

# The Lives and Voices of Highly Sexual Women

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*American women who experience very strong and frequent sexual desire have often been either ignored or stigmatized. This exploratory study of 44 highly sexual women ages 20 to 82, which used a convenience sample and a semistructured in-depth interview method, allowed participants to describe their lives and how their sexuality has affected them. Highly sexual women reported that their lives have been strongly affected by their sexuality. First, the participants' internally sensed demand for sexual excitement and satisfaction is too intense to be ignored. For some it was a major organizing principle of their time and energy. Second, their lives are lived in a society that often defines highly sexual women in pejorative ways. Women reported experiencing struggles and challenges in almost every area of their lives because of their sexuality, including feelings about themselves and their relationships with partners, female friends, and acquaintances.*

Girls' and women's erotic needs and feelings, their desire for pleasure—their joy in their own sexuality—is largely an unwritten story. (Heyn, 1992, p. 1)

Women in American society often experience their sexuality as problematic as well as potentially joyful. As noted by the editor of a book of women's erotica,

I think of some of the demeaning names commonly used—piece of ass, slut, ball breaker—and realize that women's sexuality has been labeled like this primarily because of its magnitude. There has been a shadow cast over that part of our beings, as if our sex dwelt in the cave-sucking underneath, relating to darkness and to death, the devouring dark side of nature. (Chester, 1988, p. 3)

The literature on women and sexuality has a marked gap. Highly sexual women, if they appear at all, are often censured and stigmatized (Califia, 1994; Tisdale, 1994; Queen, 1997). Highly sexual women appear only in passing in the work of most professional sexologists and are present but uncelebrated in many feminist writings. Many have called for further research on women's sexuality (Lowndes-Sevely, 1987; McCormick, 1994) and new ways of understanding authentic female desire (Dimen, 1986; Ogden, 1994). A detailed analysis of the sexological and feminist literature in reference to this issue can be found elsewhere (Blumberg, 2000).

This exploratory study describes the lives of women who have strong and frequent sexual desire and documents how their sexuality has affected them. It presents data, in part, in the voices of the women themselves in

keeping with the feminist critique of traditional scientific methodology (Daniluk, 1993; Tiefer, 1991). The questions addressed in this research are the following: What is the experience of being a woman with a high degree of sexual desire in contemporary American society; how do women who experience themselves as highly sexual beings live their lives; and how has being highly sexual affected these women's significant relationships?

The experience of growing up as highly sexual in a society that does not recognize their existence has had a large impact on almost every aspect of the lives and personal growth of the study participants. It has especially affected not only their primary partner relationships but also their relationships with others around them, particularly women. In this group, three changes over time were common. First, women's internal self-definitions and self-acceptance underwent positive changes. Second, women's growing self-acceptance and commensurate behavior often resulted in both positive and negative changes in their interpersonal relationships. Third, participants often became more exploratory and adventurous in their sexual experiences.

## METHOD

This paper reports an exploratory study of 44 highly sexual women using a convenience sample. Data was collected in two ways. First, participants filled out a demographic questionnaire prior to the interview date; the questionnaire also asked some open-ended questions. Second, I used a 60-question semistructured interview guide to conduct face-to-face interviews that lasted from 2 to 3 hours. Questions in the guide asked participants, for example, what being highly sexual meant to them and how they experienced it in their daily lives; whether and how it had affected their relationships with partners, family, and other women; what the most rewarding and the most troublesome aspects of being highly sexual were; how their sexuality and views of their sexuality had been impacted by their social environment including family of origin, peers,

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religious leaders, and the medical profession; what they saw as their actual and ideal frequencies of sexual activity with and without a partner; and so on. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data analysis used a simplified version of the grounded theory approach.

### *Definition of Highly Sexual*

Using two standard deviations above the statistical norm as a cutoff point, data from Byers and Heinlein (1989), House, Faulk, and Kubovchik (1990), and Stuart, Hammond, and Pett (1987) suggest using a sexual activity frequency of six to seven acts per week as the lower limit of the definition. Women's desired frequency in these studies might actually have been somewhat higher, especially if all sexual outlets were included, but this number was considered high enough to represent a group of women who were considerably above the North American norm.

