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## EXPLORING FACTORS FACILITATING SEXUAL SELF-DISCLOSURE FOR WOMEN

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EXPLORING FACTORS FACILITATING SEXUAL SELF-DISCLOSURE FOR  
WOMEN

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in  
Family Sciences in the College of Agriculture, Food and  
Environment at the University of Kentucky

By

Caitlin Marie Grasson

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Nathan D. Wood, Professor of Family Sciences

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### EXPLORING FACTORS FACILITATING SEXUAL SELF-DISCLOSURE FOR WOMEN

Sexual Self-Disclosure is an important part of a relationship, however, often times, women do not feel it is appropriate to engage in. Specifically, many women do not disclose their sexual preferences, or what acts they do or do not find satisfying, with their partner. This lack of sexual self-disclosure keeps women from being able to have their own sexual needs met. This phenomenological study aimed to understand the factors that facilitate sexual self-disclosure for women in relationships. The participants (n=8) were women between the age of 24-30 who were in a committed sexual relationship for more than three months, but less than two years. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and then two major themes and seven sub-themes were identified to describe the experience of women. The results from the study suggest that women go through a journey of exploration, and then experience a positive feedback loop which maintains sexual self-disclosure in their relationship.

**KEYWORDS:** Women, Self-Disclosure, Sexuality, Relationships, Phenomenology

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Reciprocal Self-Disclosure.....	1
Characteristics of the Sender and Receiver.....	2
Gender Differences.....	2
Perceived Rewards and Costs.....	3
Women’s Sexual Response Cycle.....	4
Present Study.....	5
Research Design.....	6
Chapter 2: Method.....	6
Sample.....	6
Procedure.....	7
Data Analysis.....	9
Trustworthiness.....	10
Researcher as Instrument.....	10
Chapter 3: Results.....	12
Theme 1: Journey of Self-Exploration.....	12
Lack of Knowledge.....	13
Information Finding.....	14
Ownership.....	15
Theme 2: Positive Feedback Loop.....	16
Liberation.....	17
Sharing.....	17
Intimacy.....	18
Progress Towards Better Sex.....	19
Chapter 4: Discussion.....	20
Theme 1: Journey of Self-Exploration.....	21
Theme 2: Positive Feedback Loop.....	22
Implications.....	24
Future Direction.....	25
Conclusion.....	27
Appendices.....	28
Appendix A: Interview Schedule.....	28
Appendix B: IRB Approval.....	30
Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer.....	31
References.....	32

Vita.....39

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Basson's Non-Linear Sexual Response Cycle.....	4
Figure 3.1: Journey of Self Exploration for Women.....	13
Figure 3.2: Positive Feedback Loop.....	16

## Exploring Factors Facilitating Sexual Self Disclosure for Women

In American society, sexuality has traditionally been a taboo, or inappropriate topic for women to discuss (Montemurro, Barstavich, & Wintermute, 2015). Because of this, many women feel uncomfortable having a conversation about their sexual preferences, or what sexual acts and behaviors do or do not satisfy them (Joannides, 2006), with their partners. Furthermore, traditional gender roles have put women in a position where they are taught to be submissive and not express anything about their sexuality (Emmerink, Vanwesenbeeck, van den Eijnden, & ter Bogt, 2016; Montemurro et al., 2015; Vanwesenbeeck, 2011). The lack of conversation about women's sexuality impedes their ability to have sexual experiences where they feel in control and comfortable. However, there are women who are able to share their sexual preferences with their partners. This study aimed to reveal the factors that encourage self-disclosure of sexual preferences for women, which in turn may benefit women who feel unable to self-disclose sexual preferences.

### **Reciprocal Self-Disclosure**

According to Sprecher and Trager (2015), self-disclosure is defined as, "the process by which people reveal personal information about themselves to others and can vary depending on the degree and reciprocity" (pp. 460). It is important to highlight the reciprocal part of the definition for self-disclosure. Reciprocity means both parties are disclosing at the same level (Jourard, 1971). Studies have shown that reciprocity during self-disclosure is an important part of a strong intimate relationship (Kessler & Macleod, 1989; Pederson & Preglio, 1968). Reciprocity generates better social contact and exchanges, perceived closeness to the other person (Kaufmann, Williams, Hosking, Anderson, & Pedder, 2015; Ledbetter et al. & Ragins, 2008), and trust between both

people (Dindia, 2002). In addition, reciprocity brings more comfort to both the sender and receiver rather than one-sided communication (Cozby, 1972; Sprecher & Treger, 2015; Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe, 2013). The level of reciprocal self-disclosure between partners is often maintained over time but can change depending on the topic being discussed (Altman, 1973; Hill & Stull, 1982; Won-Doornink, 1979).

### **Characteristics of the Sender and Receiver**

Across studies on self-disclosure, there has been emphasis on the characteristics of both the sender and receiver. Responsiveness of the receiver was one characteristic shown to be an important part of the self-disclosure process. When someone was responsive, individuals perceived that as meaning they were able to be open, warm, and able to respond to another person's needs and experience (Reis & Clark, 2013; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). Researchers also found that if a receiver seemed more responsive, other positive personality traits were attributed to them such as being understanding, validating, and caring (Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008; Sprecher & Trager, 2015). Women placed a higher importance than men on the characteristics of the person to whom they are disclosing. Women wanted a sender and receiver that is discreet, trustworthy, sincere, respected, and a good listener (Petronio, Martin, & Littlefield, 1984; Sheldon, 2013). Women were also cognizant of the importance of their own role in self-disclosure. As the senders, they wanted to be able to feel comfortable and open when disclosing with another person (Petronio, et al., 1984). These characteristics of both the sender and receiver were important in building intimacy in a relationship where self-disclosure can manifest (Reis & Clark, 2013).

