of letting go and deconstructing was ongoing and lifelong.

For those participants who identified as members of sexual minority groups (e.g., BDSM, GLBTQ, polyamorous), the journey towards optimal sexual experiences was facilitated, to some degree, because of their previous experiences deconstructing social messages around sex and sexuality. Having already been told that they did not conform to mainstream standards, these participants had been forced to re-evaluate the relevance of other cultural messages around sexuality, which ultimately led them to higher-quality sexual experiences. However, for all participants, the decision to live more authentically, whether

this was in terms of their sexual orientations or preferences, was usually an important contributor towards the development of optimal sexual experiences. For many, this decision represented a pivotal moment in their lives, after which optimal sexual experiences became possible.

The development of high levels of self-awareness was helpful in getting past these negative experiences. Participants compared what they truly wanted with mainstream standards, found these scripts lacking or restrictive and ultimately chose to pursue their authentic desires. In some cases, meeting a special person helped participants to overcome negative messages; under the guidance of loving partners, they felt safe to explore themselves and their sexualities. Letting go of negative messages was often connected with participants developing greater comfort with themselves, which was an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences.

Journey towards greater authenticity. Participants who were able to let go of and resolve their past difficulties found themselves free to express attitudes and values that were a better fit for them. Many participants described themselves as optimists or “glass half-full” types. Again, this was clear from their voices and from the laughter that permeated most interviews. Participants were very comfortable with themselves. Participants were not only enthusiastic about life in general but they were also enthusiastic about sex, defining themselves as “sex-positive”. They described sex in terms more often associated with a passion or a hobby, not hesitating to say that they loved sex and devoted considerable time and energy to it. For many, finding partners who shared their values and who were equally enthusiastic about life and about sex helped participants to create relationships in which optimal sexual experiences were possible.

Participants who were optimistic and enthusiastic about sex in general were able to draw on this energy during sexual experiences. Participants said that they looked forward to sex and felt great joy and enthusiasm during sex itself. The idea of feeling “happy to be there”, as one participant described it, may be related to the idea of being fully present on all levels. Feeling free to be themselves and being completely present on all levels led to feelings of happiness and enthusiasm for participants.

The choice to pursue optimal sexual experiences. One of the most basic prerequisites for bringing about wonderful sexual experiences was making the active choice to pursue them. Participants in this investigation both deliberately sought out experiences (both sexual and non-sexual) and reflected extensively on them in order to gain a greater understanding of themselves and of sex. One older woman stated, “I think experience teaches a lot *for people who want to learn.*” It seemed that the participants who had optimal sexual experiences were doing many of the same things as people who do not have optimal sexual experiences (e.g., having sex with a lot of partners). However, participants in this investigation did so for very different reasons, which resulted in very different outcomes: Individuals who had optimal sexual experiences tended to eschew a focus on mechanics and techniques in favour of learning more about themselves and their partners or of exploring new intrapsychic or interpersonal territory. This difference may be greater deliberation, concentration and reflection – in short, being purposeful about sex.

Optimal sexual experiences required significant time, effort, dedication and commitment to achieve; this was true in the course of a sexual encounter, across the lifespan of an individual and within a relationship. Participants in this study dedicated a lot of time to learning more about themselves, their partners and sex. A female participant described a relationship that involved lots of optimal sexual experiences:

I think it needs a lot of time.... Like, um, one lover of mine, we used to get together on Friday night.... and then spend all day Saturday together and all day Sunday together and we would part Monday morning.... we didn't make plans with ten people and we didn't make plans to do ten things and we got together on Friday night, we both had the time available and, and that swallowed up the whole weekend....

This description stands in stark contrast to depictions in pop culture suggesting that “great sex” can be achieved easily by using certain positions or experiencing multiple orgasms. Quick fixes are commonplace in discussions of “great sex” in lifestyle magazines and sexual self-help manuals. Sexual experiences are treated very differently in the media relative to other human experiences, as though sex were somehow easier than other activities; however, this attitude may make optimal sexual experiences less rather than more likely. For example, someone reading an article in a running magazine about a sub-three hour marathon would not assume that such a feat would be possible for him or her by simply reading the article. Mahrer has stated that *mastering* the art of Experiential Psychotherapy – as opposed to merely getting by – requires thousands of hours dedicated to watching therapy tapes, observing the practice of another Experiential Psychotherapist and practicing (Mahrer, 2005). However, the possibility that optimal sexual experiences might require similar levels of time and dedication has not been raised in the popular media and rarely within the academic literature, with certain exceptions (Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005). This speaks to the need to develop a more nuanced and detailed definition of sex itself so that individuals who want to experience this will have a greater appreciation of the effort required and a better understanding of all the aspects that might require attention in order to optimize sexual experiences.

Not only did participants devote significant time and energy to their sexual experiences but they also saw their sexuality as a significant part of themselves. Sex and sexuality was not compartmentalized in participants' lives but were instead well-integrated aspects of their personalities. The pursuit of optimal sexual experiences, for these participants, was not substantially different from pursuing optimal experiences in other areas of their lives (e.g., work, hobbies, relationships). The ability to see sex as similar to other activities may be important because it means that all learning may be applied towards the development of optimal sexual experiences.

Development of relevant qualities and skills. Making the deliberate choice to seek out or pursue optimal sexual experiences opened the door for participants to develop and refine other important individual qualities (e.g., comfort with self, maturity, centering abilities) and skills (e.g., basic techniques and knowledge, communication skills).

The pursuit of optimal sexual experiences led many participants to develop centering abilities, which allowed them to be fully present and grounded in their lives. Some had had practice being fully present and centered in specific areas of their lives (e.g., meditation, driving a motorcycle); this made being present in the rest of their lives much easier. Learning to ignore distractions to enable a more complete focus was helpful; this often required ongoing and extensive practice.

Participants who could center themselves, feel grounded and be embodied during other, non-sexual activities found these skills useful to being embodied and mentally engaged during optimal sexual experiences. For most participants, these qualities almost always co-existed, which makes intuitive sense: It would be difficult to be embodied physically if one were distracted mentally and vice versa. Being completely present on a physical level and tuning in to the sensations helped participants to focus on the sexual

experience and minimize mental distractions. Likewise, allowing the sexual experience to completely occupy their entire awareness helped participants to feel grounded in their bodies. For some, the experience of being completely and fully present during sex allowed them to feel more grounded and centered in their everyday lives.

Being able to center and ground oneself, both in everyday life and during sex, may be closely linked with developing a sense of comfort in one's body. Participants who spent more time fully inhabiting their bodies felt more relaxed and comfortable with themselves, both during sex and in general. In many cases, the experience of wonderful sex may have a significant impact on developing greater comfort with one's self.

For many participants, the development of greater comfort with themselves was an ongoing process, which was particularly true for those who had experienced changes as a result of illness or disability. Developing greater comfort with one's self was closely connected with personal development, growth and maturity. Changes in themselves and their partners were inevitable for those participants who had been pursuing optimal sexual experiences for years or decades. The ability to cope with the anxiety brought on by change and the flexibility to adapt was required.

Almost all participants found that the journey towards optimal sexual experiences involved learning more and better communication strategies. In many cases, participants learned communication strategies from their partners; in other cases, formal learning through reading, attending workshops or interacting with a sex-positive community was helpful. Developing communication skills helped participants to find their voices, allowing them to communicate better in their everyday lives and to be more expressive with partners during sex.

The pursuit of optimal sexual experience also resulted in participants learning various skills and techniques. Although lifestyle magazines and sex manuals highlight the importance of sexual skills as contributors to optimal sexual experiences, participants in this study felt differently. They explained that while it was important to learn basic techniques and anatomy, it was far *more* important to learn about one's self and one's partner(s) and to share that information. Essentially, a good knowledge of techniques provided a solid foundation on which to build. Participants reported that the development of a wide repertoire of skills gave them the creativity, confidence and flexibility they needed to be able to create the specific kinds of sexual experiences they wanted. Schnarch has said, "Techniques make you a technician, but not a lover" (1997); however, the acquisition of technical skills in the pursuit of optimal sexual experiences may be better captured by Zig Ziglar, who said, "What you get by achieving your goals is not as important as what you become by achieving your goals" (as cited in Walters, 2000, p. 96).

However, participants emphasized that there was little point to accruing good technical skills if these were not adapted to each new sexual partner. One could not, for example, perform oral sex on every partner in exactly the same way and expect this to result in wonderful sexual experiences. The authors of sexual self-help manuals and pop culture articles would be advised to emphasize the importance of adapting skills and techniques to each individual partner rather than make blanket statements about the "effectiveness" of a particular technique.

Openness to experience. An important contributor to optimal sexual experiences for participants was having the openness and willingness to welcome unexpected experiences. A sense of fearlessness permeated the transcripts and it was clear that few participants said "no" a priori to different kinds of experiences and/or partners.

Instead of avoiding situations that might cause fear and anxiety, participants in this investigation embraced these feelings with openness and curiosity. Although their adventures did not always meet with success, participants used these experiences to learn more about themselves, their partners and sex itself. A female participant laughed off her not-so-successful experiences: “When you experiment as much as I do, you’re going to go down some [laughing] dead ends, do you know what I mean?” Maintaining an attitude of welcoming openness to opportunities was important at all times but was particularly useful during a sexual encounter. Sex presented unique opportunities for surprises and learning experiences, especially if a participant was deliberately setting out to explore with a partner.

Participants were able to see difficult or challenging life events as opportunities for growth, learning, development and re-evaluation of previously-held ideas. Experiences such as illness, injury and/or disability often led to improvements in self-image and better sex for participants in this investigation because they were not afraid to change themselves or their beliefs about sex and sexuality. This was particularly true for older participants, who emphasized how important it was to continue learning, exploring, pushing back boundaries and daring to make mistakes.

The adoption of this attitude of openness and receptivity might be related to developing comfort with self and maturity. Participants who felt good about who they were as people and who were more grounded in themselves could take risks without succumbing to overwhelming anxiety. Openness to experience required courage and the willingness to tolerate some psychological discomfort. Participants were very clear that the development of maturity and the ability to self-soothe when anxious were not necessarily related to chronological age. The experiences that participants had as a result of this openness also

helped further the development of various individual qualities (e.g., self-awareness, maturity, comfort with self) and skills (e.g., technical skills).

Lifelong growth and development. The journey towards optimal sexual experiences involved an ongoing process of growing, developing and maturing. Participants took advantage of learning opportunities, whether that meant deliberately seeking out opportunities or being open to the unexpected. Participants acted as philosophers and scientists, questioning and studying their own lives. It was rare that participants reacted with surprise to interview questions, which suggests that they had spent significant time reflecting on their own experiences so as to make sense of them. Not surprisingly, most of their responses were thoughtful and nuanced and the memories they shared of optimal sexual experiences were strong and detailed.

Many participants self-identified as life-long students who were passionate about learning in many aspects of their lives. For most participants, the development of the capacity for optimal sexual experiences was a life-long project that continued into their sixties, seventies and beyond. An older male participant stated, “I think that sex is something you learn to do. It takes a long time to learn it. And so, ideally sex is better for older people because they have more experiences and more learning.”

Relational contributors overall and in-the-moment. Several major themes appeared within relational contributors overall as well as relational contributors relevant during a sexual experience: These included cultivation of the relationship, development of greater empathy, care between the partners, creation of a conducive atmosphere, development and growth of the relationship and openness to changes over time.

Cultivation of the relationship. The journey towards wonderful sexual experiences required a deliberate and active choice on the part of the individual and the couple.

Intentionally valuing and nurturing the relationship as well as valuing and nurturing the sex were fundamental contributors to optimal sexual experiences that required active participation and engagement from both partners. Participants did not take their relationships for granted but cherished, valued and cultivated them on a daily basis and brought the same attitude towards sexual experiences in the relationships.

The desire to create the kind of relationship in which optimal sexual experiences were possible was an important initial step. Participants deliberately cultivated deep empathy and strong positive feelings for their partners; these contributors were crucial in order for optimal sexual experiences to be possible within their relationships. The desire to have optimal experiences combined with a willingness to understand their partners' needs and meet them helped to build an atmosphere of safety, trust, respect and consideration.

Development of deeper empathy. The role of empathy as a relational contributor to optimal sexual experiences could not be overestimated. As a super-ordinate contributor, empathy represented a "sine qua non" of relational contributors: It was an important contributor on its own and it also helped to facilitate virtually every other relational contributor (e.g., feelings towards the other, atmosphere and tone, behavioural intentions). It played a crucial role both in general and during sexual encounters. Participants were able to read their partners' communications, respond to subtle non-verbal cues and adapt their activities to shape their sexual encounters. This level of empathy went far beyond the usual conceptualizations in the couples therapy literature of active listening, "I" statements and reflecting emotion (e.g., Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Instead, participants said they were trying to feel their way into their partners' minds and bodies.