Two definitions delineated the study group: one based on numerical frequency data and the second on the intensity and importance of sexuality in the woman's life. Because the factors that affect the experience and expression of sexuality are varied, I considered it crucial to present this multiple definition to possible participants. Women thus had the opportunity to identify with either (or both) of these conceptualizations. I used the term *highly sexual* to refer to women who fell into either or both of the following categories:

1. You typically desire sexual stimulation, usually to the point of orgasm, with yourself or a partner, six to seven times per week or more and act upon that desire whenever possible.
2. You think of yourself as a highly sexual woman, sex is often on your mind, and it is an aspect of yourself that strongly and frequently affects your behavior, life choices, and quality of life satisfaction.

### *Participants*

The study employed several methods to locate respondents. First, I mailed a letter to professional acquaintances and friends to ask their help in identifying potential participants. Second, I sent a letter of invitation to women who had already indicated a willingness to consider participating in the study. This group of women consisted primarily of graduate students or other women who had attended seminars or professional meetings at which I discussed my upcoming research project. I did not directly solicit participation at these meetings. Women typically approached me in private, gave me their addresses, and asked to be sent more information.

The letters to associates and potential participants each indicated that to qualify for participation, women must be able to identify with either of the study's two definitions of sexuality. This mailing also provided information on the goals of the study and the lack of previous research on the topic, along with a consent form. The mailing to professional associates ultimately produced no respondents. Of the 44 women who participated, 27 responded (either

directly or through friends) to the mailing to women who had previously expressed an interest.

Finally, I placed an advertisement in the Detroit-area alternative newspaper, *Metro Times*. This ad briefly discussed the research project, gave the assurance that a third party was available to certify the validity of the research, and provided an address and phone number to call for further information. Women who responded to the ad received the standard mailing for potential participants. The ad produced 17 of the 44 participants, either directly through response to the ad or through networking.

I conducted participant interviews in a variety of locations that were chosen to be comfortable for participants so as to minimize self-image management as a confounding variable in the data. Locations included the respondents' homes or offices, my office or the clinical offices of therapist friends, and study rooms in libraries. Whenever possible I avoided an artificial laboratory-like environment because as Hales (1985) suggested, many interlocking factors make laboratories likely to produce extremely inaccurate results. I assured respondents that lack of prior research in this area meant that no answer could be correct or incorrect, and reminded them that the study goal was to accurately describe women's experiences and not to evaluate them.

## RESULTS

Sixty-four women identified themselves as highly sexual and completed all or part of the initial study process. Forty-four women completed the interview. Twenty could not be interviewed for reasons of geography, difficulty in arranging a satisfactory interviewing time and place, or a change in their willingness to participate.

American culture has often either ignored the existence of or stigmatized women who have very strong and frequent sexual desires. Care must therefore be taken in interpreting the data, which, being drawn from exploratory research using a convenience sample, cannot be generalized to all highly sexual women. However, through its use of an in-depth interview process, the research design does permit a close look at how the women interviewed thought and felt about some significant issues.

The demographics of the participants were varied. The women's ages ranged from 20 to 82, and they had diverse educational and professional backgrounds, with careers ranging from janitor to corporate CEO. There was little ethnic diversity in the sample, however, with 41 White, 1 African-American, and 2 Latina participants. Twenty-five percent ( $n = 11$ ) of the participants were married at the time of their interviews, and 48% ( $n = 21$ ) were divorced or separated. Of the remaining participants, 8 (18%) were single, 3 (7%) were widowed, and 1 was engaged (see Table 1).

Each woman was asked to describe both her actual frequency of and preference for sexual activity, specifying discrete sexual episodes, not orgasms. Some participants felt the need to clarify their numerical answers with the qualifier *long*, meaning an episode of more than 2 or 3