### **Gender Differences**

Gender and gender roles can influence the level of self-disclosure between two people Foubert and Sholley (1996). There is a sexual double standard in society that allows men to be sexually dominant, while girls are socialized to be sexually passive, submissive (Khajehei, Doherty, & Tilley, 2015; Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012), and the receiver rather than initiator of sexual encounters (Khajehei, Doherty, & Tilley, 2015). The acceptance of this double standard can lead to negative sexual effects (Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012; Vanwesenbeeck, 2014). Negative effects of the sexual double standard included women experiencing a lack of agency in expressing sexual preferences because they felt it was not their right (Emmerink, Vanwesenbeeck, van den Eijnden, & ter Bogt, 2016; Montemurro, Batrasvich, & Wintermute, 2015; Vanwesenbeeck, 2011). Women only felt like it was acceptable to talk about sex when it was focused on helping and supporting another friend (Montemurro, et al., 2015), or when they were talking about their status as virgin (Kaufmann, et al. 2015). The research on the sexual double standard highlighted the need for more research on how male partners can facilitate a relationship where women's sexual self-disclosure is accepted.

### **Perceived Rewards or Costs**

Research shows that women in America do not talk about sex or disclose information about their sexual preferences (Greene and Faulknker 2005; Muise 2011; Waskul et al. 2007), which may be due to a woman's concern regarding the costs or risks (Schalet, 2011), associated with this disclosure. Women may feel that it is not acceptable to bring up sex (Montemurro, et al., 2015) because they could be judged by their partner (Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Montemurro, et al., 2015; Tanenbaum, 2000; Tolman, 2002. In addition, women have to determine their partner's

comfort level and attitude regarding sex before disclosing with them (Kaufmann, et. al, 2015). This experience can also be described by the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Satisfaction (Lawrance & Byers, 1995). This model considers the rewards and costs associated with a sexual relationship, while also considering how equal the rewards or costs are for each partner (Byers, Demmons, & Lawrance, 1998). A sexual reward is something that brings pleasure or gratification, while a cost is something that makes an individual feel anxiety, or pain (Byers, et al., 1998). If a woman perceived that the costs are higher than the rewards, she may be much less likely to share or disclose about her sexual desires or preferences. When costs outweigh the rewards, partners are less likely to be relationally and sexually satisfied (Byers, et al., 1998). Instead of focusing on the risks associated with self-disclosure, the current research aimed to identify components that help women see the rewards of sexual self-disclosure.

### Women’s Sexual Response Cycle

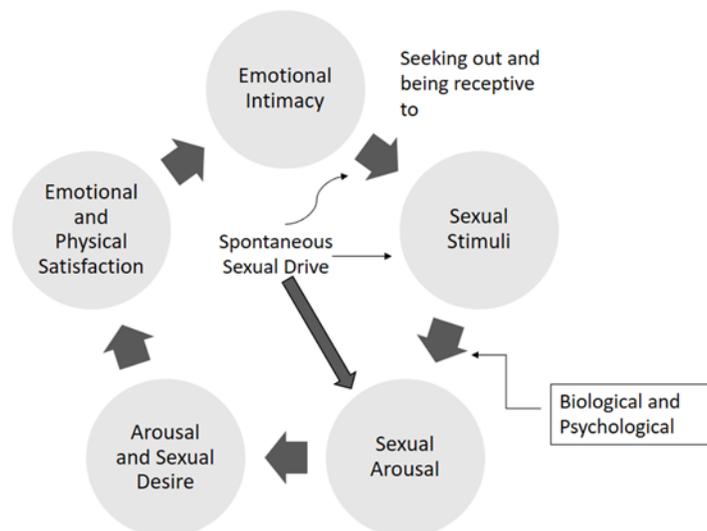


Figure 1.1: Basson’s Non-Linear Sexual Response Cycle

Basson (2001) presented a new sexual response cycle for women that illustrates how sexual interactions and emotional closeness enhance one another. The Basson Sexual Response Cycle places more emphasis on the theory that sexual experiences for women often start in a non-sexual state (Basson, 2001). For women, there is more that goes into sex than solely sexual stimuli, including emotional connection and attachment which helped develop and maintain sexual satisfaction over time (Butzer & Campbell 2008; Hayfield & Clarke 2012). Using Basson's model has led many researchers to the use of a biopsychosocial model when considering women's sexual responses (Khajehei, Doherty, & Tilley, 2015). Furthermore, Basson (2001) found that looking at women's sexual response with a focus on emotional and intimate factors increased the likelihood that women would be willing to receive additional stimuli. Engaging in more emotional closeness and bonding motivates the woman to be open to sexual interactions (Basson, 2001). The current study looked at the point in Basson's Sexual Response Cycle when a woman self-discloses with a sexual partner. The moment in which a woman is most likely to self-disclose sexual preferences is after emotional intimacy needs have been met.