This level of empathy bears a much greater similarity to descriptions of transcendental empathy within a psychotherapeutic relationship (Hart, 1997, 1999, 2000;

Mahrer, Boulet & Fairweather, 1994) in which personal boundaries are transcended and the other person is no longer experienced as separate. At this point, partners can help one another to express feelings beyond what each was initially capable of and can stay with one another during moments of deep self-exploration. Extremely high levels of empathy may allow for significant change in both psychotherapy and sexual experiences. Participants in this investigation described losing themselves in order to be completely present with, aware of and focused with their partners.

Mutual feelings of empathy may represent the foundation for all other relational contributors. Empathy was necessary to establish an atmosphere conducive to optimal sexual experiences; it also showed strong links with important behaviours within the relationship, including mutuality and communication. Mutuality and empathy were inextricably linked: Participants who were aware of their partners' needs and had positive feelings about them strove to meet those needs whenever possible. An important element here was that both partners in the relationship adopted this attitude, which ensured reciprocity.

Caring between partners. Participants described liking, caring, accepting and supporting their partners; these were feelings that participants carried with them at all times, regardless of whether their partners were present. Participants also described feelings that were experienced mostly in the presence of their partners, e.g., a strong connection, feelings of merger and abandon, unselfconscious and freedom. An older woman stated, "We feel good about each other. When we're finished making love.... I feel happy to be with him. I'm glad I'm there with him." The feelings that participants had towards their partners and experienced with their partners were strongly interconnected and enhanced one another, e.g., liking their partners and caring for them led to a greater sense of closeness and connection. For most participants, however, caring about their partners and respecting them appeared to

be more fundamental contributors to optimal sexual experiences than loving them, which may run counter to conventional social expectations. Popular conceptualizations of “great sex” suggest that such experiences require that partners be in love; however, participants in this study reported having had optimal experiences with different types of partners (e.g., primary romantic partners, play partners). The common denominator that was identified across these relationships was caring and respect. Participants emphasized that strong, positive feelings within their relationships were necessary for optimal sexual experiences, but not sufficient in and of themselves. However, the experience of these feelings helped motivate participants to take concrete actions, such as communicating with their partners and empathizing with them.

The feelings that couples experienced within their relationships were deeply intertwined. The existence of a warm and intimate bond with another person allowed participants to give themselves over to feelings of merger, abandon, unselfconsciousness and freedom. A male participant described this as, “Feeling comfortable or close to the person or people you’re having sex with, um, that allows for a certain openness or spontaneity or unselfconsciousness.” Taking these intrapsychic and interpersonal risks with another person increased the sense of intimacy in the relationship and helped to build strong feelings of caring and connection.

Participants stated that having strong feelings towards their partners and within their relationships enhanced the quality of their sexual experiences as they were happening. A sense of closeness, connection and warmth pervaded the relationship overall and during sexual moments. During sexual encounters, participants could bridge the space between themselves and their partners to experience a feeling of connection and merger on all levels,

physically, emotionally and spiritually. The ability to abandon oneself and be unselfconscious may be important for creating such connections.

Creation of a conducive atmosphere. For participants in this investigation, the creation of an atmosphere of trust and safety within their relationships contributed to optimal sexual experiences both directly and indirectly, as the creation of this atmosphere helped to facilitate other important contributors. Different sub-themes related to the atmosphere and tone of the relationship interacted with and enhanced one another. Participants said that they felt safe and secure to be anything, do anything and say anything because they knew that their sharing would be met with respect and acceptance by their partners. Feelings of light-heartedness and relaxation could also deepen the sense of trust and safety as partners were not afraid to make mistakes with one another. In turn, feelings of safety with their partners allowed participants to be flexible, joyful, spontaneous, playful and creative, both in the relationship overall and during sexual encounters.

The atmosphere and tone of the relationship was also closely connected with other important relational contributors (e.g., behavioural intentions, feelings within the relationship). Participants stated that the ability to trust their partners at such deep levels was possible because they knew that their partners cared for them and wanted to really understand and support them. The trust and safety within their relationships were strongly related to the feelings participants had for their partners. Caring, accepting and supporting one another helped create an atmosphere of safety in their relationships, which, in turn, strengthened these feelings over time. The existence of a safe atmosphere also facilitated important behavioural contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Almost all of the participants who said that willingness to explore and experiment together contributed to optimal sexual experiences also emphasized the importance of a safe and trusting

atmosphere. Exploration and experimentation were not possible without trust and safety; however, positive experiences of taking risks and pushing boundaries together could increase feelings of trust and safety. Participants also said that trusting their partners and feeling safe with them helped to facilitate the kind of deep, extensive communication that was itself an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences.

Development and growth of the relationship. The journey towards optimal sexual experiences required that couples be willing to cultivate their relationships through their willingness to explore and experiment and communication, both overall and during sexual encounters. At all times, it was important that the relationships be characterized by mutuality and reciprocity in terms of partners' behaviours.

As a super-ordinate contributor, mutuality was an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences and an important characteristic of every other relational contributor. Optimal sexual experiences were not possible unless all participants brought this attitude of mutuality to the sexual encounters. Participants emphasized that attitudes, feelings and behaviours had to be mutual: Both partners had to value and nurture the relationship, both partners had to demonstrate caring, respect and consideration towards one another, both partners had to communicate, both partners had to help build an atmosphere of trust and safety, etc. Participants recognized that mutuality did not mean that both partners had exactly the same needs that could be met in the same way; rather, participants strove to meet each others' needs on the same level. Deep levels of empathy and extensive communication were crucial in order for participants to determine exactly what their partners needed, both in the relationship overall and during sex itself. In some cases, participants reported that their partners had been able to meet needs that the participants themselves did not know they had.

Communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, was absolutely essential before, during and after optimal sexual experiences. Whereas lifestyle magazines caution readers to engage in communication during “neutral times” so as not to generate anxiety (e.g., while eating dinner), participants in this study advocated respectful and honest communication at all times. They used communication to push their own comfort levels and to reveal themselves more completely to their partners. Participants reported welcoming authentic communication from their partners. Many emphasized the need to develop skills so as to be able to read non-verbal communications as well.

Communication was pivotal in linking together other relational contributors. Communication helped couples to develop and express deep levels of empathy and to create an atmosphere conducive to optimal sexual experiences. Communication was also fundamental in facilitating exploration, experimentation and discovery. Participants emphasized that going on sexual adventures with another person required extensive verbal and non-verbal communication throughout the process.

Openness to experience and the willingness to explore within the relationship were important contributors to optimal sexual experiences. These contributors may have been easier to develop in a relational context as partners came from different backgrounds, had different life experiences and possessed different strengths and limitations. It was inevitable that participants would bring different and sometimes unanticipated qualities to their relationships.

Openness to exploration as outlined in this investigation can be easily distinguished from popular conceptualizations of exploration and novelty in the media. Instead of minimizing or avoiding anxiety, participants welcomed opportunities to learn more about themselves and their partners, even when these involved taking interpersonal risks.

Transcending the anxiety together helped to build the sense of safety and trust in the relationship and generate even greater intimacy. The willingness to experience and explore in the relationship was facilitated by a sense of trust, safety and empathy as well as by the positive feelings participants had towards their partners. Participants trusted that their partners would not hurt them or push them past their limits. The experience of exploring, risking and discovering together also helped to enhance these feelings of trust and caring.

Openness to changes over time. Participants expected that their partners and their relationships would change and evolve throughout the years. They responded by welcoming these changes. They embraced growth in themselves and their partners through their openness to experience and willingness to continue learning; these qualities were facilitated by the emotional maturity of both partners. It was clear from participants' descriptions that they were proud of the relationships they had built with their partners. The structure and depth of the relationship also provided a context for other relational contributors. Partners created a shared history together, which motivated, enhanced and strengthened their current behaviours and feelings towards the other. The depth of the relationship was connected to the depth of other contributors: Over the years, participants had developed deeper trust in one another, they valued the relationship at higher levels and their feelings of connection and intimacy had grown more intense. This was especially true for the participants who had been recruited on the basis of their experience in long-term relationships; however, many of the kinky participants described similar experiences in their long-term relationships. The atmosphere and the tone of the relationship were the result of many years of dedicated effort through communication, empathy and willingness to meet one another's needs. Throughout the years, participants had developed a deep understanding of their partners, which they

continued to build on and expand even though some had known each other for 40 years or more.

Preparation for and Creation of Optimal Encounters. Participants in this investigation carefully cultivated their relationships and created space for optimal sexual experiences in their lives. This attitude was especially relevant in the hours leading up to a sexual encounter. Participants did not leave the quality of their sexual experiences to chance alone but deliberately set up their emotional and physical environments so as to increase the possibility of making an experience optimal. During sex, participants drew on relevant individual and relational qualities to enhance the quality of the experience as it was occurring.

Preparation for optimal encounters. Contrary to popular representations of great “make-up sex”, very few participants in this investigation expressed the belief that optimal sexual experiences were possible if there was anger or lingering unresolved conflict between the partners. In fact, participants often stressed the importance of resolving these issues before optimal sexual experiences could be possible. They described deliberately setting up an emotionally-conducive environment prior to sex. For many, this involved sharing some kind of activity with their partner or having a good conversation. Although they gave different examples of activities (e.g., going on a date, eating together, cleaning the house), the fundamental goal of doing this was to spend time with one another and create warm, positive feelings, which they savoured during the sexual encounter.

Participants set up their physical environments deliberately so that they would be congruent with their desires and would meet their needs. They emphasized the importance of flexibility and the need to adapt their environments to suit partners’ specific wants and needs (e.g., keeping the room warm, having pillows around to facilitate movements for those with

disabilities). The preparation of the physical space was guided by participants' intentions for the sex so that the environment could be deliberately nonintrusive or it could be set up so as to enhance a shared fantasy. Setting up the physical environment beforehand allowed participants to focus their energy and attention on their partners and the sex without having to worry about distractions. Pop culture advice about sex (e.g., in self-help books) often includes suggestions to set up the bedroom in particular ways but usually omits the fundamental purpose for doing so and the possibilities for flexibility, adaptation and personalization.

In addition to deliberately preparing the physical space, participants also brought intentionality to their personal preparations for sex, by showering or bathing and sometimes wearing special clothing. Again, one of the primary purposes of doing so was to minimize potential distractions so that participants could ensure a complete and total focus on their partners and the sexual experiences they created.

The preparation of themselves and their physical environments required forethought and energy on the part of participants; this reflects the value placed on sex by participants. Participants had a good understanding of their partners' needs during sex and wanted to meet them. For example, an older male participant said that one of his partners was sensitive to loud noises, which distracted her during sex. He paid close attention to this in setting up the physical environment.

Consent was an important and basic contributor to optimal sexual experiences; however, many participants ended up mentioning this as a kind of after-thought (e.g., "And of course it's consensual"). However, clear, informed consent was a fundamental relational contributor during a sexual experience; optimal sexual experiences would not be possible without this contributor. The ability for participants to take consent for granted was likely

the case because none of the participants in this investigation would consider a sexual experience to be optimal if it was non-consensual or not mutually enjoyed. This speaks to the power and depth of the mutuality in their relationships as well as the respect and consideration participants had for their partners. Consent was strongly linked to communication; partners discussed consent as it pertained to specific activities during sex but consent to various activities was also as an overall quality within the relationship (e.g., non-monogamy).

Creation of optimal experiences during sex. Participants deliberately nurtured their relationships and set the stage for optimal sexual encounters both emotionally and physically. They also brought this attitude of intentionality to their sexual encounters as they were unfolding. Participants were purposeful during their sexual encounters, deliberately heightening their own and their partners' pleasure for the sake of doing so. Eroticism was a key contributor to optimal sexual experiences as they occurred. The ability to create an erotic atmosphere during a sexual encounter was facilitated by participants' awareness of sexual feelings both within themselves and in their partners as well as their abilities to tune in to subtle shifts in the atmosphere and in their partners' reactions. Again, empathy was a critical quality of the individuals and the relationships.

Rather than focusing on orgasms, techniques or specific activities, participants reflected on the kind of qualities they wanted to create in the sex (e.g., connection, passion, depth, intensity) and then consciously pursued them. They deliberately heightened anticipation and build-up by prolonging the encounter. Although a few participants stated that they had had fantastic "quickies", most believed that optimal sexual experiences required more time to create. Participants intentionally slowed down and focused their attention on their partners and themselves. One older man asked, "How long can we just be

in this state of trust and responsiveness?” Participants tended not to describe sex in a compartmentalized, linear way, (i.e., foreplay, intercourse and orgasm), but described a more free-flowing model that involved a mix of connecting with one another, playing and communicating. An older man described his interactions with his partner, “Whenever I'm around my loved one, I'm having sex with her. It's *all* foreplay or it's *all* post-coital snuggling. I mean, it's always making love when we are intentionally together with the leisure to be together, it's lovemaking.”