**Table 1. Participant Demographics**

P#	Age	Race	Education	Occupation	Income range	Marital status	Religious preference
1	35	White	M.A.	Therapist	0-25	Single	None
2	49	White	J.D.	Attorney	100+	Divorced	Jewish
3	21	Latina	H.S.	College student	0-25	Single	Catholic
4	42	White	M.A.	College lecturer	0-25	Separated	None
5	50	White	A.S.-RN	Nurse	0-25	Married	Protestant
6	69	White	B.A.	Biologist	50-75	Married	Protestant
7	41	White	A.A.	TV Producer	0-25	Divorced	Christian
8	31	White	M.A.	Therapist	25-50	Divorced	None
9	24	White	H.S.	Graphic designer	0-25	Single	None
10	47	White	M.A.	Real estate agent	25-50	Widowed	Protestant
11	26	White	A.A.	Erotic store mgr.	0-25	Married	None
12	51	White	M.A.	Therapist	25-50	Single	Pagan
13	38	White	A.S.-RN	Nurse	25-50	Divorced	Catholic
14	51	White	B.S.N.	Nurse	25-50	Divorced	None
15	24	White	B.A.	Writer	0-25	Engaged	Catholic
16	36	White	A.A.	Erotic masseuse	50-75	Widowed	None
17	33	Black	A.A.	Clerk	0-25	Single	Pagan
18	82	White	A.A.	Author	75-100	Widowed	None
19	25	White	B.A.	Sex ed teacher	0-25	Married	None
20	37	White	A.S.	Admin. Assistant	25-50	Divorced	None
21	33	White	A.A.	Business owner	0-25	Separated	None
22	20	White	A.A.	College student	0-25	Single	Protestant
23	44	White	M.A.	College admin.	0-25	Divorced	Catholic
24	34	White	B.A.	Banker	50-75	Divorced	Christian
25	27	White	M.A.	Financial analyst	50-75	Married	Catholic
26	31	White	M.A.	Author	0-25	Married	None
27	31	White	A.A.	Market researcher	25-50	Married	None
28	48	White	A.S.	Corporate CEO	100+	Divorced	Christian
29	36	White	GED	I.T. consultant	50-75	Married	Christian
30	37	White	A.S.	Loan analyst	25-50	Divorced	Christian
31	42	White	B.A.	College admin.	25-50	Divorced	Catholic
32	25	White	A.A.	Journalist	25-50	Divorced	None
33	33	White	A.A.	Office manager	25-50	Divorced	Catholic
34	25	White	B.A.	Retail sales	25-50	Single	Catholic
35	41	White	M.A.	Engineer	50-75	Married	Atheist
36	40	White	M.A.	Medical masseuse	25-50	Divorced	Pagan
37	43	White	A.S.	Office manager	50-75	Separated	None
38	23	White	A.A.	Restaurant mgr	25-50	Single	None
39	45	White	H.S.	Janitorial	25-50	Divorced	None
40	25	White	H.S.	Janitorial	0-25	Separated	None
41	47	White	B.S.N.	Nurse	25-50	Divorced	Protestant
42	35	White	H.S.	Daycare worker	0-25	Married	Christian
43	34	Latina	A.S.	I.T. consultant	0-25	Married	Christian
44	37	White	H.S.	Loan processor	0-25	Divorced	Christian

Note. P# = participant number. Income range given in thousands of dollars per year.

hours. Preferred weekly frequency ranged from 3+ to 70 (see Table 2).

Highly sexual women reported that their lives have been enormously affected by, if not almost completely organized around, their sexuality. Two major aspects of living life as a highly sexual woman emerged. First, for these women the internally sensed demand for sexual excitement and satisfaction was too strong to be ignored. This demand affected the daily lives of all participants, and for some was a major organizing principle of their time and energy. Second, women in this study struggled with living in a society that defines them in pejorative ways and that has mores and belief systems that do not correspond to their own behaviors. Participants reported that because of

their sexuality, they experienced challenges in almost every area of their lives, including their feelings about themselves, their relationships with partners, and their relationships with female friends and acquaintances.

### ***The Power That Cannot Be Ignored: Daily Life and Psychological Functioning***

The significance of the sexuality of these women and its influence on their daily lives cannot be overstated. Participants almost unanimously asserted that being highly sexual was a central fact in their lives in both positive and negative ways. Thirty-five of the 44 women believed that being highly sexual had positively affected their personality growth and development in some way, and 12