### **Present Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the factors that facilitate sexual self-disclosure for women between the ages of 18 and 30. Past research, as discussed above, has been focused on the barriers that keep women from self-disclosing. By using the experiences of women who have had success in sexual self-disclosure, the researcher hopes to promote more sexual communication between women

and their partners who are not able to engage in sexual self-disclosure. For this research study, sexual self-disclosure was defined as sharing or expressing sexual preferences, or what women enjoy or do not enjoy doing during sex, to a partner. The intended audience for the findings of the current study are clinicians, women, and their partners. The goal of the study is to understand the interpersonal components that lead to women's disclosure of sexual preferences.

### **Research Design**

Using Moustakas's (1994) approach, the researcher aimed to capture the essence of sexual self-disclosure for women. For this study, the researcher proposed to build upon current research by asking this central question: What is the experience like for women who are able to self-disclose sexual preferences with their partner? In addition, sub-questions were explored such as: What contexts are women able to self-disclose with their partner? What individual factors help women in self-disclosing sexual preferences? How can partners help in making women more comfortable in self-disclosing? And finally, what components of a relationship do women need to experience before self-disclosing sexual preferences?

### **Method**

#### **Sample**

The participants were women in satisfied relationships between the ages of 24 and 30 years who were currently in a sexually active and in a committed relationship with a male for more than three months, but less than two years, which was determined by the participant describing their relationship as one where they were currently having sex with a monogamous partner, who were able to self-disclose sexual preferences to their male partner. The relationship length criteria was used to provide insight into the experience of

women in relationships before passionate love developed into companionate love, which usually occurs around three years into a committed relationship. The eight women in the study had an average age of 28 and an average relationship length of around one year, or twelve months. The majority of the participants identified as White, but there was one participant who identified as Chinese.

A brief description and pseudonym for each participant follows: Allyn is a 30 year-old researcher who holds a PhD, Marsia is a 28 year-old licensed marriage and family therapist with a PhD, Meg is a 24 year-old master's degree recipient who lives in the Southwest, Rebecca is a 24 year-old current graduate student, Bethany is a 29 year-old researcher interested in sexual health, Lauren is a 29 year old who works in child development, Lila is a 30 year old boutique store owner, and Libby is a 28 year-old Extension agent.

## **Procedure**

After receiving IRB approval (see appendix B) participants were recruited by posting fliers in campus buildings on the University of Kentucky's campus and by online social media posts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The fliers and social media posts described the purpose of the study as well as listed the researchers email address, and a Google Voice phone number (see appendix C).

Participants contacted the researcher through email after seeing flier or social media post and then were sent a follow-up email reiterating the inclusion criteria.

Participants who identified as women, between the ages of 18 and 30, who were in a committed sexual relationship for more than three months, but less than two years were emailed by the researcher to set up an interview time and read the informed consent.

After an interview time was set, seven participants completed interviews over a video conferencing application (Zoom) that ensured privacy and one in a face-to-face interview at a location that was chosen by the participant. Zoom interviews were audio only and were used for interviews because it allowed access to participants who were not able to meet physically in person because of space or time limitations (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). The in-person interview participant was given an informed consent to sign before the interview took place. Participants who chose to interview via videoconference received an informed consent via e-mail. A semi-structured interviewing process was used, which allowed for additional questions as needed (Creswell, 2013). Interviews began by participants being asked a general question about sexual self-disclosure then increased in detail as the interview progressed.

During the interview, notes were made if anything that needed more clarification arose. The videoconferencing interviews were recorded via voice recorder on the application and a voice recorder was used for the in-person interview so that transcription could be done afterwards. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. All interviewing and transcribing was done by the primary researcher. The informed consent for the face-to-face interview participant was stored in a locked filing cabinet in the faculty advisor's office. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. The interview transcriptions were kept on a password-protected and encrypted laptop. Each participant received a \$50 Amazon gift card for participating. After the researcher transcribed all the interviews, the each participant was sent the transcription of the interview and themes that emerged for member checking so that each participant could verify that their experience was captured accurately (Creswell, 2013).

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis phenomenological approach described by Moustakas (1994). Bracketing was used to describe and recognize their own experience with sexual self-disclosure as a clinician and a partner in a relationship so that they are aware of prejudices and biases (Creswell, 2013). After interviewing, the audio recordings and memo notes were transcribed. During the interview process, similar responses and experiences from each participant were identified. Saturation was determined when no new information emerged that added to the understanding of the themes (Creswell, 2013). In one Zoom interview, only half of the interview was recorded, so the researcher only used that portion of the interview during the development of themes. Transcriptions and notes were reviewed, and the researcher began to conceptualize codes that emerged from the data. Then, the process of horizontalization began and significant statements were highlighted (Moustakas, 1994), which led to a conceptualization and development of “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, pp. 96, 2013) and theme categories. These theme categories were used to create a textural description (Creswell, 2013) which described the experience of women when they self-disclose sexual preferences with a partner. A structural description was then developed to further understand the contexts in which women self-disclose their sexual preferences with a partner. From both the structural and textural descriptions, the “essence” (Creswell, 2013) of sexual self-disclosure for women in relationships was described by using thick, rich description. Another important step that was used during data analysis was the process of the researcher writing about their own experiences with the phenomenon, as

described by Moustakas (1994), which is discussed in the researcher as instrument section below.