During optimal sexual experiences, communication was critical. It facilitated the expression of many other important contributors, including consent, connection, safety and mutuality and it was also a direct contributor to optimal sexual experiences itself. Communication helped participants to bring intentionality to the sexual encounter and to create and heighten erotic feelings. Although conceptualizations within pop culture suggest that communication and spontaneity are antithetical (e.g., “too much talking kills the mood”), participants in this study believed that extensive communication could actually facilitate the occurrence of spontaneous interactions because it allowed for a safe atmosphere to be established. Prior preparation and extensive communication allowed for spontaneity and flexibility during sexual experiences and within relationships.

Linking individual qualities and skills with relational qualities. One of the most important findings from this investigation was the degree of cross-over between individual qualities and relational qualities. The specific qualities of participants led them to choose specific partners and to work with those partners towards developing certain relationship qualities. In turn, the qualities of these relationships led to the development and refinement of other important individual qualities.

Two major pathways emerged during transcript analysis. The first pathway was that qualities of the relationship could have an indirect impact on optimal sexual experiences by facilitating the expression of individual qualities, which were direct contributors to optimal sexual experiences. An atmosphere of trust, safety, intimacy and love in a relationship might help a participant to let go on an individual level of negative messages heard during childhood or adolescence. Participants were able to develop important qualities and skills that allowed them to live more authentically because of the empathy, understanding, acceptance and support that they received from partners. Many reported that their individual communication skills had improved by learning to communicate within their relationships.

The converse was also true: Individual qualities could have an indirect effect on optimal sexual experiences through their direct impact on relational contributors. Individuals who were relaxed and comfortable with themselves could help create a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere within the relationship. Partners with strong communication skills could create a relationship characterized by communication and honest sharing, both in and outside the bedroom. The creation of a sense of openness and willingness to explore in the relationship likely resulted from both partners being flexible and open to experience as individuals. Participants drew on several individual qualities to create empathy in their relationships, including feelings of goodwill towards their partners, the ability able to read verbal and non-verbal expressions, openness to experience and the willingness to pay attention.

There were many pathways between individual and relational qualities. Often, the combination of these contributors was not merely additive but exponential. A female participant explained the connection, “I think kink is a beautiful mirror for that because you can’t flog yourself....and get anywhere with it. You can’t make yourself fly. It takes two or

more.” The idea of welcoming experience may be particularly salient here. Individual growth can result from deliberate choices and learning; however, this growth is likely to occur in expected ways, e.g., a person who sets out to learn more about centering him or herself may gain valuable skills in terms of centering abilities. By contrast, being open to the unexpected and learning from another person may allow for learning and growth in directions that were never expected but are nevertheless extremely valuable.

In addition to the two major pathways that emerged from analysis, individual and relational qualities intersected in various other categories. For some participants, meeting a special person and developing a relationship with him or her was an important developmental event that set in motion a participant’s journey towards optimal sexual experiences. Sometimes, this special person was not actually a lover but a friend who helped the participant to open a door and discover new resources in the form of information or connections to a certain community (e.g., GLBTQ, BDSM, polyamory). In other cases, an important developmental event was meeting a sexual partner who would work with the participant to set the stage for and create wonderful sexual experiences. Having goodwill towards a partner was a direct contributor to optimal sexual experiences; goodwill also facilitated several other relational contributors. The existence of generous, positive feelings at the intrapsychic level was strongly linked to the atmosphere and tone, attitudes and beliefs and behavioural intentions within the relationship. Feeling goodwill towards one another helped both partners to build an atmosphere of trust and safety, value, nurture and prioritize their relationships and engage in exploration, risk-taking and communication together. Goodwill also helped to facilitate mutuality, which was an integral component of virtually every other relational contributor.

There were also a few instances of relational qualities that were experienced intrapsychically. The emotional maturity of both partners within the relationship was a strong contributor to optimal sexual experiences as it helped the relationship to weather changes and growth over time. This contributor also helped to facilitate openness to experience and willingness to explore because both partners were able to manage their anxiety and self-soothe. Participants also described having strong feelings of love, caring and positive regard towards their partners, feelings that the participants carried with them at all times. These feelings were not the result of being in the presence of their partners but were nevertheless an important relational contributor to optimal sexual experiences.

Overarching relationships between contributors. Results from the analysis of interview transcripts suggested that the relevance of contributors varied from one participant to the next. It was often the case that a participant who emphasized and elaborated on the importance of individual and/or developmental contributors in bringing about optimal sexual experiences tended to de-emphasize relational and environmental factors. Similarly, a participant who felt strongly that relational factors were the most relevant contributors to his/her optimal sexual experiences might spend less time on individual/developmental or environmental contributors. This relationship also held true for specific sexual experiences. For example, one couple described special twice-monthly sexual encounters that required several hours' worth of preparation and set-up. For those experiences, environmental contributors played a prominent role whereas in their more "everyday" experiences, relational contributors were usually more relevant. One man described different kinds of optimal sexual experiences, which would likely involve different contributors:

I mean, you know, there's all different kinds of great sex where great sex can be sex that was, had a great physical impact, right, so sex that was unbelievably exhausting,

again in a good way. It could be sex that where... I got to do something that I'd always wanted to do or, maybe I didn't even know I wanted to do.... and then there would be, I mean, sort of unique great sex...something more emotionally, emotional and psychological happens, so for example the first time I had an orgasm and cried.

It was also true that the relative importance of contributors might change with participants' changing definitions of optimal sexual experiences over their lifespans. One female participant had never had optimal sexual experiences before she met her current partner. However, the experience of that relationship had furthered the development of individual qualities that might make such experiences possible with future partners. Another female participant explained how the relevance of the environmental contributors could change over the course of a relationship:

I would say the less passion that you have, the more helpful a good environment.

And what I mean by that is that, like, you know, if you're really hot for someone and you're walking down a back lane, ducking into a dark corner in the pouring rain on a cold night can actually work. Whereas a little further along into an established relationship, [laughing] that's not likely to be such a turn-on and you really want to go home, someplace warm.

An older polyamorous man, for whom individual qualities had always been important contributors to his optimal sexual experiences, described falling in love in a very unexpected way over the last few years and found that experiences and learning arising from that relationship were creating new and wonderful sexual experiences, both with his lover and with his wife.

There were also participants for whom one particular set of contributors seemed especially dominant. For example, some participants believed that relational contributors

were absolutely essential. They had developed the capacity for optimal sexual experiences with cherished spouses and did not expect that such experiences would be possible once their spouses were gone. One woman, who engaged in swinging with her husband, commented that her very best sexual experiences required her husband. She described having good experiences with partners that she met at swingers' parties but said that the most amazing sexual experiences of her life always occurred with her husband. There were also participants for whom individual qualities represented their preferred dimensions; correspondingly, the contributions of their partners' qualities, the relationship contributors or the environment were diminished relatively.

These findings have important implications for sex therapy. Certainly, sex therapists will want to broaden their focus away from genitals and physiological functioning to include a broader spectrum of contributors to sexual experiences (i.e., developmental, individual, relational). However, it may first be necessary to identify the relative salience of specific contributors for the particular individual in therapy. For example, working on the relational contributors with a client who focuses more strongly on individual qualities may not help that person to create better quality sexual experiences.

Depth/complex concepts. The depth and quality of participants' responses were striking; their answers were comprehensive, rich in detail, nuanced and complex. Participants were very precise in their responses and were particularly adept at making subtle distinctions regarding the reasons for developing certain skills or practicing certain behaviours. For example, although lifestyle magazines guarantee that "great sex" can be achieved through the use of techniques and skills (Duran & Prusank, 1997; Ménard & Kleinplatz, 2008), one male participant characterized sexual skills differently:

...so it's having a lot of options, so that, you know, there's lots of choices. It's kind of like, um, you know, I mean, to be a great artist you need to have lots of technical skills so that you can make sure that what you're drawing or painting is exactly what you want.

This statement reflects a qualitatively different approach where the purpose of developing skills is to gain the flexibility afforded by having a wide repertoire rather than the idea that there exists a "one-size-fits-all great sex button", as one participant characterized most media representations.

The results from this investigation suggest that many of the words commonly associated with sex and sexuality may need to be expanded or re-conceptualized; these words include "skills", "activities", "communication", "fantasy" and even the word "sex" itself. In many cases, participants would use such words but would make sure to redefine or elaborate on them. Although sexual skills have often been equated in the popular media with stimulation techniques, participants in this investigation defined the term more broadly to encompass communication, empathy and self-awareness. When asked about the types of activities that might contribute to optimal sexual experiences, participants cited everything from working on an artistic project together, preparing the bedroom for sex later, going to the symphony, writing a journal entry, going to a swingers' party and/or cleaning the house together. The idea of sexual communication has been over-simplified both in the media and in academic research. Sexual communication, as defined by participants in this investigation, went far beyond disclosing sexual likes and dislikes; instead, participants used the word "communication" to refer to the possibility of sharing every part of themselves, sexual and non-sexual, with another person. Similarly, the word "fantasy" provoked varied responses from participants. For some, fantasy meant ignoring one's sexual partner in favour of mental

imagery or storylines. “I definitely know that it’s not great sex if one of the people is, like, off in a fantasy in their own mind,” said one male participant. Not surprisingly, the participants who defined fantasy in this way did not feel that it contributed significantly towards optimal sexual experiences. On the other hand, fantasy for some meant sharing imagery or ideas or role-playing with a partner so as to deepen their level of involvement in the sexual encounter.

On a more fundamental level, participants’ definitions of “sex” were usually far more open and inclusive than culturally-accepted definitions based on sexual scripts (i.e., kissing, touching, manual sex, oral sex, penis-in-vagina intercourse) (Gagnon, 1977; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). In response to the question, “What is great sex?”, one participant distinguished, “There’s two parts to that. What, what’s sex and then what’s great sex?” In other cases, participants’ definitions of and understanding of these contributors had evolved over time, such that, for example, communication in their youth was more limited to disclosing likes and dislikes but expanded over time to include sharing their deeper desires and dreams with partners.

Optimal sexual experiences = solid foundation + magic. In many ways, these findings may be reassuring: No one contributor or theme seemed to be sufficient to guarantee optimal sexual experiences. It was clear from participants’ responses that no specific behaviour, feeling, quality or skill, whether this occurred at the individual or relational level, whether it was relevant before, during or after sex, was sufficient to ensure that any given sexual experience would be optimal. Rather, a solid base of developmental, individual, relational and environmental contributors could be created that would provide a foundation for optimal experiences. At that point, some of their experiences would be

optimal, while others might not, but this could not be predicted by participants a priori. One non-religious participant described optimal sexual experiences as a “gift from God.”

It seems unlikely that any study will ever be able to determine exactly *why* certain sexual experiences are optimal and others are not. However, the results of this investigation provide extensive information about how to go about creating a foundation that will increase the probability of having optimal sexual experiences. The extent to which the probability increases will likely depend on the person, their partner(s), their relationship(s), the situation and environment, etc.

Comparison to Previous Findings

In this section, the findings from this investigation will be compared with the current research literature across the spectrum of sexual experiences, from dysfunctional to satisfying. The theoretical literature on optimal sexual experiences and the literature and research on non-sexual optimal experiences will be considered for their relevance to the results of the present investigation.

Contributors across the spectrum of sexual experiences. At the outset of this investigation, an analysis of the existing research literature suggested the existence of a set of contributors (e.g., developmental, personal, health/lifestyle, relational) that seemed to be relevant across the spectrum of sexual experiences, from dysfunctional to normal to satisfactory and, possibly, to optimal. In some cases, findings from this study support this idea; however, there were also important discrepancies between the contributors to optimal sexual experiences and the contributors to other kinds of sexual experiences.

Contributors to sexual dysfunctions. Consultation of the existing research on the contributors to sexual dysfunctions led to speculation that these elements might need to be avoided, minimized, overcome and/or treated in order for optimal sexual experiences to be

possible. In some cases, this appeared to be true. Whereas research has shown that espousing certain interpersonal attitudes (e.g., having narrow definitions of sexuality, focusing on performance, holding stereotyped views of masculine and feminine sex roles) may be associated with the development of sexual dysfunctions (Nobre & Pinto-Gouveia, 2006; Sanders et al., 2008; Tiefer, 1988; Zilbergeld, 1999), the results of this investigation showed that letting go, overcoming, unlearning, deconstructing and relinquishing destructive messages about sex and self was sometimes necessary for optimal sexual experiences to become possible. Sexual dysfunctions may also be related to relationship difficulties, such as communication problems, lack of trust, anger and lack of intimacy (Crowe, 1995; Hyde et al., 2004; Metz & Epstein, 2002). Again, it appears to be the case that conflict within the relationship needs to be processed and resolved before optimal sexual experiences become possible. The relationship needed to be positive for optimal sexual experiences to be possible at all and it needed to be especially positive in the hours leading up to a sexual encounter.