**Table 2. Participant Typical, Current, and Preferred Frequency of Weekly Sexual Episodes**

P#	Typical			Current			Preferred
	Masturbation	W/ primary	W/ secondary	Masturbation	W/ primary	W/ secondary	
1	3-4	3	0	7	0	0	7
2	0	14	0	7	0	0	14
3	2	4	0-4	2	4	0-1	6
4	7	7 L	0-1	7	0	0-1	14
5	4-7	1	0-1	4-7	1	0-1	14-21
6	4-7	1	0	4-7	0	0-1	7
7	21-70	0-2	0	35-70	1	0-1	28-49
8	3-4	0-4	0	3-4	3	0	7+
9	0	7-14	0-1	0	.5	0-1	7-14
10	1-2	3-4	0-2	1-7	5 L	.05-1	14-21
11	7-14+	2-4	0-1	7-14+	2	0-1	7-14
12	0-1	1-3 L	0-2	0	3 L	0-1	3 L
13	2	1	0	1-4	.5-1	0-1	7 L
14	7-21	0-4	0-2	7	8-12	0	21-23
15	5-6	4-5	0-3	5-6	4-5	0	9-11
16	14	10	up to 20	14	10	up to 20	28+
17	0	5-7	0-2	0	7	0-1	7
18	0-1	3+	0		(not currently active)		3+
19	14-21	1-3	0-2	15-20	2-3	0-1	23+
20	0-7	21-48	0-1	1+	10-15 L	0-1	21-28
21	10-15	2-4	2-3 L	0-7	21	0-1	15-25
22	7-14	14+	0-7	7	7+	1-3	21-28+
23	7+	3-6	0-4	12	6	0-8	33+
24	6	7	0-1	7+	Up to 10-15	0	20
25	1-2	5-6	0-2	1-2	Up to 14-21	0-1	7-10
26	7-21	7-14	0-1	7-21	4-5	0-7 cyber	11-26
27	4-6	4-6	0-3	0	28-46	2-3	21-28
28	3-4	1	0	7-14	0	0	7+
29	7-14	10+ per day	42-70 group	0	< 1/ year avg.	0	30-50+
30	7-14	5-6	1	1-2	8-9	0-1	14+
31	2-3	7-8	0-3	2-3	7-8	0-3	14
32	0	1	0-3	0	3	0	3-7
33	0-14	0-14	0-3	0-7	14-25	0-1	25+
34	6-7	4	0-7	7+	0	0-7 cyber	14
35	4-6	1-4	7 prtncs avg .5+	4-6	1-4	7 prtncs avg .5+	10-12
36	0-3	7-14+	0	0-3	2-3	0	7-10
37	70-105	1L	0-2	21-28	1L	0-2	63-70
38	0-2	7-21	0-2	0-2	2-3	0	7-14
39	0-7	3	0-4L	0-7	3	0-4L	35-42L
40	7	11-25	0	7	4+L	0-2	34-40
41	0-28	1-2	0	7-21	3-6L	0-1	14-21
42	7-14	14	0	21-35	1-3	0-7	23-35
43	0	0	18-24	7-14	2-3	14-28 cyber	21-35
44	14-28	7-14	0	21-28	2-6L	0-1	28-49

*Note.* *Episode* is defined as a discrete sexual interaction from beginning to end with self or partner regardless of number of orgasms or time spent during interaction. *Typical* is a category referring to a common pattern of past sexual activity, sometimes with a previous partner, sometimes with current partner. Masturbation while on the phone with a partner, usually referred to as "phone sex," was included as masturbation if with a primary partner, as was cyber sex. Both were included as sex with a secondary partner when so specified by the participant. *Cyber* sex refers to masturbating while online on the Internet with a partner. L = lengthy, meaning participant specified episodes lasting hours at a time. P# = participant number.

women found it impossible to imagine their personalities apart from the fact of being highly sexual. For these 12 women, their sexuality was at the core of their being.

For all participants, being highly sexual was ongoing, could not be ignored, and had affected relationships, activities, and life choices. Women reported that their sexuality was a major focus of time and energy, and had, for many of them, shaped their lives. They reported that because their sexuality was a central factor in their lives that had often produced struggles internally and externally, they had to work consciously to integrate the power of this

force with their sense of self. They reported learning to make conscious choices about who they were and how they would live life. Many of them reported that the introspection and personal growth required to cope successfully with the intensity of their sexual desire had ultimately produced a self-confidence and sense of individuality that then generalized to other areas of their lives.

The following sections examine the centrality of sexuality to the lives of highly sexual women from two related perspectives. First, I discuss the internal conflicts experienced by participants about their sexuality with a focus on

(a) the content of the conflicts and (b) the participants' reports that their feelings of being conflicted have changed and diminished over time. Second, I address the effect of participants' sexuality on their personalities and overall personal growth and development.