### **Trustworthiness**

Creswell and Miller (2000) described eight ways to ensure trustworthiness for a research study. The first trustworthiness strategy was the process of bracketing, which was used to set the experiences of the researcher aside from the participants. Second, the interview transcripts and themes were sent to each participant as a way to member check with the participants to ensure their culture, story and experience was correctly understood and to clear up any ambiguity that arose during the interview process (Creswell, 2013). Third, triangulation was used, where a thesis committee member familiar with family studies and relationships, reviewed and shared their perspective on the themes that were found, which further clarified and helped the researcher refine the themes. Finally, the researcher clarified their experiences, assumptions, and prejudices that influenced the interpretation of the results or themes that emerged throughout the study (Creswell, 2013).

### **Researcher as Instrument**

Because of my experience as a therapist and as a woman in a long-term committed relationship, I have experienced my own struggles with sexual self-disclosure. Throughout the process of interviewing, I was constantly aware of how my own experiences aligned closely with many of the women I interviewed. This awareness helped me put my experiences to the side and helped me become more curious about the interviewee's experience. In addition, I had to constantly set aside my own expectations and assumptions about each individual woman that was interviewed so that I could "best"

understand the experiences of women (Moustakas, 1994). Without setting aside my assumptions and experiences, there would have been a lack of credible description of the experiences of the eight women.

In addition, during my time as an intern therapist, I worked with many couples and individuals who were uncomfortable having any conversation at all about their sexuality or any sexual experience. Many times, I have seen males be open with me and their partner about their sexual needs, while women have felt embarrassed or uncomfortable with the topic. In my experience as a couple's therapist it is seemingly uncommon to have women who are able to tell their partner what sexual preferences they hold.

I realize that my experience as a white, heterosexual woman in a Family Sciences graduate program has shaped how I view my own comfort level with sexual self-disclosure and how I perceive my client's experience. As a clinician, I believe that having conversations and sharing sexual needs is an important and necessary part of a healthy relationship. I also believe that both partners need to be accepting of the other's comfort level when talking about sexuality.

I also I think it is valuable for me to consider how my own sexual self-disclosure has changed throughout my relationships. It allowed me to connect with women regarding gender and society's view on our sexuality, and connect with the couple on how difficult it can be for both parties when one person does not feel comfortable enough to be open and honest in their self-disclosure.

However, it can also keep me from seeing other aspects of gender, culture, sexual orientation, education level, or relationship status that influence an individual's sexual

self-disclosure that may be different from my own experience. I also believe that because I have learned how important communication is in a relationship, I have made it a priority in my own. In my experience, I have been able to talk with my partner about how my sexual preferences have changed throughout our time together. From my own relationship and experience as a clinician, I have a unique perspective on sexual self-disclosure with couples that was be beneficial for this study.

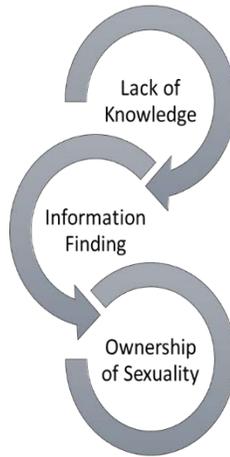
## **Results**

Participants were asked to talk about their experience in self-disclosing their sexual preferences with their male partner. In addition, the eight women were also asked about components of the relationship and partner that help in fostering that sexual self-disclosure. Another important part of the interview was understanding the way in which women were taught about their own sexuality by society and how it impacted their sexual self-disclosure. This section gives an in-depth look into the two major themes and subsequent subthemes that emerged as the women talked about their experience in sexual self-disclosure. The two major themes were (1) the journey of self-exploration that lead to a greater ownership of their sexuality (see Figure 2) and (2) how a sexual positive feedback loop played out in their current relationship (see Figure 3).

### **The Journey of Self-Exploration**

The journey of self-exploration involved going through a time where there was lack of information about what sex is and what it would be like. Through that lack of knowledge, each woman went on a journey of finding out what sex could be for them, or what they did not want it to be. This was done through their own information finding, which involved both sexual experiences with past partners and through resources such as

podcasts, informational websites, and research literature. All of these experiences led the women into gaining a sense of ownership over their sexuality and their sexual preferences.



*Figure 3.1. Journey of Exploration for Women*

**Lack of knowledge.** There was a common thread shared by participants wherein the experience of obtaining inaccurate sexual health information from caregivers or educational institutions was shared. Throughout the interviews, each woman described either a lack of information about sex from parents, or being taught strictly abstinence only sexual education. Marsia, a doctoral student described an experience she had during eighth grade, “I was attending a Catholic middle school and so there was no information about sexuality, sexual health, reproduction. It...literally the message I received was that God loves you, and you should wait until marriage to have sex.” [Marsia, 28 years old] And then, when she received birth control, her mother simply stated, “You know you still need to use condoms, even with Mirena.” Marsia added, “and that was the extent of the sexual education my parents provided me.” This theme continued across each of the women. Bethany [29 years-old] remarked that her parents “vehemently avoided” talking about sex and that she was “operating with no message, or ‘no, don’t do it.’” until her

teens. Further, Meg [24 years-old] remembers feeling as if all of sex was “shameful” or “bad” which led to her to thinking that “talking about it was not okay either.” From this lack of knowledge, the participants found themselves looking to other resources to understand what sex was.