In other cases, the factors associated with the development of sexual dysfunctions appeared to be irrelevant to optimal sexual experiences. Although negative life experiences (e.g., assault, abuse, neglect) have been associated with the development of sexual dysfunctions in the research literature (Dennerstein et al., 2004; Firestone et al., 2002; Najman et al., 2005; Walser & Kern, 1996), it would appear that the experience of abuse, neglect and/or assault does not *automatically* preclude optimal sexual experiences, as participants in this investigation had overcome a variety of such experiences. It may be the case that the process of overcoming negative events may be more relevant to optimal sexual experiences than the original negative event. An older male participant explained that psychological work and self-evaluation were necessary in order to become free and “totally human” (he had overcome many life challenges, including coming out as gay). Likewise, the

experience of health problems, whether these are mental or physical (Bancroft et al., 2003; Laumann et al., 2005; Meston & Bradford, 2007; Shifren et al., 2008), has been associated with sexual dysfunctions. However, many of the participants in this investigation had experienced seemingly debilitating medical conditions (e.g., cardiovascular problems, cancer, multiple sclerosis, HIV), iatrogenic disorders (e.g., resulting from surgery, medications) and mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety) but were nevertheless capable of optimal sexual experiences. This finding suggests that health problems may not represent insurmountable obstacles to this quality of sexual experience. Perhaps physical health is more relevant at lower levels of sexual functioning. It may also be the case that the attitude espoused by the individual towards the health issue might be more relevant than the health issue itself. In a few cases, participants described a health crisis that had prompted the re-evaluation of their definitions of sex and sexuality; they reported that the sex they were currently experiencing was even better than the sex they had had when they were healthier. The finding that optimal sexual experiences are possible well in to old age despite injury, illness and disability was similar to results from Zilbergeld's study of elderly, long-term lovers (2004).

Facilitating "normal" sex. Far less research and theory have been focused on the factors that facilitate "normal" sexual experiences relative to research on the predictors of sexual dysfunctions. A few sexologists have theorized about the fundamental qualities of normal, healthy sexual development, such as learning about intimacy, understanding roles and relationships, reacting to physical changes and modifying the body schema (Bukowski et al., 1988). Some of these ideas were reflected in the results of this investigation, i.e., the development of specific individual and relational attitudes; however, rather than being

limited to childhood and adolescence, participants described sexual development as being lifelong and ongoing.

The results from other studies of normal sexual functioning are less relevant to optimal sexual experiences. Haavio-Mannila and Kontula (1997) found that children who were raised in a sex-positive environment and who received comprehensive sex education experienced better sexual functioning as adults. Very few participants in this study had received sex-positive messages from authority figures (e.g., parents, teachers) during childhood or adolescence; in addition, formal sex education was rarely mentioned by participants except to note that it was usually non-existent, deeply flawed and/or inadequate. It would appear that optimal sexual experiences are possible in the absence of early sex-positive messages and high-quality sex education. Although the pre-requisites are never specified explicitly, existing models of “normal” sexual response tend to be physiologically-based (e.g., Kaplan, 1974; Masters & Johnson, 1966), leading to the assumption that physiological functioning and the ability to experience orgasm are important for normal sexual functioning. The results of this investigation suggest that “normal” physiological functioning is not necessary at the level of optimal sexual experiences: Many participants in this study had problems with genital functioning (e.g., erectile dysfunction, difficulty lubricating) but said that their difficulties did not impede their optimal sexual experiences. Others specifically stated that orgasm was unimportant or contributed only marginally to their optimal sexual experiences. Participants’ descriptions of their optimal sexual experiences did not appear to corroborate any of the existing physiologically-based models of sexual response; instead, participants described a lifelong process of cultivating the necessary individual and relational qualities for optimal sexual experiences.

Contributors to sexual satisfaction. Researchers have identified a variety of contributors to sexual satisfaction that might also be relevant for optimal sexual experiences. Specific individual qualities (e.g., general and sexual self-esteem, sexual assertiveness) have been associated with more satisfying sexual experiences (Hally & Pollack, 1993; Larson et al., 1998; Ménard & Offman, 2009). These qualities bear some resemblance to the individual contributors to optimal sexual experiences that were identified in this investigation (e.g., being sex positive, comfort with self, feeling good about oneself in the moment). Many studies have also found a positive association between relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction (e.g., Barrientos & Paez, 2006; Gossmann et al., 2003; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Purnine & Carey, 1997; Santtila et al., 2008; Sprecher, 2002; Young et al., 2000); overall relationship qualities as well as relational qualities in-the-moment were found to be crucial contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Sexual satisfaction has also been associated with good communication between partners about sexual and non-sexual subjects (e.g., Bridges et al., 2004; Byers, 2001; Byers & Demmons, 1999; Ferroni & Taffe, 1997; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; MacNeil & Byers, 1997; Ménard & Offman, 2009) as well as satisfaction with communication levels (Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Cupach & Metts, 1995). The results of this investigation highlighted the importance of communication by the individual and within the relationship.

However, most previous studies on the subject of sexual satisfaction have involved the use of standardized psychometric measures designed to examine lower levels of the constructs in question; therefore, it is not clear to what degree these concepts are directly comparable to the contributors identified in this study. For example, sexual communication in previous studies may be conceptualized at a much more basic level (e.g., “I begin sex with my partner if I want to”) (Morokoff et al., 1997) compared to the communication skills

described by participants in this investigation, which was broader, deeper and more complex. Likewise, the enthusiasm, delight and energy of sex positivity, as described by participants in this investigation may be qualitatively different from sexual self-esteem as it is defined in the literature by questionnaire items such as, “I feel self-assured about my sexual abilities” or “I feel good about the place of sex in my life” (Squiers, 1998). In several cases, the depth and complexity of participants’ responses in this investigation differed meaningfully from the ideas captured by the psychometric measures used in research on sexual satisfaction.

Many of the contributors to optimal sexual experiences identified in this investigation have also been linked with dysfunctional, normal and satisfying sexual experiences. This supports the idea that sexual experiences exist along a continuum, and that there is a set of contributors that may be relevant across the spectrum, from dysfunctional to optimal. Specifically, developmental contributors (e.g., learning, individual and relational attitudes), individual characteristics, attitudes or beliefs (e.g., self-esteem, erotophilia/erotophobia) and relational qualities (e.g., communication, trust) may be relevant to all types of sexual experiences. However, some of the factors that are relevant for dysfunctional and “normal” sexual experiences (e.g., physical and mental health, physiological functioning) seem to be less relevant for optimal sexual experiences. Although physiological functioning and orgasms have been emphasized throughout the academic literature on sexual functioning, it would appear that these are not sufficient by themselves for bringing about optimal sexual experiences. Likewise, negative life experiences and poor health do not automatically preclude wonderful sexual experiences. In addition, some of the factors that have been studied in conjunction with normal or satisfactory sexual experiences may be defined or conceptualized differently as they relate to optimal sexual experiences (e.g., sexual communication, trust). For example, the idea of “trust” within a relationship

may need to be defined differently depending on the calibre of sex in question. Whereas trust has been defined in psychometric measures using statements such as “I can rely on my partner to react in a positive way when I expose my weaknesses to him/her” (Rempel, Holmes & Zanna, 1985), this seems qualitatively different from a description provided by a female participant:

It’s one thing to say that you trust somebody, it’s another thing to have that physical demonstration of it on a routine basis. It’s kind of, it’s almost like to have those same kind of trust experiences, you’d almost have to, like, go to war with somebody, go, go in to battle. That, that, being able to put your entire being in somebody else’s hands and they do the same with me that, you know, they know that there’s a possibility they could end up doing something that would seriously harm me or, you know, inadvertently, or they could touch off, inadvertently, some, do something that could trigger some sort of emotional landmine that I didn’t even know was there. But they completely trust that if they do that, I’m going to understand, and the same, same way on my part. I trust, completely trust that they, their, their intent is always positive, it’s always good, no matter, no matter what it might seem like on the outside that on the inside what they are doing is totally, the intent is to uplift me and not, um, not diminish me.

Research/Theory about contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Psychologists and sex therapists have proposed a variety of individual, relational and environmental contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Many of these ideas were supported empirically by the results of this investigation; however, in other cases, the results from this study were not comparable to existing ideas in the academic literature. In still other cases, there were superficial similarities between these ideas but deeper conceptual differences.

Developmental contributors. The theoretical literature on the developmental contributors associated with optimal sexual experiences corresponds to many of the ideas raised by participants in this investigation. Several clinicians have suggested that optimal sexual experiences require confronting and healing past wounds in order to develop a personal definition of optimal sexuality (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Shaw, 2012). The need to deliberately seek out, cultivate and prioritize sexuality has been identified as important in the literature (Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Ogden, 1999) as well as by participants in this study. Similar to the participants in Ogden's study on women who love sex, participants in this investigation saw their sexuality as an integral part of their lives and deliberately made choices that would further their journey towards optimal sexual experiences. Sex therapists have stated the importance of personal differentiation, growth, maturity and openness to sexual and non-sexual changes (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Morin, 1995; Schnarch, 1997; Shaw, 2012); participants in this study also said that personal growth and development over time had enhanced the quality of their sexual experiences.

Developmental contributors identified in this study that have not been considered to the same extent in the theoretical literature include openness to the possibility of unexpected opportunities (e.g., luck, meeting a special partner). This is, perhaps, not surprising given that such experiences are by their nature unpredictable and some cannot be deliberately sought out; sex therapists may prefer to focus on factors that are within their clients' control. However, it is important to acknowledge that some contributors to optimal sexual experiences may be uncontrollable or unpredictable as this may improve clients' understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon. Clinicians working in this area would be advised to help their clients adopt an attitude of openness and willingness to experience.

The development of a curious and receptive attitude towards unexpected possibilities may help clients to become aware of and capitalize on them.

Individual qualities overall. As with developmental contributors, there were many similarities between findings from this investigation and ideas proposed by sex therapists in the clinical literature. However, in some cases, there were distinct differences between the constructs as defined by sex therapists and the depth and complexity of the ideas that were described by participants. Sex therapists have hypothesized that optimal sexual experiences might require having a positive attitude toward sex (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Ogden, 1999), which was also emphasized by participants in this investigation. However, the depth of enthusiasm and zest communicated by participants both in the content and in the process of the interviews has not been captured in the theoretical literature. The importance of being able to centre oneself so that one may slow down and be present has appeared in the theoretical literature about optimal sexual experiences (Broder & Goldman, 2004). Several recent studies have also investigated the successful use of mindfulness techniques as an intervention for women with sexual dysfunctions (e.g., Brotto & Heiman, 2007; Brotto, Basson & Luria, 2008; Brotto, Krychman & Jacobson, 2008). However, mindfulness as it is conceptualized in the research literature, i.e., “being an impartial witness to your own experience” (Collard & Walsh, 2008) appears to be distinct from centering abilities as defined by participants, i.e., being completely immersed in their experience. The idea of having goodwill towards a partner as an intrapsychic feeling has been discussed in the couples therapy literature (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Hoyt, 2008; Wile, 2002) and was also emphasized by participants in this study.

Some individual qualities identified by participants in this investigation as important contributors to optimal sexual experiences have not received much attention in the academic

literature. “Joie de vivre” as an individual attribute is not an idea that has been touched on within the theoretical literature on optimal sexual experiences nor has it received much attention within the more general psychological research literature. This may be because developing a greater sense of optimism, zest or “joie de vivre” usually falls outside the goals of conventional psychotherapy, i.e., “to make the troubled less troubled” (Seligman, 1990, p. 96).

Individual qualities in-the-moment. Within the theoretical literature on the contributors to optimal sexual experiences, authors often fail to specify the timing of a particular factor. For example, some clinicians may emphasize communication as an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences but do not specify whether this is communication before, during or after sex. Therefore, it is difficult to be sure to what degree these ideas have been considered in the academic literature. However, there were some similarities between individual contributors that are relevant during optimal sexual experiences and ideas proposed in the literature.

Sex therapists have emphasized the importance of connection to oneself (Ogden, 1999) as well as giving oneself permission to be fully present during an optimal sexual experience (Broder & Goldman, 2004); both of these ideas were reflected in participants’ descriptions of being embodied and being engaged during optimal sexual experiences. Schnarch (2000) also stated that it was necessary for a person to be feeling good about him or herself for optimal sexual experiences to be possible in that moment. The impact of being willing to let go and be vulnerable to oneself, one’s partner and the experience was emphasized by participants in this study as well as by sex therapists (e.g., Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2010b; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Ogden, 1999; Schnarch, 1997). Giving oneself permission

to revel in pleasure (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Resnick, 1997) was also deemed an important contributor in the course of an optimal experience by our participants.

