

SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS

—Preliminary Results of an Exploratory Survey—

This paper describes a survey designed to investigate the connections between sexuality and spirituality in the lived experience of women and men, connections that have been compromised and marginalized through history. The paper focuses on the importance of these connections in the relationships of women respondents and suggests that documenting these connections may help generate more inclusive research regarding both sexual and spiritual experience. Data from male respondents are included to acknowledge the significance of male partnership in the relational attitudes of many of the female respondents and also to indicate that spiritual values in sexual relationships were not solely the concerns of the female respondents (and hence open to marginalization), but of the male respondents as well.

The overall goal of this paper is to illustrate the realms of spiritual and relational potentials within the experience of women's sexuality. Specifically, this paper aims 1) to review the literature on sexuality and spirituality in support of the argument that acknowledging connections between sexuality and spirituality is important to the understanding of women's sexual relationships, 2) to explore the importance of these connections in the relationships of women respondents through an overview of seven preliminary survey results, 3) to propose a method for assessing the spiritual dimensions of sexual relationship based on these results, and 4) to promote the possibility of secondary in-depth analysis by future researchers by providing initial descriptive statistics of the survey results.

Background

Mainstream Western belief systems routinely separate the concepts of sexuality and spirituality. This separation is part of a dualistic frame of reference traced back to pre-5th century BCE by historians and anthropologists (e.g., Riane Eisler, 1987; Marija Gimbutas, 1989). Consequently, in North America today, medicine, religion, law, politics, and the media all conceptualize sexuality as primarily concerned with physical performance, and spirituality as primarily concerned with moral and religious values. Such definitions have sanctified the systemic religious and political control of women's sexual behavior; results range from compulsory procreation to outlawed abortions. They have also fueled the current medicalization of sex as epitomized

by the Viagra boom that began in the late 1990s (media launch date: March 28, 1998). Moreover, dualistic definitions leave out much of what is most important to women's sexual experience, such as its meanings, along with spiritual and relational issues such as love, commitment, and intimacy that contemporary clinical evidence shows are crucial to women's sexual satisfaction (Judith Daniluk, 1998; Gina Ogden, 1994, 1998a, 1999, 2000; Leonore Tiefer, 1991).

Since the late 1970s, feminist scholars have argued for a reconceptualized frame of reference that would unite physical sexuality with its spiritual roots. These scholars include theologians and practitioners of both traditional and earth-based religions such as Margo Adler (1986), Bernadette Brooten (1996), Mary Daly (1978), Carol Christ (1987), Lucy Goodison (1990), Carter Heyward (1989), Mary Hunt (2000), and Charlene Spretnak (1982); physicians such as Christiane Northrup (1995); psychotherapists such as Judith Jordan (1987); holistic healers such as Jeanne Achterberg (1991), Barbara Brennan (1987), and Rosalyn Bruyere (1994); sexologists and writers on sexual politics such as Evelyn Accad (1991), Rebecca Alpert (1997), Emily Culpepper (1997), Oliva Espin (1997), Sheila Kitzinger (1983), and Miranda Shaw (1994); cultural historians such as Riane Eisler (1995), Paula Giddings (1984), and Marija Gimbutas (1989); and free thinkers and poets such as Natalie Angier (1999), Judith Grahn (1984), Audre Lorde (1978), and Starhawk (1989).

This paper will draw on the work of these and other scholars and will present a new form of evidence to affirm their thinking: survey data from thousands of respondents who reported that spirituality was an integral part of their sexual experience.

The socioscientific discourse on sexuality and spirituality

The predominant socioscientific discourse on sexuality defines sex primarily as penis-vagina intercourse and secondarily as genital stimulation. Major sex surveys (e.g., Alfred Kinsey, et al., 1948, 1953; Edward Laumann, et al., 1994) along with medical sexologists (e.g., Laura Berman and Jennifer Berman, 2001; Helen Singer Kaplan, 1974; William Masters and Virginia Johnson, 1966, 1970; Susan Rako, 1996) define optimal sexual function as requiring a goal of physiological orgasm. Feminist sexologists point out that by emphasizing sexual performance, this discourse can produce false-positive diagnoses of sexual dysfunction (Judith Daniluk, 1998; Peggy Kleinplatz, 2001; Naomi