**Information finding.** Participants described searching for and looking to new sources of information after receiving insufficient sexual information. Because they did not have information about what sex was or what sex could entail, many women found themselves looking towards other resources to gain knowledge. Some used visual resources such as pornography, while others turned towards research, podcasts, or informational websites, and some participated a mix of all these things.

However, some women did say that resources such as pornography did not provide them with an accurate description of sex, but it did provide more information than they had previously received. Pornography made some women feel as though sex was a performance, or a job. Lauren [29 years old] spoke about the effect that pornography had on her, “I sought out my understanding through pornographic means, which we all do, we are just bombarded with sexual imagery, but we are also told not to be sexual, so it makes us really curious.” Continuing she said that pornography “told me that my body was ugly and that it could only be one certain type of way and there were certain types of sounds and it gave me this idea of sex that was very much like performative for women, like it’s your job to do this, it’s your job to do that.” Marsia stated, “From things like porn and just what you see in movies and what you read in Cosmo, all of these sources that are not full of accurate information. So, I think that you know, I saw porn probably for this first time...probably early to mid-high school. I think

that was a lot of my early sexual education, honestly.” However, Libby [28 years-old] found that watching pornography in a college course on sexuality helped her feel more comfortable with herself and her sexuality, while Allyn listened to podcasts and read educational materials which helped her understand her needs and sexual preferences.

The participants also found that negative experiences with past sexual partners helped them gain more understanding of what sex was supposed to be, or not supposed to be. Some women felt that in past relationships, they were made to feel as though sex was not for their pleasure, but for their partner. Two women described feeling like sex was supposed to be painful or aggressive, and the lack of knowledge they had kept them from talking to their partner about their discomfort.

**Ownership.** All of their experiences with sexual health education resources, sex positive podcasts, pornography, and past sexual partners culminated and helped them have a shift in their mindset about their sexuality. Specifically, they described a sense of accepting one’s own sexuality and sexual preferences as a woman and feeling a lack of shame or guilt. During the interviews, all eight of the women touched on this subtheme, which is described by Allyn,

“I think, thinking of the body not with shame, but thinking of it just like kind of mysterious.” Adding on, “It’s also feeling...being able to own up more to how I’m feeling. If I’m feeling like I don’t want to do this thing, I could just say “I don’t like it.” And I don’t need to justify it, or feel bad...” [Allyn, 30 years-old]

Lauren had a similar experience and explained that she began to have more of a sense of “higher self-worth and self-esteem” after being with a partner who was sexually aggressive with her and realizing that the relationship was not what she wanted sex to be.

Bethany shared that she became physically more “in touch” with her body, which helped her feel a sense of comfort with her sexuality. This process of having shedding shame and guilt and a gaining an understanding of oneself, allowed each of the women to self-disclose their sexual preferences in their relationship with their current partners.

### **Positive Feedback Loop**

After working through their understanding of their own sexuality and what they want in a sexual relationship, the participants talked about how that process had given them power and control, or liberation, when they entered into these current relationships. This sense of power, control, and identity helped them feel closer with their partner which increased their intimacy. Because of all those things, they are able to disclose sexual preferences and work towards having better sexual experiences with their partner. Throughout the process of creating themes, it became clear that each of these subthemes were closely related and intertwined with one another and created a type of positive feedback loop for the women and their partners.



*Figure 3.2: Positive Feedback Loop*

**Liberation.** Participants described feeling agency, or a sense of power and control over their sexuality, in their relationship with their current sexual partner. When asked about what it was like to have agency in the relationship, Lila [30 years-old] summed it up as, “I guess I would probably say...just take charge. You know, just do what I want to do. Because ultimately, I wanna feel good, it’s kind of being selfish, but like it’s kind of like that’s what the other person is going to enjoy, if you’re enjoying yourself.” Marsia also captured this experience, “For me, feeling as if I have power and control sexually...I think that feels really liberating, like it can, like I decide what we do and I can decide what I’m comfortable with. In some ways, taking back that power and control that is assumed.” This translated into the women also discussing how they initiate conversations about sexual preferences because they feel in control and secure in the relationship. The participants also explained that being able to know themselves, their bodies, and what they prefer when it comes to sex, helped them feel more open to self-disclosing with their partner.

**Sharing.** When the woman talked about the couple being open with one another, developing their own language, and both sharing their sexual preferences. An interesting finding that was consistent across each interview was that each couple had their own language for talking about sex. Lauren and her partner both follow an erotic artist on Instagram which helps them start conversations about preferences they have, while Libby and her partner physically touch each other to let them both know what they want. Each woman described how the unique language they developed has increased their sexual self-disclosure with their partner.

Another important part of this subtheme is the sharing of sexual experiences preferences by the male partner. Lila, when talking about her partner sharing his sexual preferences said,

“this person has been kind of really open and that made me feel extremely comfortable, but yeah, I just think that when someone’s open about things that are taboo, you know, especially when you don’t really know the person, you feel like you’re a little more connected to that person.... So, having that person be honest is, you know, it makes you feel comfortable, it turns you on, I feel like.”