Some individual contributors in-the-moment have not been addressed within the literature. The importance of feeling enthusiastic and joyful about sex has not been raised in the research literature or in theories about optimal sexual experiences but was identified as important by participants in this study. Indeed, enthusiasm and joy are rarely connected with sex in the literature except to note when they are absent, i.e., when discussing HSDD (e.g., McCabe et al., 2010). This is a significant oversight on the part of researchers and sex therapists. Although many have emphasized the need for communication, attentiveness and sensitivity (e.g., Barbach & Levine, 1980; Castleman, 2004; Ogden, 1999), this construct as it is described in the literature differs in terms of complexity, depth and breadth when compared to participants' descriptions in this investigation. Within the academic literature, sexual communication within a romantic relationship has often been operationalized as sexual self-disclosure, which is usually defined as disclosure between partners regarding preferences for certain sexual behaviours or techniques (e.g., kissing, oral sex, intercourse) (e.g., Byers & Demmons, 1999; MacNeil & Byers, 1997). This is appreciably different from communication as described by participants in this investigation, which involved talking about expectations, desires, fantasies, likes, dislikes, boundaries, limits and more. A male participant described communication during an optimal sexual experience:

Um, I can communicate about how I'm doing. Um, talk dirty, for me, um, what I do to have great sex is frequently, um, make sure that there is verbal exchange of sorts. Um, or sometimes it's just really deep, heavy breathing, um, we're touching and connecting. Have great sex is making sure, um, that I'm enjoying myself and that partner's enjoying him or herself. Um, that there's a really strong sense of, either

verbal or non-verbal feedback and adjustment, because if I'm not able to sort of get a sense of where my partner is or sort of how they're doing with what's going on, for me that's not great sex.

Researchers on sexual communication have not recognized all the different iterations of sexual communication (i.e., as an individual quality, as a relational factor, as a contributor in-the-moment) and have not conceptualized this construct in sufficient depth.

Skills. Many of the skills that contributed to participants' optimal sexual experiences have also been identified as necessary by sex therapists. The importance of having a solid foundation of technical skills and basic knowledge of anatomy has been described within the literature (Barbach & Levine, 1980; Granvold, 2001), although, in recent years, many have de-emphasized the value of technical skills alone in creating optimal sexual experiences (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Schnarch, 1997). Knowledge of one's self and of one's partners has been identified as an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences (Shaw, 2012) and was confirmed by the results of this study. Communication skills (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Lee, 1996) have also been recognized as essential for optimal sexual experiences.

However, a few important skills identified in this investigation have not received much consideration in the academic literature or in pop culture advice. The need to tailor one's skills to the specific partner or relationship is not an idea that has received much attention in the literature. This is unfortunate because this theme may represent the most crucial omission from sex advice within the media. Participants emphasized that performing the same sexual activities in the same way with every sexual partner (e.g., oral sex) would likely preclude optimal sexual experiences. The ability to read others' verbal and nonverbal

communications and to have empathy for them so as to meet partners' needs was absolutely crucial in adapting technical skills from one partner to the next.

Relationship qualities overall. There were many similarities between the relational contributors described by participants in this investigation and previous suggestions by sex therapists. Sex therapists have hypothesized that qualities related to the atmosphere and tone of the relationship such as trust (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Ogden, 1999), respect (Kleinplatz, 1996b), intimacy (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Schnarch, 1991, 1997), playfulness and forgiveness (Metz & McCarthy, 2012) may play important roles in facilitating optimal sexual experiences; participants stated that these qualities characterized the kinds of relationship in which optimal sexual experiences were possible. Key relational attitudes and beliefs identified by participants in this investigation included compassion, consideration and mutuality (Schnarch, 1997) as well as the integration of sexuality into daily life (Metz & McCarthy, 2012). Feelings experienced within the relationship that were identified in the theoretical literature and confirmed by the results of this study include connection, acceptance, caring, love, feeling safe and positive regard (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Feuerstein, 1992; Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Ogden, 1999; Schnarch, 1991, 1997, 2000; Zilbergeld, 2004) as well as intensity, desire and chemistry (Barbach & Levine, 1980; Broder & Goldman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b; Morin, 1995; Schnarch, 1991, 1997). Interestingly, within the literature, passion has more frequently been identified as a characteristic or descriptor of optimal sexual experiences as opposed to being a contributing or facilitating factor (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Granvold, 2001; Morin, 1995; Ogden, 1999). "Behavioural intentions" identified as important in this investigation included extensive communication between partners (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004;

Kleinplatz, 1996b; Morin, 1995; Zilbergeld, 2004) and the willingness to explore and experiment together (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b; 2004). The idea that partners would continually strive to know one another better (Kleinplatz, 2005; Shaw, 2012) was an important aspect of the structure and depth of the relationship that contributed to optimal sexual experiences. Empathy has been deemed a key contributor to optimal sexual experiences by clinicians (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b; Metz & McCarthy, 2012) and also by participants in this study.

Again, some relational contributors have not been addressed in the literature and some have been defined very differently. Humour, laughter, spontaneity, joy and imagination as parts of the atmosphere of the relationship were not emphasized to the same degree by sex therapists in the literature as they were by participants in this study. Some of the feelings that participants experienced in the presence of their partners, such as merger, unselfconsciousness and freedom were rarely identified as important contributors to optimal sexual experiences within the literature, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Barbach & Levine, 1980; Schnarch, 1997). Qualities related to the structure and depth of the relationship, e.g., common values, peerness, agreement, good fit; changing, evolution, growth, fluidity and shared history have not been mentioned in the literature in connection with optimal sexual experiences. This is a troubling omission given the importance of these contributors to participants in general and to older participants in particular. For many, the experience of sharing a life together represented the scaffolding on which wonderful sexual experiences were constructed. However, qualities related to the structure of a relationship (e.g., shared values and beliefs, shared vision of life, close friendship, companionship) have often been identified as key contributors to long-lasting relationships (e.g., Bachand & Caron, 2001; Dickson, 1995; Fenell, 1993; Goodman, 1999; Kaslow & Hammerschmidt,

1992; Kaslow & Robison, 1996; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Mackey & O'Brien, 1995; Mackey, Diemer & O'Brien, 2000a, b; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Roizblatt et al., 1999; Schlesinger, 1982; Sharlin, 1996).

Relationship qualities in-the-moment. As with individual qualities in-the-moment, sex therapists rarely make temporal distinctions with respect to the contributors to optimal sexual experiences; analysis of the theoretical literature did not always clarify when a particular factor became relevant along the timeline of a sexual experience. However, in some cases, authors were clear about timing so that comparisons could be drawn between the academic literature and the findings from this investigation.

In the course of an optimal sexual experience, relaxing and focusing on sexual play and pleasure (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Metz & McCarthy, 2012) were considered important contributors to optimal sexual experiences by participants in this study. Heightened pleasure, enjoyment and satisfaction (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Morin, 1995) and eroticism (Feuerstein, 1992; Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2005; Morin, 1995; Schnarch, 1991) were also found to be key facilitators of optimal sexual experiences. Communication, feelings for one another and safety, comfort, trust and intimacy have all been identified as important contributors to optimal sexual experiences while they are happening (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2004, 2010b, 2012; Metz & McCarthy, 2012; Morin, 1995; Schnarch, 1991, 1997; Zilbergeld, 2004). Mutuality in balancing the give and take of pleasure was deemed a fundamental contributor to optimal sexual experiences by participants in this investigation as well as in the literature (Castleman, 2004; Ogden, 1999).

Some differences emerged between participants' descriptions of relational contributors-in-the-moment and the theoretical literature. Participants in this study identified

desire as an important contributor to the quality of a sexual experience; within the theoretical literature, desire is more often conceptualized as a precursor to sex rather than a factor that may enhance the quality of the experience as it is unfolding, with few exceptions (Schnarch, 1991, 1997). The importance of connection in bringing about optimal sexual experiences has been addressed within the research literature but the idea of sexual merger and being swept up together has not. In fact, the term “merger” is more used within the literature on lesbian relationships, where the occurrence of this phenomenon is considered problematic (Pardie & Herb, 1997). Other relational contributors during optimal sexual experiences that were less often described in the literature include freedom, abandon and letting go, again with certain exceptions (Ogden, 2001; Schnarch, 1991, 1997). Perhaps, this omission exists because loss of control is primarily seen in negative terms in Western culture (Steinberg, 1992). Likewise, the contribution of spontaneity and flexibility to optimal sexual experiences has largely been overlooked in the research literature. It is possible that in an effort to distance themselves from lifestyle magazines and self-help books that frequently promote spontaneity as a key to “great sex”, clinicians have overlooked these factors altogether. However, participants’ tended to define spontaneity as the freedom to explore anything that might arise in the moment of sex whereas magazines tend to operationalize spontaneity in terms of novel positions, techniques or times of day to have sex. The contributions of intensity and intentionality to optimal sexual experiences were rarely described in the literature but were identified as important by participants in this investigation. In addition, the role of consensuality in creating optimal sexual experiences was not often cited by clinicians or sex therapists, again, with certain exceptions (Zilbergeld, 1991). It may be the case that sex therapists take this as a given; however, the importance of establishing consent has been emphasized within the SM community (Brame, 2000; Califia, 2001; Miller & Devon, 1995;

Wright, 1998).

Situational, preparatory and environmental contributors. The importance of preparing for sex in terms of the physical space, one's person and the relational climate has been touched on in the research literature; however, there are some slight differences between descriptions in the literature and descriptions from participants in this investigation.

The role of the physical environment in setting the stage for optimal sexual experiences has been identified by several sex therapists (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Zilbergeld, 2004) as well as by participants in this investigation. Optimal sexual experiences may require planning, forethought, attention and effort as well as the reduction of situational distractions (Schnarch, 1997). Physical preparation, in the sense of preparing oneself for an optimal sexual experience by showering or trimming one's nails, was also found to be an important contributor to optimal sexual experiences (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Zilbergeld, 1999). However, authors in the area of optimal sexuality have rarely distinguished between the contribution of the overall atmosphere of the relationship and the importance of the emotional environment that immediately precedes a sexual encounter (i.e., interactions between partners earlier that day). However, participants in this investigation believed that the relational mood going in to a sexual encounter was important.

Individual proclivities and miscellaneous contributors. Some of the participants in this study identified unique, individual qualities that were important to their optimal sexual experiences. Although the specifics of their particular interests may not be represented within the research literature, many authors have characterized optimal sexual experiences as unique, subjective and individual phenomena (Barbach & Levine, 1980; Broder & Goldman, 2004; Castleman, 2004; Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2004, 2012; Zilbergeld, 2004). Participants

usually stated that orgasm and fantasy were either unimportant for creating optimal sexual experiences or only minimally important. In fact, some participants felt that fantasy was more likely to detract from a sexual experience than to enhance it. This de-emphasis on orgasm is in accordance with the theoretical literature on optimal sexual experiences, although it is not consistent with the literature on sexual dysfunction: Most sex therapists suggest that orgasm plays some role in the creation of optimal sexual experiences but is far less important than other factors such as intimacy, connection or being present (Barbach, 2000; Basson, 2000; Broder & Goldman, 2004; Schnarch, 2000). The idea that orgasm is neither necessary nor sufficient for creating an optimal sexual experience has also been confirmed in the research literature (e.g., Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Philippsohn & Hartmann, 2009). A few sex therapists have suggested that fantasy may contribute to optimal sexual experiences (Broder & Goldman, 2004; Granvold, 2001; Zilbergeld, 1991) but tend to focus on and emphasize other factors.

Overall, it would appear that speculations within the clinical literature regarding the contributors to optimal sexual experiences were largely correct. Some contributors to optimal sexual experiences that were identified in this investigation have not previously been addressed in the sex therapy literature (e.g., “fortuitous triggers”). In other cases, participants described important contributors (e.g., communication, empathy) in significantly different terms relative to clinicians’ descriptions. Participants’ descriptions were characterized by unexpected depth, complexity and subtlety. An intriguing finding of this investigation was the degree of interplay between individual and relational qualities, which has not been addressed in the literature and represents a serious omission given the emphasis placed on this by participants.

Research and theory about contributors to other kinds of optimal experiences.

Given the relative lack of research and theory on the nature of and contributors to optimal sexual experiences, it became necessary to consult the literature on non-sexual optimal experiences. It was thought that there might be similarities between the contributors to optimal sexual experiences and the contributors to other types of optimal experiences. In some cases, the developmental contributors, individual qualities and skills that facilitated non-sexual optimal experiences were similar to those identified in this study; however, as expected, there were many key differences, especially in terms of relational contributors.

Vallerand and his colleagues (2006) found that having an autonomous personality orientation (e.g., engaging in activities out of pleasure and/or choice) and showing high levels of activity valuation were key facilitating factors in developing a harmonious passion for an activity or sport. These findings are similar to participants' answers in this study: Seeking, choosing and practice were key developmental contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Participants also believed that valuing sex, being sex positive and seeing sex as a way to further intimacy within a relationship were important contributors to their optimal sexual experiences. However, the results from one study on the development of passion in children were less relevant. Mageau et al. (2009) found that children were more likely to develop passion for an activity if they identified with the activity, preferred to specialize in activities, had parents who valued the activity and had support for their personal autonomy from parents. No participants in this investigation said that they preferred to specialize in activities and few had received sex-positive messages from their parents while growing up.