McCormick, 1994; Gina Ogden, 1999; Leonore Tiefer, et al., 2000). Moreover, this discourse supports a culturally created model of male sexual dominance that engenders domestic violence along with child and adult sexual abuse (Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, 1981; Riane Eisler, 1987, 1995; Wendy Maltz, 1988). Further, by focusing on sex defined primarily as penis-vagina intercourse, this discourse separates issues of sexual relationship from other life issues and marginalizes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals (Judith Daniluk, 1998; Patricia Jung, et al., 2001; Linda Savage, 1999). Since penis-vagina intercourse is a major avenue for the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, it may be argued that this socioscientific discourse on sexuality has also become a public health issue as well as an issue for sexuality education, clinical treatment, and ethical debate. Finally, this discourse limits scientific research on sexual experience by limiting the research questions to be explored (Peggy Kleinplatz, 2001; Gina Ogden, 1999; Leonore Tiefer, 1995). The synergies among the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of sexual experience remain unaddressed in the literature on sexually related measures (see Clive Davis and William Yarber, 1998).

The socioreligious discourse on sexuality and spirituality

There is an emerging literature on religion and sexuality. This literature can be somewhat misleading as it tends to equate the notion of religious experience (often culturally and communally defined) with the notion of spiritual experience (often personally defined). For instance, the religious literature on sexuality typically describes an “embodied spirituality” that includes the ability to transcend ordinary experiential boundaries into realms usually attributed to “religious ecstasy.” For the most part, these works center on the consciousness of God in relationship to consciousness of the self (Jeanne Becher, 1990; Carl Jung, 1959; Paul Tillich, 1954; Phyllis Tribble, 1978; Elizabeth Puttick, 1997).

The interfaces of religion, spirituality, and sexuality were initially defined by men such as Paul Tillich (1954) and Carl Jung (1959), followed more recently by James Nelson (1978), George Feuerstein (1989), and Thomas Moore (1998). These interfaces are now being increasingly defined by women (e.g., Jalaja Bonheim, 1997; Rita Brock, 1988; Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker, 2002; Riane Eisler, 1995). There are emerging feminist theologies that connect the body with personal power and self-determination (e.g., Carter Heyward, 1989; Mary Hunt, 2000; Joan Timmerman, 1992) and with

social justice (e.g., Rita Brock, 1988; Patricia Jung, et al., 2001; Kathleen Sands, 2000). The literature on transcendent and transformative sexuality includes the mystical erotic “raptures” of St. Teresa of Avila (c. 1575) along with contemporary works on ecstatic sexuality and Tantric practices (Rebecca Alpert, 1997; Margo Anand, 1989; Jalaja Bonheim, 1997; Zsuzanna Budapest, 1989; Audre Lorde, 1978; Miranda Shaw, 1994, 1997; Marianna Torgovnick, 1997). Insights on the connections among religion, sexuality, and spirituality are often based on the sexual energy and ritual implicit in Goddess worship (Marija Gimbutas, 1989; Linda Savage, 1999; Miranda Shaw, 1994, 1997). Riane Eisler’s 1995 book, *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body* was the first anthropological and cultural history of sexuality and spirituality. The study that is the subject of this paper is the first to investigate sexuality and spirituality using survey results from respondents from across North America.

Creating a Survey on Sexuality and Spirituality

My experience over 25 years as sexuality therapist, educator, and researcher has been at variance with the widespread view that sexuality and spirituality are inherently separate from one another. Most of the women who have talked with me have expressed the importance of the non-physical aspects of their sexual experience along with the physical aspects such as intercourse and orgasm. That is, whether they were describing positive or negative sexual experience, they were vitally concerned with how sex felt and what it meant in their lives and their relationships. Conversely, I found the separation of spiritual and sexual experience to be a major source of the sexual problems and dysfunctions for which many of these women had sought help. These problems included inhibited sexual desire, orgasmic difficulties, genital pain, and vaginismus (involuntary vaginal spasms). They also included cultural conditioning, lack of information, relationship discrepancies and problems, abuse, addictive behaviors, and pleasure anxiety—a condition described by psychia-

orgasm to the exclusion of the larger issues of the emotional feelings and spiritual meanings connected to trist Wilhelm Reich (1942) as a generalized fear of feeling good.

Coincidentally, I observed that sex surveys themselves had contributed to a generally narrow concept of sexual normality, by focusing on genital stimulation and sexual experience. Julia Eriksen’s 1999 *Kiss and Tell: Surveying Sex in the Twentieth Century* outlines a century of