When the male partner was able to talk about their own preferences or past sexual experiences, the women said that it made them want to disclose even more. Some women talked about how when their partner shares with them, which in turn, shows them that their partner is vulnerable and honest, which increases the intimacy between them.

**Intimacy.** This was described as the different layers of emotional connection between the participants and their partners above and beyond just sexual preferences. The participants emphasized that being able to connect intellectually, emotionally, and physically made them want to disclose their sexual preferences with their partners. “I think because we understand each other on different levels that has helped to be able to share physically, our desires, and I think those other parts of the relationship have allowed us to learn to communicate about other things that are sometimes difficult to share” [Rebecca, 24 years-old]. Participants also said that knowing their partner accepted all parts of them, both sexual and non-sexual, made them feel more secure and comfortable. These feelings of comfort and security in all parts of the relationship made it so the women felt intimacy and then were able to self-disclose. The participants also

talked about how their partner makes them feel valued and important in all parts of the relationship which leads to more self-disclosure from the women. Meg [24 years-old] explained, “I think that all the different types of...the emotional intimacy feeds into that type of disclosure and then the sex is really good and that makes me want to talk about it more. So, I think that it all balances and builds.”

**Progress towards better sex.** Participants also talked about how important it was for there to be constant and consistent effort put in by both partners to have better sex. For example, Meg stated that she and her partner have a “debrief” session after sex where they share what they did or did not like and what they want to try in the future. She said that this has become a routine, which has made it easier for the both of them to share their sexual preferences. For some women, their partner checks in during sex and ask how they can make it better for their partner in the moment. Women described the experience of having their partner ask about what they want as being an emotional experience, because they did not have that experience with past male partners and it helps them recognize that they are cared for and that their partner wants them to be part of the sexual experience. Lauren described being with a male partner who was interested in what she preferred, “When we’re engaged in like intimate moments, like nothing is assumed. So, we’re constantly communicating in those moments, which I thought would be the least sexy thing in the world like, [he asks] “Can I do this? Is this okay?” But now it’s just kind of part of our language.”

The process of self-exploration shows how the women moved through a lack of knowledge, to gaining more knowledge through both experiences and resources, then began to develop their sense of ownership over their own sexuality. Then, because of all

those culminating experiences, the women were able to develop an understanding of themselves and what they want. While they did not explicitly call their experiences a “process,” it was important for the women to go through these steps, or experiences, so that they could be able to share their sexual preferences with their partner.

Once the women were able to grow individually, they were then able to enter a relationship that maintained that sense of ownership. In these current relationships, the women are able to feel emotionally and physically intimate with a partner who supports and accepts them and their identity. These individual and relational components help the women feel more comfortable disclosing with their partner, who also disclose with them. This constant disclosure of both partners combined with the emotional components of the relationship maintains and continues the cycle of self-disclosure for the women. In addition, the women describe that when they are able to have all these moments of self-disclosure and connection, the sex is better. When the sex is better, the women want to continue the cycle.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand how women are able to self-disclose sexual preferences with a male partner. To understand what this experience was like for women, the research focused on both relational and individual factors that help women disclose with their partner. Throughout the interviews, it was revealed that all the components are all closely linked together and form a continuous feedback loop for each couple. While it is difficult to tease out every part of an individual or relationship that could have an impact on sexual self-disclosure, it is important to contextualize the two

processes and subthemes that came out from the data in this study with previous scholarship.

### **Theme One: The Journey of Self-Exploration**

This theme involved the subthemes of lack of knowledge, information finding, and subsequent taking ownership over the participant's own sexuality. The women discussed that they were made to feel "bad" or "shameful" about their sexuality and in some earlier relationships. This is consistent with Emmerink, Vanwesenbeeck, van den Eijnden, & ter Bogt (2016) and Montemurro (2015) which discussed the socialization of women's sexual communication. Allyn, Meg, Lauren, and Marsia felt that they could not express their own preferences with their previous partners, which aligns with the findings of previous research from Vanwesenbeeck (2011) which found there was a sexual double standard in sexual development and discussion of women's sexuality, in which women are made to feel as though it is not their right to talk about their sexual desires.

Participants in this study also talked about how as they aged, they began to understand themselves and their sexuality, specifically their sexual preferences, more fully. The women that were interviewed in this study identified with more "feminist" beliefs because they were more assertive in communicating sexual desires to their partners (Fitz & Zucker, 2014). This is in contrast to women who adopt more traditional ideals of female sexuality are less likely to tell their partners their sexual partners (Curtin, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2011).

The women also talked about how they gained their own sexual knowledge. Techniques women have used to gain sexual knowledge have included magazines or internet blogs (Edwards, 2016). Allyn, Bethany, and Marsia all stated that they found

information from magazines or internet/social media resources. While these are considered an “informal” version of sexual education, many women turn towards these resources instead of parents or educators (Edwards, 2016). The use of pornography to learn more about sex, which was described by all the women, is similar to the findings of Hare, Gahagan, Jackson, and Steenbeek (2015) in which young adults used pornography to fill in the “gaps” (pp. 271) that their sexual health classes left. Lila stated that pornography, in the context of a course on human sexuality, made her more comfortable with her own sexuality. Women in the research done by Hare, et al. (2015) also found that individuals watched pornography because they had not previously learned about sexual pleasure, and porn was a way to find out the different ways one can have sex (Hare, et al., 2015; Kontula, 2008). However, Marsia and Meg both suggested that learning about sex through pornography made them feel as though sex was performative and not something they could enjoy for themselves. Women in Hare et al. (2015) also reflected that pornography was not the best way to explore one’s sexuality because of the negative impact.