Csikszentmihályi (1990, 1993) has described a variety of contributors to "flow" experiences; many of these are comparable to the contributors to optimal sexual experiences identified in the current investigation. He found that individuals who were able to focus their attention, ignore distractions and concentrate had a greater likelihood of experiencing flow.

Participants in this investigation felt that centering abilities were important in bringing about optimal sexual experiences. Csíkszentmihályi also found that individuals who experienced flow regularly had a strong capacity to notice and read the most subtle feedback, a feature shared with participants in this study. Finally, individuals who had experienced flow were characterized as being unafraid of losing themselves; the ability to lose oneself, on both individual and relational levels, was shown to be a key contributor to optimal sexual experiences.

However, there were some notable dissimilarities between the contributors to flow experiences and the contributors to optimal sexual experiences. Csíkszentmihályi found that individuals who had experienced flow were more able to translate personal difficulties into challenges, match their skills to challenges in their lives and set manageable goals for themselves. In this study, participants specifically stated that having a goal orientation was likely to be a barrier to optimal sexual experiences. Unfortunately, since Csíkszentmihályi has dismissed sexuality as an activity that might generate flow experiences (1990, 1997), no research has been done on experiences of flow in sex. In addition, there has been very little research on flow experiences that occur in partnerships or groups of people. The results of research by Bakker (2005) showed that the flow experiences of music teachers may crossover to their students, suggesting a potentially fruitful area for further investigation. Research by Walker (2010) has confirmed that research participants report greater enjoyment from social flow experiences compared with solitary flow experiences.

Initially, the findings from research on the contributors to flow experiences in elite athletes did not seem particularly comparable to results from this investigation. However, some similarities could be identified. Elite athletes who reported flow experiences were also more able to focus, be intensely involved in the moment and reported having had previous

experiences with flow. Relevant individual qualities that contributed to flow experiences included feeling confident, motivated, fearless, relaxed and positive (Cohn, 1991; Jackson & Roberts, 1992; Jackson, 1995; Jackson et al., 2001; Krane & Williams, 2006; Privette 1981, 1983; Privette & Landsman, 1983). These qualities were comparable to the individual qualities that contributed to optimal sexual experiences for participants in this study. However, elite athletes also emphasized the need for pre-competitive plans, avoidance of negative thinking, control of thoughts and emotions, goal setting, use of imagery and positive self-talk, contributors that were not relevant in bringing about optimal sexual experiences. A key difference between the findings from these different research areas may be the competitive, goal-directed nature of sports whereas many participants in this investigation reported that having a goal could actually *impede* optimal sexual experiences.

One of the most obvious and immediate distinctions between findings from research on non-sexual optimal experiences and the results of this study would be the identification of relationship-based contributors. Despite the fact that many athletic endeavours involve working with a partner or a team, researchers on flow, passion and peak experiences have so far failed to account for qualities of the relationships between teammates, overall or during an athletic event, that might enhance the experience. Participants in this investigation reported that most of their optimal sexual experiences occurred with at least one other person present and that relational contributors could be extremely important. In addition, researchers of these non-sexual optimal experiences seem to have a proportionately greater focus on those qualities that are relevant in the moment of the experience as opposed to the long-term developmental or individual qualities that might be relevant.

Implications

The results of this investigation have important implications for members of the

general public as well as individuals and couples seeking sex therapy and/or sex education.

These findings are also important for theory of and research on sexual experiences.

Happiness, health and well-being in the general public. Optimal sexual experiences may have significant health benefits for those who choose to pursue these. Previous research has identified strong, direct links between overall health and sexual well-being (Davey Smith, Frankel & Yarnell, 1997; Litwin, 1999; Taleporos & McCabe, 2002; Whipple, Knowles, Davis, Gianotten & Owens, 2007). Studies of the health benefits of sex suggest a number of significant positive effects, including stress relief (Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, & McBride, 2004; Hill & Preston, 1996), increased strength of the immune system (Charnetski & Brennan, 1994), improved cardiovascular functioning (Ebrahim et al., 2002), pain relief (Komisaruk & Whipple, 1995) and better sleep quality (Weeks & James, 1998). In terms of mental benefits, improved self-esteem (Weeks & James, 1998) and better mood (Burlison, Trevathan & Todd, 2007) have also been linked with sexual experiences.

Previous research has not established whether these health benefits are related to the quality of the sex, i.e., will a person accrue these health benefits if he or she does not enjoy the sex that he or she is having? However, the results of this investigation provide a much-needed roadmap allowing individuals and couples to explore their sexual potential. More specific research will be required to establish whether the quality of sexual experiences is positively correlated with the magnitude of health benefits and to determine the specific impact of optimal sexual experiences on health and well-being. The deliberate search for higher quality sexual experiences is likely to result in a greater sense of sexual well-being (if not optimal sexual experiences) and therefore better health and general well-being.

Findings from the present investigation may also help couples to build strong, happy, lasting relationships, as there is a strong connection between relationship happiness and the

quality of a couple's sexual experiences. Findings from previous investigations have demonstrated a clear link between happy, lasting marriages and sexuality within the relationship (Fields, 1983; Hinchliff & Gott, 2004; Mackey & O'Brien, 1995; Schlesinger, 1982). As previously mentioned, a variety of studies have shown a strong, positive correlation between sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. Strong and happy relationships are associated with better health and well-being for both partners (Goodman, 1999; Horwitz, White & Howell-White, 1996; Musick & Bumpass, 2007) as well as improved well-being for children within that family (Parke, 2003). An improvement in the quality of sexual experiences within a relationship may serve to strengthen the bond between partners and result in stronger, healthier families.

The results of this study show that able bodies are neither necessary nor sufficient contributors for optimal sexual experiences, which may provide reassurance and hope for older Canadians. In pop culture as well as in the academic literature, the sex lives of older adults tend to be framed in terms of sexual dysfunctions. Older individuals are frequently treated as asexual (Walz, 2002); if the sexuality of older people is considered, it is assumed that they must be experiencing one or more sexual dysfunctions (DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Laumann et al., 2005; Nicolosi et al., 2006) and therefore that they require treatment of some kind, usually in the form of medication or hormones (Shah & Montoya, 2007). Findings from this study suggest that a focus on physiological functioning and health, by sex therapists or pharmaceutical companies, is misplaced. These results also corroborate previous investigations that have found a lack of connection between sexual satisfaction and objectively-defined sexual functioning (e.g., Bancroft et al., 2003; Ferenidou et al., 2008; Frank et al., 1979; King et al., 2007; Shifren et al., 2008). Older adults who are interested in improving the quality of their sexual experiences would be encouraged to focus on

improving many of the individual and relational contributors that were associated with optimal sexual experiences. Indeed, personal growth, differentiation, maturity and self-awareness may represent significant assets in bringing about optimal sexual experiences for this group (Kleinplatz et al., 2009b).

For similar reasons, these findings also open doors for people who have been marginalized from the mainstream discourse on sexual functioning for other reasons related to physiological functioning (e.g., who suffer from chronic illnesses and/or disabilities). Although individuals who have multiple sexual partners or who practice BDSM have been characterized by some as having difficulties with intimacy, participants in this investigation who self-identified as sexual minority group members emphasized the importance of intimacy, empathy, connection, goodwill and caring. In fact, the need to step outside of and re-evaluate traditional sexual scripts was identified as a key contributor to optimal sexual experiences by participants from all groups. A striking finding of this research was the inability of research team members (i.e., those who had not conducted the telephone interviews) to distinguish between participants who identified as older individuals and those who identified as sexual minority group members, between men and women or between older and younger participants.

Sex therapy interventions. Sex therapists might want to re-evaluate some of their current interventions in light of these results. It seems likely that the difficulty in developing effective treatments for certain sexual dysfunctions such as HSDD (Kleinplatz, 2011; Schnarch, 2000) might be due to a lack of understanding of their causes. For example, the usual treatments for erectile dysfunction and vaginismus presume that there is a “correct” state for male and female genitals in order to be sexually functional (Kleinplatz, 2001a, 2004). Correction of these genital problems is theorized to remove the obstacles, thereby

allowing for successful sexual interactions (i.e., Masters & Johnson, 1970). However, many couples have tried Viagra and found that erections did not solve their sexual problems (Fagelman, Fagelman & Shabsigh, 2001; Madduri, 2001; Pryor & Redmon, 2001; Ströberg, Hedelin & Bergström, 2007).

For participants in this investigation, functioning genitals were not important contributors to optimal sexual experiences. In addition, optimal sexual experiences were not simply the result of eliminating problems and obstacles. Participants in this study focused to a far greater degree on the individual and relational qualities that need to be added or strengthened in order to bring about optimal sexual experiences rather than the factors that needed to be avoided or minimized. In many cases, optimal sexual experiences were possible for participants in spite of issues that might objectively be considered problematic.

Likewise, sex therapists have focused attention on achieving orgasm (to address anorgasmia) and the correct timing of this orgasm (to address rapid or delayed ejaculation). These types of interventions suggest that the occurrence of orgasm and the timing of said orgasm may be important for improving the quality of an individual or couple's sexual experiences. While this may be true to some degree, results from this investigation suggest that the contribution of orgasm to optimal sexual experiences is minor, at best.

Rather than focusing solely on ameliorating "dysfunctions" and removing obstacles, the results of this study suggest the need for more complex and nuanced interventions focused on clients' subjective experiences. Although optimal sexual experiences might not be possible for all clients, sex therapists could use the results of this research to help improve the quality of their sexual experiences. To do so, sex therapy will need to go far beyond genital functioning to consider an individual's developmental experiences, their individual qualities and how these are activated in the moment of an optimal experience. Therapists

might need to adopt a new definition of “skills” and consider how these might be important at the individual and relational levels. In terms of the relational context, therapists will need to consider the history of the relationship and qualities of the relationship overall as well as how these are expressed during a sexual experience. Discussion around the timing of contributors may also be important. For example, communication for the purpose of bringing about optimal sexual experiences may take many different forms depending on when it is happening in relation to a sexual encounter (i.e., days before, hours before, during or after). Therapists may find that their work is facilitated by the interactions between different contributors: For example, working to build a relationship characterized by trust and safety may catalyze greater risk-taking and authenticity for both partners.

In particular, this research would be valuable for reframing the dialogue around treatment of HSDD to focus on quality of sexual experiences rather than quantity. Historically, discussion around HSDD has centred on frequency counts when, in fact, complaints around sex may have more to do with quality. Several clinicians have suggested that low desire is a healthy response to sex that does not access or meet our deepest needs (Kleinplatz, 2001b, 2010a, 2011, 2012; Schnarch, 1991, 1997; Shaw, 2012). Despite this, the success or failure of treatments for HSDD, whether these are pharmaceutical or therapy, has been judged based on frequency of sexual experiences. Shifting the focus of treatment from pure numbers to the quality of the sex could help individuals and couples focus on the kind of sex they want and whether it fills their needs. Information on how to bring about optimal sexual experiences may answer these people’s unasked but desperate questions.

Although this was not the major focus of the study, participants in this investigation illustrated the power of resilience. Many had overcome extremely negative life events, including abuse, assault and neglect as well as severe illnesses and injuries. This finding has

important implications for the goals of sex therapy. Sex therapists should not necessarily limit their goals based on clients' past experiences. Participants in this investigation identified a variety of ways to get past negative experiences including education (formal or informal), reading and/or finding a really fantastic partner. (In fact, few participants stated that they had done any kind of psychotherapy.) An important predictor of this resilience may be participants' attitudes towards their experiences. Many described their negative life experiences as opportunities for growth, learning and change rather than as losses. Sex therapists may want to focus their treatment of survivors on clients' attitudes towards the experience and help them to develop a more positive, life-affirming narrative that includes negative events but is not dictated by them.

Sex education. The results of this study may have significant implications for the content of sex education aimed at youth and adults. At present, young people have limited sources of information regarding sexuality: Some of it is incomplete (most school-based sex education programs) and some of it is deeply flawed (e.g., Internet pornography) (Fisher & Barak, 2001). In recent years, sex education in schools, when this is offered, has focused on STIs, HIV, abstinence and contraception (Guttmacher Institute, 2012) even though many have recommended that information related to sexual pleasure be included and discussed (Greslé-Favier, 2010; Ingham, 2005; Ninomiya, 2010). Sex educators could draw on findings from this investigation to help youth develop a more expansive understanding of sex, sexuality and pleasure that goes beyond physiological and biological approaches. In particular, sex educators could help youth to develop and cultivate the kind of individual qualities (e.g., comfort with self, centering abilities) and skills (e.g., communication skills) that might be relevant later in life. Sex educators could provide an alternative to performance-based media discourses and help learners to deconstruct media messages before

negative schemas are firmly entrenched. If sex educators could help youth to determine what kind of sexual experiences they really want for themselves, young people might refuse to settle for lousy and potentially damaging sex in the present in favour of higher quality experiences at a later date.