*The experience of internal conflict in highly sexual women.* Women reported that being highly sexual had had many positive effects on their lives. For most of them it had also created emotional and practical challenges throughout their lives. Many reported frequently experiencing a disjuncture between what they sensed and desired and what society seemed to accept and reinforce, and reported that they had often struggled with this sense of difference. Some came to terms with these issues quickly and some reported that they still struggled or had only recently resolved them. This process was simple and painless for very few participants, and the struggle was absent for only one.

Some measure of the significance of sexuality for these women and the internal conflict it has generated for them can be observed in the following description by a participant of her life. She reported feeling for years that her sexuality was an affliction, a chronic problem like insulin-dependent diabetes, that required regular coping strategies. (Interviewer's comments are bracketed and in italics.)

It gives me a kind of strength that I wouldn't have because it's something that I have to deal with all the time . . . that can be channeled positively or negatively. . . . Although I had flashes of this thought, but just recently with the last 5 years, I'm starting to view it as a . . . positively healthy thing. Before I thought it was, it was kind of like having a, a strange condition. . . . It was almost like having to deal with . . . a chronic illness. [*So you perceived yourself as sick?*] Not really sick, but . . . almost like with a negative affliction. . . . Like a handicap. I have a relative who has non-functioning kidneys who has to be on dialysis in the evenings. She's not abnormal . . . she just has this condition. That kind of perception. It has to be dealt with. . . . It's always there. (#30)

The content of the internal conflicts can be broken down into two main categories. First, participants related a painful struggle to accept who they were and the shape of their lives at a very basic level, saying things like "I grew up knowing that what I felt and what I wanted to do was wrong" (#5); "If I do this am I a pig or a slut or tainted forever?" (#14); and "A belief that you're evil, and bad, and dirty around something that's natural" (#36).

A second group reported internal conflicts involving particular kinds of behaviors required to find sexual satisfaction. This was not so much self-hatred as thoughts like "Why can't I be satisfied like everyone else with one partner?" (#35); and "This isn't ladylike, I don't want to let this loose" (#10).

Twenty-five of the 44 participants had experienced major internal conflicts, in some cases continuing for many years, over whether they were "weird," "evil," "a soulless freak," a "slut," or "dirty." They struggled to reconcile the social value system that they could see in the media, in their friends' and families' attitudes, and in their partners' comments with doing what seemed consistent with their internal sense of who they were and how they

could meet their own sexual needs.

[No matter what I did] I was a slut . . . . Something very negative, very unworthy of any kind of respect. I was married twice and things that I would want from either husband, if there was any kind of negative reaction to it, I would never ask for it again. Because it's rejection. [*So what would you want that would be rejected?*] Anal sex or oral sex. They would flat out reject me and I'd never ask again. I always thought it was what was wrong with me. (#13)

The women with major internal conflicts often described experiencing their sexual desire as a driving force that just could not be ignored. They reported that they often acted or wanted to act in ways that violated their sense of appropriateness, or that the reactions of those around them caused major conflicts.

When I first went to a therapist, my therapist asked, "What do you always do on a weekend?" At the time, I was alone, I wasn't dating anybody, I had no serious relationship, just came out of a divorce that was very controlling and very abusive. So I told him, "I go to the bar on a Friday night and I go there with a purpose . . . to get laid." It didn't matter who it was and if I ever see him again, no, it didn't matter. Everybody always said I was looking for a relationship. And if a relationship came out of it, fine, if it didn't, oh well. That was when they labeled me addicted to sex. Shocked me, I mean, I am not! I like it, but I'm not addicted to it. I'd probably be miserable, but I could go without it. But I would want it. We got into the masturbation thing. "Do you masturbate?" And I'd tell him, "Yeah, daily." . . . [*And how did you feel when he said that?*] I was very embarrassed. I knew I liked to talk about sex and I knew I was open about sex, but I never realized that it was a bad thing. The way he was talking, it was awful for me to be doing this. . . . Do I feel that way now? No. That's my life. I can function. I can go out and go grocery shopping without thinking about it. I can still function. I can still raise my children. (#33)

There were 12 women with internal conflicts involving the issue of finding sexual satisfaction and how this affected their relationship behavior.