### **Theme Two: Positive Feedback Loop**

This theme included elements of a relationship dynamic wherein subthemes of liberation, intimacy, sharing, and progress towards better sex occurred. Women identified as being able to feel control and power in the relationship both sexually and relationally. This power and control also helped the women gain a sense of safety within the relationship.

The women identified characteristics of their partner that made it so that they felt comfortable self-disclosing their sexual preferences. Openness (Reis & Clark, 2013; Reis,

Clark, & Holmes, 2004), acceptance, understanding and caring (Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008; Sprecher & Treger, 2015), patience, and honesty (Petronio, Martin, & Littlefield, 1984; Sheldon, 2013) were all mentioned by the women and have been shown in previous research that each of these characteristics is important for a woman when she is self-disclosing to a partner. Relational components that helped the women self-disclose included both partner's sharing their sexual preferences and checking in on one another, while also feeling safe/secure, comfortable, and vulnerable. These components were important factors that helped the women maintain and continue sexual self-disclosure with their partner.

Specifically, when the men would share their sexual preferences or experiences with the women, and vice versa, the women felt that this increased their feelings of trust (Dindia, 2002) and intimacy. This reciprocal self-disclosure and has been found to be an important part of building intimacy in a relationship (Kessler & Macleod, 1989; Pederson & Preglio, 1968). In addition, reciprocal self-disclosure helps individual feels more comfort with one another communication (Cozby, 1972; Sprecher & Treger, 2015; Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe, 2013, which was mentioned by many of the women in the study.

The researcher was particularly interested to see if Basson's Female Sexual Response Cycle would fit with the experiences of the women. The relational components of Basson's Model are emotional intimacy and emotional and physical satisfaction which are described as increasing the intimacy and closeness for women (Basson, 2001) making it possible for them to self-disclose sexual preferences with their partner. These same components of the cycle were reflected in the women's interviews, such as when women

talked about how conversations about sexual preferences increased their closeness with their partner. Basson (2001) found that engaging in more emotional closeness and bonding motivates the woman to be open to sexual interactions. This proved to be true for the eight women, because the more they engaged in emotional closeness and sharing, the more they described wanting to engage in not only sexual self-disclosure, but also sexual acts. In the same way that Basson's model presents a circular cycle of sexual intimacy, the women in this study described a similar loop/cycle.

### **Implications**

The researcher became interested in this topic because of their experience as a couple's therapist. Assessments or programs that focus in on sexual self-disclosure could be beneficial for couples. Clinical intake could begin with asking both the male and female what their experience has been like if/when they self-disclose sexual desires or preferences with their partner. The clinician could get an idea of the patterns the partners may follow and get an idea of the feedback loop of the couple. In addition, the clinician can ask the couple the history of the sexual education (what type of education they received, where they learned about what sex is, past sexual partner experiences, etc). Further, therapists/clinicians could engage in more psychoeducation programs in which they share information about what women need in the relationship and how important it is to hear and understand their early sexual experiences. Couple's may also benefit from using the findings from this and similar research in addition to using Basson's (2001) Female Sexual Response Cycle.

Interventions that could be used with couples that are looking to have better sexual self-disclosure is to have them do a "debrief" with one another, like Meg does

with her partner. The couple could have a time set aside where they tell each other things they have enjoyed or not enjoyed previously, and things they are interested in trying. Another intervention that may help women would involve engaging in activities that help her feel emotionally close to her partner. The more activities where the woman feels close and intimate with her partner in a non-sexual way may increase the chances that she will be more open to talking about sexual desires or preferences. Couples could also engage in a form of sensate focus, where they learn about themselves and their partner's bodies, first without the pressure of engaging in any sexual act. This intervention is good for couples who want to engage in sexual self-disclosure because each partner must listen and make sure they are not doing anything that makes their partner uncomfortable. In addition, this activity gives each person an opportunity to be in control, but also learn more about their partner.

Clinicians could benefit from more bracketing when they are working with couples on sexual topics. If the clinician is not comfortable with sexual topics, or aware of their own biases, it may hinder the self-disclosure of the couple. This could be done through unconscious bias training with other mental health clinicians. Clinicians should also constantly talk with a supervisor or co-workers who challenge their beliefs and help the clinician think and talk through their potential negative assumptions or biases.