Likewise, the results of this study could help improve the content of sex education programs targeted at adults. Although regrettably, there are few formal programs available for adults (c.f., Brick, Lunquist, Sandak & Taverner, 2009), sex education is sometimes offered as a component in other programming (e.g., programs for new parents at community centres, pre-marital counselling). In addition, there are a few organizations that offer sex education to adults (e.g., the “Our Whole Lives” program run by the Unitarian/Universalist Association, workshops put on by sex toy stores), although these might not be widely accessible. For those who desire it, the results of this study could help provide some direction as to how clients might go about improving the quality of their sexual experiences. Sex educators could help clients to understand better their deepest sexual desires and identify those contributors (e.g., individual, relational) that might need to be developed in order to realize these desires.

In particular, the findings from this investigation may provide a significant source of validation for those who do not recognize themselves or their desires within mainstream representations of “great sex”. The results of this study represent an empirically-based alternative to the media-dominated discourse on optimal sexual experiences, which far from leading to “sexual bliss” or “hot sex” is likely to result in dysfunction, dissatisfaction and unhappiness (Zilbergeld, 1999). A focus on the subjective nature of optimal sexual experiences might help take some of the pressure off of individuals who do not fit the media mold for “great sex” (i.e., young, able-bodied, heterosexual, attractive, dysfunction-free).

Theories of sexuality. The results of this study might allow sexologists to reframe and broaden discussions on the nature and quality of sexual experiences. Historically, the dialogue in this area has rarely progressed beyond the functional/dysfunctional dichotomy, with certain notable exceptions (i.e., Kleinplatz, 1996b, 2004, 2012; Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2007; Kleinplatz et al., 2009a,b; Metz & McCarthy, 2012). The elements that contribute to the subjective quality of a sexual experience have received little consideration outside of their role in “causing” sexual dysfunctions, which makes the question of what “causes” normal sexual experiences absurd. Results from this investigation reinforce the idea that sexual experiences exist along a continuum and that there may be a set of individual, relational and environmental contributors that are relevant across many different kinds of sexual experiences. These results might help pave the way to developing a better, more comprehensive understanding of the factors that account for the quality of a sexual experience.

Sex research. The results of this research help to fill the gap in sex research concerning the higher end of the spectrum of sexual experiences. Although hundreds of books and thousands of journal articles have been published on experiences of sexual dysfunction, hitherto, little attention has been paid to optimal sexual experiences, even as media sources continue to emphasize the near-universal desirability of “hot sex.” Previous studies had shed light on the nature and components of optimal sexual experiences but not on the factors underlying such experiences, which is a far more complex question. These findings confirm that optimal sexual experiences are possible but require significant time, energy and attention to developmental, individual, relational and/or environmental contributors.

It is hoped that the results of this research will encourage other researchers to take a broader and a deeper focus in designing studies on sexual experiences. The usefulness of correlational studies on university populations that involve one or two easily-operationalized factors should be re-considered. Gagnon and Simon (1973) argued for a greater attention to the social and psychological contexts in which sex occurs:

Research efforts are fragmentary and often ill-founded, influenced by fantasy and desire, and – worst of all – are pornotopic in design, seeking to analyze the sexual without reference to the social or psychological circumstances that turn sexual behavior into sexual conduct (p. 284).

In terms of breadth, researchers would be well-advised to consider the larger context in which sexual experiences are embedded (i.e., individual, relational, environmental, developmental, etc.). More research needs to be done examining the impact of these contributors to sexual experiences at all different levels, from dysfunctional to optimal. The interplay between individual and relational contributors may have significant and surprising effects on the quality of sexual experiences and should be investigated. Researchers would also be encouraged to develop more complex, nuanced understanding of the factors associated with the quality of sexual experiences. For example, sexual communication has often been operationalized on a fairly limited scale, i.e., higher versus lower self-disclosure. Research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of the different roles that constructs such as sexual communication may play at different times in relation to sexual experiences. Likewise, studies should be done on the timing of the different contributors to sexual experiences, i.e., from the distant past to the present. The results from this investigation could also be used to create more comprehensive and useful measures. Broader, deeper,

more-nuanced studies will lead to a much better understanding of sexual experiences across the spectrum.

The outcome goals of research on the effectiveness of sex therapy or pharmaceutical treatments for sexual dysfunctions could be informed by these results. At present, outcome goals seem to be defined by stand-ins for what individuals and couples really want (The Working Group for a New View of Women's Sexual Problems, 2001). The relative hardness of erections or weekly frequency counts of sexual encounters may be poor substitutes for higher quality sexual experiences. Research on the contributors to optimal sexual experiences might improve the operationalization of targets for sex therapy and other clinical trials. Researchers could include measures, focus groups and/or interviews in order to determine participants' subjective appraisals of the quality of their sexual experiences, which may provide a far better indicator of the success of an intervention.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

There has been extensive disagreement among qualitative researchers regarding the criteria that should be used to evaluate findings (Beck, 1994; Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001). Some have argued that concepts such as reliability and validity have no relevance for qualitative research (Merrick, 1999). Thomas and Magilvy (2011) have stated that the very use of the term "rigor" to refer to qualitative investigations is inappropriate because the word itself implies a degree of stiffness, rigidity and inflexibility that is antithetical to qualitative studies, which are meant to be conducted in a spirit of discovery. Others have proposed sets of criteria that parallel the standards used to evaluate quantitative research: credibility as a substitute for internal validity, transferability instead of external validity, dependability for reliability and confirmability instead of objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, this approach is controversial as there are

significant differences in the epistemology, purpose and methodology of qualitative and quantitative investigations (Ponterotto, 2005).

As a result of this disagreement, a variety of criteria specific to qualitative research have been proposed to evaluate reliability and validity. In 1999, Elliott et al. determined that approximately 40 different quality standards had been proposed by qualitative researchers (e.g., Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1989; Yardley, 2000) working in different fields (although there was significant overlap between the various criteria). This section will evaluate the degree to which this investigation fulfilled some of the most commonly-used and agreed-upon criteria for evaluating qualitative research. The strengths and limitations of this study will be considered.

Reflexivity and bracketing of expectations. In the present investigation, a variety of approaches were used at every stage of the investigation to bracket biases on the part of the researchers. Interview questions were constructed by the two interviewers, a professional psychologist and a graduate student. Both individuals may have had personal and professional biases about the phenomenon under investigation as it was hoped that including two individuals in the question-construction process may have served to counteract this. To further bracket assumptions in question-development, three sexologists reviewed the interview script prior to commencing the interviews with participants. It might have been desirable to also include individuals from outside the field of sex research in order to limit further the incursion of professional biases.

A semi-structured interview protocol was adopted in order to allow participants flexibility in answering questions and to further bracket assumptions held by the researchers. Many participants chose to add or modify questions (e.g., Interviewer: “What does it take to have great sex in the way of activities?” Participant: “Well, you know, I almost want to

throw this off to the side and tell you that, um – for example, one of my lovers, it was very important that I went swimming”). It would appear that most participants did not feel limited by the interview protocol, which suggests that this attempt at bracketing was useful and a significant strength of the investigation. Some of the participants may not have felt comfortable modifying the interview questions and expressing this discomfort to the interviewers but it is impossible to know to what degree that may have affected their responses. Some participants may have felt uncomfortable due to a perceived power differential between themselves and the researchers. However, it is also possible that some individuals felt more comfortable choosing to participate in an academic study because they could be assured that the interview and project data would be handled in a professional manner.

As previously stated, data analysis was conducted by a large multi-disciplinary team in order to assist one another in setting aside preconceptions. However, it should be noted that the team members were all psychologically-oriented and predominantly, but not solely, young adults of high education levels, which may have resulted in unconscious shared bias. It might have been preferable to have greater diversity within research team members (e.g., ethnicity, educational background, age, sex) to minimize the potential influence of shared bias. Although many team members voluntarily shared their personal reflections, both positive and negative, of reading the transcripts and doing the coding, at other times, team members may have held back during group discussions for a variety of reasons (e.g., privacy, personal discomfort). It is impossible to know how fully team members were able to bracket their personal assumptions during this research. This situation might have been improved by asking team members to keep a journal during the coding process, complete memos after reading through the interviews and write down their answers to the interview

questions (Wertz, 2005), *without* the expectation that they would share the results of these reflections with the group, which might at least have heightened team members' awareness of their own biases.

Team members were kept blind to participants' demographic information so that they might avoid making assumptions based on gender, age, sexual orientation and/or participant group. This appeared to be successful in that team members were often unable to determine the participants' sex or age and would often make incorrect inferences (e.g., referring to the participant as male when the person was actually female).

Transparency. Transparency, a construct that is related to reliability in quantitative approaches, is achieved when other researchers can see clearly how these particular results were determined (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Williams & Morrow, 2009). It does not mean that other investigators need to be in complete agreement with the researchers' interpretations of the findings nor that other researchers in the area would identify the same set of findings given the same data (Yardley, 2000). Rather, different studies might illuminate different aspects of the phenomenon rather than suggest any flaws in the original interpretation (Eisner, 2003).

In this document, I have attempted to provide a detailed description of the internal processes of the investigation so that other researchers could replicate our methodology. Descriptions of the research methodology included the purpose of and rationale for the study, participant recruitment methods, data collection methods, pre-analysis data preparation, exploration of the research findings and explicit details about the measures taken to enhance the reliability and validity of the data (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Another measure to ensure replicability would be to repeat the study with different participants or different sample groups (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). It would not be expected

that results would be identical to the original investigation (Eisner, 2003); some have even suggested that given the distinct characteristics of qualitative research, the same researcher could not repeat a study and expect to arrive at the same findings (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994). Instead, replication within qualitative approaches is focused on duplicating study procedures rather than replicating specific findings (Williams & Morrow, 2009). This has not yet been done but might yield valuable results that could enhance the current findings and add to the theoretical framework on optimal sexual experiences.

Credibility. Credibility within qualitative methods refers to the confidence that can be placed in the findings of the investigation. This is achieved through the use of rigorous techniques in the collection and analysis of data (e.g., reflexivity, transparency) (Patton, 1999). This can also be done through the evaluation of negative cases or by “member checking” (Williams & Morrow, 2009). “Member checking”, though sometimes controversial (Giorgi, 1988, 2006), involves the presentation of findings for verification by participants. Feedback was solicited from participants at the conclusion of each interview (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Published materials from this study will also be sent to participants as they become available.

The credibility of qualitative findings is also affected by the degree to which participants are discussing the phenomenon itself as opposed to their constructions of the phenomenon. Although participants in this investigation might have answered our questions to the best of their abilities, their answers might have been inaccurate or incomplete because their responses reflected their perceptions, constructions and narratives of the contributors to optimal sexual experiences. However, this is a limitation that affects most psychological research – not to mention sex research – because it is simply not possible or ethical to access

the 'raw' experience of sex research participants through either qualitative or quantitative methods.

A significant asset to the credibility of these results is the degree of convergence in participants' answers in spite of their divergent backgrounds. In this investigation, the participant groups differed considerably, i.e., self-identified members of sexual minority groups and older individuals in partnerships of 25 years or more. However, their responses demonstrated remarkable similarity. It might have been preferable to deliberately recruit a greater number of younger participants (e.g., in their twenties and thirties) within the sexual minority groups in order to set up a greater contrast. Whenever possible, we tried to interview the partners with whom individuals reported having optimal sexual experiences. It might have provided additional credibility had we been able to do this with more participants.

Participants also brought extensive experience and expertise to the interviews: Most were insightful and articulate and virtually all had had decades worth of optimal sexual experiences to discuss. Even though the self-identified sexual minority group members had not been recruited on the basis of age, most had had years if not decades of optimal sexual experiences to share. The interviews were also fairly long, ranging from 42 minutes to 110 minutes with an average length of 80 minutes.

Triangulation of findings using other methods and sources of data may help confirm research findings. Other qualitative approaches might have yielded fruitful results (with certain obvious exceptions, i.e., observation). For example, focus groups might have been a useful adjunct to individual interviews by yielding additional insights through participant interaction. However, these would have presented significant logistical problems as participants came from across North America and a few from overseas. In addition,

preserving anonymity and confidentiality in a focus group setting would be impossible and might have represented a barrier to interested participants.

Grounding. The presentation of findings in qualitative studies, and especially phenomenological investigations, should be grounded in examples from the words of the participants (Wertz, 2005; Williams & Morrow, 2009). This ensures that the interpretations made by the researchers are clear, obvious and justifiable. During data analysis, research team members engaged closely with the data, cycling between analysis and the original interview data repeatedly. As a group, when we were unsure of our interpretations or we wanted to check a tentative theme system, we did so by returning to the transcripts themselves. Efforts were made to demonstrate the subtle differences in the voices of the participants (Whittemore et al., 2001) by presenting multiple quotations from different participants related to the same idea. Grounding the findings in the data should also show the vividness of the participants' responses (Whittemore et al., 2001), which is also referred to as "thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Efforts have been made wherever possible to provide longer quotations from participants in order to clarify the context of their statements.