### **Future Directions**

A majority of the women did describe being both more assertive while engaging in sex and also being the initiator of conversation about sex, which contradicts research on women's passivity in the bedroom (Khajehei, Doherty, & Tilley, 2015). Because the inclusionary criteria specified women who were able to self-disclose about sexual

preferences with the partner, this is not an unexpected finding. Nevertheless, it is important to understand how these women were able to move from feeling shameful and passive about their sexuality, to being able to feel confident about themselves and feel a sense of ownership of their sexuality. In the future, expanding the sample that was used in this study could provide further insight into the experiences of women. Expanding the sample could include women who are in same-sex relationships, those from a variety of cultures, or include both partners in the interview. If the sample included women in same-sex relationships, there would be more insight into how similar or different women are compared to one another and their sexuality. Including both partners in the interview may show how both partners are constantly influencing one another in both the emotional and sexual parts of the relationship. Further, it would be beneficial to doing this study with women who are in cultures where sexuality is even more risky than it is for American women. One woman identified as Chinese and talked about how sex felt like a job and a duty rather than for her own pleasure. Interviewing a sample of Chinese women would reveal whether they have a similar experience of sexual relationships.

It would be interesting to look at older women to see if they experience the same processes throughout their lives. The themes found in this current study may not hold true for women who are older than 30. In addition, further research on the topic of sexual self-disclosure should be done with men to see how they experience sexual-self disclosure as well. Future research should continue to focus on phenomenological qualitative studies. The information, description, and understanding one receives when doing this type of research is important to understanding the lived experience of individuals and their sexual, physical, and emotional relationships with partners.

## **Conclusion**

The present study showed the importance of emotional connection in the early stages of a committed relationship. This research also showed the implications that women's sexual health education has on their view of themselves individually and within the context of a sexual relationship. The eight women in this study were an example of how Basson's Sexual Response Cycle played out into their relationship in a similar positive feedback loop and how their journey to getting to a place of ownership over their sexuality comes from their own experiences, but is also supported by their male partner. Overall, this research provided more understanding of the experiences of adult women in the early stages of a sexually committed relationship with a male partner.

## Appendix A

### Interview Schedule

I want to understand how you are able to share sexual preferences with you partner. I do not need details of the sexual acts in which you and your partner participate. It is an important part of this type of research to ensure that I am accurately capturing your experience. Is there an email address you would feel comfortable with me using to send you the themes that were identified from all the interviews I conducted?

1. Tell me what your experience has been like when you disclose your sexual preferences with your current partner.
2. Describe for me how you have been able to share your sexual preferences with your partner.
  - i. What has made it easier for you? Explain how what you just described makes it easier.
3. What has your partner done that has contributed to your self-disclosure?
  - i. Are there any characteristics of your partner that helped you disclose your sexual preferences? If so, what are they?
  - ii. Does your partner also share their own sexual preferences? How has that influenced your disclosure with them?
4. What parts of your relationship make it so that you can share with your sexual partner?
  - i. How do you think emotional connectedness with your partner influences your self-disclosure?

- ii. Do you think that feeling an element of safety in the relationship helps you share? How does that influence your self-disclosure with your partner about sexual preferences?
- 5. How has the way you were taught about your sexuality affected your ability to share with your partner?
  - ii. How would you describe yourself and your ability to share with your partner?
  - jj. Describe the agency you have in the relationship and how it has helped in communicating about sexual preferences with your partner.
  - iii. How does the acceptance of your sexual preferences influence your ability to share?
- 6. Is there anything that you want me to know that I did not ask?

## Appendix B



Office of Research Integrity  
IRB, RDRC

Change to inclusion/exclusion criteria, change in subject recruitment, updates to Form B and Form C.

Modification Review	Approval Ends January 23, 2019	IRB Number 17-0800-P4S
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TO: Caitlin Grasson

FROM: Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: Approval of Modification Request for Protocol 17-0800-P4S

DATE: March 9, 2018

On March 9, 2018, the Institutional Review Board approved your request for modifications in your protocol entitled:

*Factors Facilitating Sexual Self-Disclosure for Women in Committed Relationships*

If your modification request necessitated a change in your approved informed consent/assent form(s), attached is the new IRB approved consent/assent form(s) to be used when enrolling subjects. [Note, subjects can only be enrolled using informed consent/assent forms which have a valid "IRB Approval" stamp, unless waiver from this requirement was granted by the IRB.

Note that at Continuation Review, you will be asked to submit a brief summary of any modifications approved by the IRB since initial review or the last continuation review, which may impact subject safety or welfare. Please take this approved modification into consideration when preparing your summary.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research" from the Office of Research Integrity's Guidance and Policy Documents web page [<http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/human/guidance.htm#PIresp>]. Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through ORI's web site [<http://www.research.uky.edu/ori>]. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at (859) 257-9428.

seeblue.

315 Kinkead Hall | Lexington, KY 40506-0057 | P: 859-257-9428 | F: 859-257-8995 | [www.research.uky.edu/ori/](http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/)

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## Appendix C

# Can You Talk to Your Partner About Sex?!

Researchers at the University of Kentucky's Department of Family Science are conducting a research study to learn from women who have been able to talk to their partner about sexual preferences.



Individuals may participate if they:

- Identify as female
- Are between 18 and 30 years of age
- Have been in a committed sexual relationship with a male for more than 3 months, but no more than 2 years
- Have 1 ½ hours of time to give

Participants will:

- Be interviewed about how they are able to talk to their partner about sexual preferences.
  - Participants will not have to disclose their specific sexual preferences to the researcher
- Receive a \$50 gift card to Amazon for participating.

To set up an interview time, contact:

Caitlin Grasson, B.S.  
Principal Investigator  
Family Sciences Department  
(502) 513-4619  
Email: [cmgr249@gmail.com](mailto:cmgr249@gmail.com)



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