Future Directions

The next major study in this area will be translational research focused on the implementation of results from this investigation. Specifically, how can these contributors be operationalized for use by those who wish to develop the capacity for wonderful sexual experiences? How can individuals and couples develop the kind of qualities that will enhance the calibre of their sexual experiences? The results of this study showed that aging, disability, illness and injury do not represent fundamental barriers to optimal sexual experiences; however, the focus of this investigation was on individuals who already identified as having optimal sexual experiences. It remains to be seen whether anyone can have these types of experiences if they so desire or whether there exist fundamental barriers that were not identified in this investigation.

It would also be valuable to investigate the effects of optimal sexual experiences on the individual and the couple. Specifically, such an investigation could address the effects of optimal sexual experiences, both positive and negative, on physical health, mental health, self-esteem, body image, relationship satisfaction, relationship longevity, etc. Longitudinal research involving interviews conducted at fixed intervals might yield particularly valuable information.

Conclusion

Previous research on sexual experiences had focused almost exclusively on the contributors to dysfunctional or dissatisfying sex, creating a dichotomous understanding of sexual experiences as either “dysfunctional” or “not dysfunctional”. A vacuum existed at the upper end of the continuum of sexual experiences, which the media rushed to fill with myths and misinformation. A few clinicians had advanced theories about the contributors to optimal sexual experiences but their ideas lacked grounding in empirical research and were based on clinical work with individuals and couples who were, at least initially, dissatisfied. Researchers in the area of non-sexual optimal experiences have so far neglected to include sex as an activity that might be a context for optimal, peak or flow experiences.

The goal of this investigation was to identify any and all contributors to optimal sexual experiences. A phenomenologically-oriented content analysis was done on transcripts from interviews with 12 participants who self-identified as having had optimal sexual experiences. Analysis yielded seven major contributors to optimal sexual experiences, two pathways towards optimal sexual experiences involving these contributors and two minor contributors. Contributors to optimal sexual experiences were identified at the level of the individual, the relationship and the environment in which sex occurred. The timing and relevance of these contributors ranged along participants’ lifespans, from experiences that had occurred during their childhoods to qualities of the individuals or relationships that became relevant during sexual experiences. Contributors were linked with one another so that certain relational qualities might allow for the expression of individual contributors to optimal sexual experiences and vice versa. The complexity and depth of participants’ descriptions were particularly noteworthy and represented a major strength of this investigation.

The results of this research have significant implications for sex research, theory, education and clinical work. These findings not only make an important contribution to research about the upper end of the continuum of sexual experiences but they also make a valuable addition to the research on optimal and peak experiences more generally. The paradox of “great sex”, i.e., the fascination of the media juxtaposed with the near-complete apathy from academia, can be resolved by the addition to the literature of these empirically-based findings about the contributors to optimal sexual experiences.

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Appendix A
Recruitment Ad (Older individuals)
What is great sex?

A group of researchers in the Department of Psychology at Carleton University is interested in studying wonderful sex. In the field of sexology, we often spend too much time focusing on problematic sexuality and not enough time talking about really memorable sex. We are interested in interviewing individuals, preferably over the age of 60 who have been in long-term relationships and who have had great sex at some time in their lives. It doesn't matter if it was once, long ago or every day. We are hoping that we can contribute to the field by getting some idea of what great sex actually consists of from people who have lived it. We suspect that what is depicted in movies and magazines doesn't quite capture it. If you would like to help us in formulating a model of great sex, please contact us at

[e-mail address 1] or
[e-mail address 2] [phone number]

Appendix B
Listserv recruitment post (SM communities)
What is great sex?

We are interested in studying wonderful sex. In the field of sexology, we often spend too much time focusing on problematic sexuality and not enough time talking about really memorable sex. We are interested in interviewing individuals, particularly those who have been marginalized, who have had great sex at some time in their lives. It doesn't matter if it was once, long ago or every day. We are hoping that we can contribute to the field by getting some idea of what great sex actually consists of from people who have lived it. We suspect that what is depicted in movies and magazines doesn't quite capture it. If you would like to help us in formulating a model of great sex, please contact us at

[e-mail address 1] or
[e-mail address 2] [phone number]

pseudonym. We will then be able to match the name you provided with the audiotape or interview transcript and withdraw this data.

Anonymity/Confidentiality:

The information obtained from your participation will be kept anonymous and confidential. Your interview transcript will be assigned a code; neither the code nor the interview transcript will be attached to your name or address. Only the researchers will have access to the interview transcripts; these will be kept in a locked cabinet in a secure area. Likewise, one copy of the audiotape used to record your interview will be kept in a secure location by the researchers until the interview has been transcribed. A second, encrypted, copy of the interview will be kept in a secure location at the University of Ottawa. At the conclusion of the research, the tapes and transcripts will be destroyed. The data collected in this study will be used for research publication and/or teaching purposes.

Please make a check or “X” on this line if you agree to participate and return it to:

Dr. Peggy Kleinplatz
[address]

or return the form by e-mail to:

[e-mail address 1] or
[e-mail address 2]

Please return one copy of the completed informed consent form and keep the second for your personal records.

_____ I agree to participate in this study as it was explained to me and consent for my interview to be tape recorded. Investigators should contact me at (please provide phone number):

during the following hours: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Appendix D
Semi-Structured Interview Script for Individuals Experiencing Optimal Sexuality

Time of interview: _____
 Date: _____
 Interviewer (s): _____
 Interview Code #: _____

Review informed consent. Ask participants to assent verbally.

_____ Check off after participant assents verbally to consent.

Turn on tape recorder with consent.

Age: _____
 Sex: _____
 Sexual orientation: _____
 Relationship status: _____
 Number of years with current partner or longest relationship: _____
 Occupational status: _____
 Highest educational attainment: _____
 Disability/ability status: _____

What is great sex?

- Has your definition of great sex changed over time?

At what point in your life did sex become great?

- Have your perceptions of what it means or what it takes to have great sex changed over time?
- Did you learn how to have great sex?
 - how? why?

What proportion of your sexual experiences are great?

- How often have you had great sex?
- How do these experiences differ from other sexual experiences?

What are the elements or characteristics of great sex?

How would you recognize great sex if you stumbled into it?

What leads to great sex?

- What do you do to have great sex?

Are there special characteristics of partners with whom you have great sex?

What does it take to have great sex in terms of:

- participants

- environment
- activities
- skills
- sex acts
- individual qualities
- partner qualities
- relationship qualities

What is the role of _____ in great sex?

- orgasm
- intercourse
- fantasy

Please think back to your three best sexual experiences...

- What are the commonalities among them?
- What are the commonalities among the relationships in which these occurred?
- Did these experiences have an impact on you?
 - What was their impact on your:
 - thinking/feelings
 - body-image
 - self-image
 - image/thinking/feelings about your partner
 - expectations
 - on your relationship
- Did these experiences have an impact on your partner or partners?
 - What was their impact on your partner's or partners'?:
 - thinking/feelings
 - body-image
 - self-image
- Did these experiences affect your desire?
 - Did these experiences increase or decrease your sexual desire?
 - If so, desire for what?

Do you think great sex is:

- similar for men and women?
- similar for gay and straight people?
- similar for able-bodied and disabled individuals?
- similar for young and old people?

Do you have any other thoughts or comments?

Review and verify informed consent, reminding participants that they are free to withdraw at any time, now or at some later date. If a participant wishes to withdraw his or her data at some later point, they need only contact us and provide their pseudonym, which we will match to their audiotape or written transcript. We will then withdraw their interview data.

_____ Check off after reviewing informed consent, again, and participant assents verbally.

Thank participants. Ask about questions and concerns. Tell participants that we would be pleased to share our findings with them.

Appendix E
Debriefing Form

What are we trying to learn in this research?

The purpose of the present investigation is to develop an understanding of optimal sexuality based on the experiences of individuals who have great sex and the accounts from individuals who have reflected on the spectrum of sexuality.

Why is this important to scientists or the general public?

Until now, there has been almost no research conducted on the subject of optimal sexuality so this study will help fill a void in the psychological literature. This investigation may also provide empirical support for the theories put forward by some sex therapists. This research is important to the general public because results may provide support for healthier sexual goals than those typically espoused by popular culture.

What if I have questions later?

The following individuals are responsible for the current investigation. If you have any further questions, concerns, or comments about this research investigation, please do not hesitate to contact us. If you are interested, we would be pleased to share our findings with you.

Dr. P. Kleinplatz Investigator, School of Psychology
[phone number]

Dana Ménard Investigator, School of Psychology,
[e-mail address]

Should you have any ethical concerns about this investigation, please contact

Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research
University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall
550 Cumberland Street, Room 159
Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
(613) 562-5841
ethics@uottawa.ca

If you have any other concerns about this study, please contact

Dr. Gosselin
Director of the Psychology Department
[phone number]
[e-mail address]

Appendix F
Master list of contributors and themes

Major Contributor 1: Developmental contributors

- 1a – Letting go, overcoming, unlearning, deconstructing, relinquishing
- 1b – Seeking, choosing, pursuing, setting out on a journey, choosing, practice
- 1c – “Fortuitous triggers”: Luck, opportunity, early positive messages, events that echo, pivotal moments
- 1d – Personal development, growth, maturity, change, unfolding
- 1e – Relationship, partners, a special person
- 1f – Openness to experience, paying attention, focusing

Major Contributor 2: Individual qualities overall

- 2a – Attitudes and values toward life (“Joie de vivre”)
- 2b – Sexual enthusiast/erotophile
- 2c – Comfort with self (“Bien dans sa peau”)
- 2d – Goodwill towards the partner
- 2e – Willingness/readiness/being poised to/for experience
- 2f – Maturity
- 2g – Centering abilities
- 2h – Miscellaneous individual qualities/attributes

Major Contributor 3: Individual qualities in-the-moment

- 3a – Being embodied
- 3b – Being engaged/focused mentally
- 3c – Going beyond oneself
- 3d – Feeling good about oneself
- 3e – Being expressive, receptive, attentive and responsive with partner(s)
- 3f – Being open/opening up to oneself, one’s partner(s) and the experience/being emotionally available
- 3g – Feeling enthusiasm
- 3h – Experiencing intense pleasure, high levels of arousal and build-up
- 3i – Fantasy (minor)

Major Contributor 4: Skills

- 4a – Fundamental knowledge of techniques and anatomy
- 4b – Knowledge and skills specific to the partner(s)/relationship
- 4c – Self-awareness
- 4d – Communication skills
- 4e – Specialized technical skills

Major Contributor 5: Relationship qualities overall

- 5a – Empathy
- 5b – Atmosphere and tone of the relationship
 - i – trust, safety and security
 - ii – humour, playfulness and laughter
 - iii – spontaneity, joy and imagination

- iv –respect and consideration
- 5c –Attitudes and beliefs within the relationship
 - i – valuing and nurturing the relationships
 - ii – seeing sex as a way to further intimacy
 - iii – respect and consideration
- 5d – Feelings within the relationship
 - i – bonding, intimacy, closeness, connection and warmth
 - ii – merger, abandon, giving self over to the partner
 - iii – unselfconsciousness, ability to let go and let loose, freedom
 - iv – desire for one another, attraction, chemistry
 - v – passion and intensity
- 5e – Feelings towards the other
 - i – love, liking, caring, positive regard, acceptance, support
 - ii – respect and consideration
- 5f – Behavioural intentions between partners
 - i – mutuality, giving and receiving, meeting one another’s needs and reciprocity
 - ii – willingness to explore, experiment and learn, discovery, venturing into the unknown and taking risks
 - iii – communication, sharing and honesty
- 5g – Structure and depth of the relationship
 - i – having common values, peerness, agreement and good fit
 - ii – changing, evolution, growth, fluidity, maturing of relationship and shared relationship history
 - iii – emotional maturity of the partners, ability to tolerate own anxiety in relationship, emotional independence in relationship and self-soothing
 - iv – knowledge of partner, knowledge of partner’s body/desires/feelings/erotic wishes
 - v – depth

Major Contributor 6: Relational qualities in-the-moment

- 6a – Mutuality
- 6b – Consensuality
- 6c – Sexuality in relationship
 - i – heightened pleasure, enjoyment, satisfaction
 - ii – intentionality
 - iii – intensity, passion, desire
 - iv – eroticism
- 6d – Relationship in motion
 - i – connection and sexual merger
 - ii – being swept up together
 - iii – freedom, abandon, letting go
 - iv – spontaneity, flexibility, going with the flow
 - v – communication
 - vi – safety, comfort, trust, intimacy
 - vii – feelings for one another

Major Contributor 7: Situation, preparation and environmental contributors

7a – Physical environment

7b – Physical preparation

7c – Emotional environment

Pathway A: Relational Context that Facilitates an Individual Quality

Pathway B: Individual Quality that Facilitates a Relational Quality

Minor Contributor 8: Individual proclivities

Minor Contributor 9: Miscellaneous