Finally, 7 of the participants reported experiencing no or relatively minor internal conflicts. Said one participant, "I feel blessed by it" (#27). In general, these women had parents who were at least sex-neutral if not sex-positive. They had often found one or more other highly sexual women as teenagers or as college students who could validate their internally sensed normality of doing what felt right to them despite social mores.

*The resolution of internal conflicts.* In some cases the painfully intense conflicts continued for a long time. Almost all participants, however, reported that they had gradually resolved their conflicts and become relatively comfortable with themselves. For some the resolution had only partially taken place, particularly for the younger women. The resolution of these conflicts seems to have involved at least two general mechanisms.

For some this was a gradual reasoning process during which the participants thought through the issues for themselves, regardless of the responses of society or those around them.

A lot of it had to do with self-acceptance. I had considered it like an affliction and an irritant. It was something that I had to deal

with that I didn't want to deal with, like my family member's dialysis. As in, "People with normal sexuality don't have to deal with this kind of thing. Why do I have to? This is unfair." It was as if I wanted not to have to really acknowledge it at all. But it was something that was so strong that it could not be ignored. I spent a lot of time trying to ignore it and it caused me to channel it negatively. . . . [*How did the conflict get resolved?*] Well, a combination of seeing that it wasn't going away. As I got older it got more defined, so obviously it was something that was always going to be there, it wasn't something that I could suppress, and there was a kind of self-acknowledgment. (#30)

For others, their barriers and conflicts appeared to have been worn down by the incessant clamor of their sexuality.

There was a long, long time where I tried to repress it because I had been made to feel that it was wrong to have these feelings and participate in these activities. It was as if I was trying to repress something that was almost impossible to repress. It was just always there. Always. Starting from when I was 5 or 6 years old, as I said . . . . Because that's when I started to masturbate. And I always felt that it was wrong. Because my mother would discover me and she would just go ballistic . . . . So I grew up feeling that what I felt and what I wanted to do was not right. It's taken a long time to dismiss other people's attitudes. (#5)

Many women still struggled with these issues, a fact that may be related to several factors including age and relationship status. Younger women had simply had less time to learn to cope with or reason their way through the issues that were generating internal conflicts. Since the chief generator of internal conflicts was the sexual behavior of participants as they attempted to meet their sexual needs, the current presence of a steady relationship in which all sexual needs were met seemed for younger women to be related to a lessening of internal conflicts.

*Personality growth and development.* Every woman in the study believed that her sexuality was a significant aspect of who she is, and that her sexuality has significantly affected her life and life choices. Despite the powerful effect of sexuality on their lives, however, participants were hardly unanimous in perceiving that their sexuality had had an impact on their innermost sense of self. Women's beliefs about the effects of their sexuality on their personalities fell into three main categories.

Fifteen women perceived the effect on their personality of their being highly sexual as relatively minor, although only one said it was unimportant.

Another 17 women believed their sexuality was, to varying degrees, a significant element of who they now see themselves to be. These women reported having generalized from their sexual selves to other aspects of their social interactions and felt they had gained by applying their skills and personal awareness to other areas of life.

I think confidence stands out above everything else. I don't know if one is the cause of the other. I don't know if I'm very confident and aggressive in other things in my personal life, at work and things, because I'm highly sexual or I'm highly sexual as the consequence of the other things in my personality. I also mean being uninhibited about the way you are . . . not defining your personality through some religious or social blueprint of how you should be. In that

sense you get to be more fully yourself because you're not so . . . bogged down with inhibition. . . . I think I'm generally very happy and I'm optimistic and I think fairly highly of myself and I think that comes from letting myself be uninhibited and acting on those things when appropriate, and building confidence in my decisions and in my intelligence and in my attractiveness. (#25)

For the final 12 women, their sense of themselves as highly sexual beings was so important that they could not separate out that part of themselves. They reported that being highly sexual was the essence of their personality. As one participant noted, "It is a core part of who I am . . . . I have always known myself this way" (#15). Another said,

It is my personality [laughs]. You can't separate it. It's not like a quality that's stuck on like a little grape stuck on. I guess I just accept it. I've always accepted it . . . . In high school I was thinking about sex . . . and my girlfriends were thinking about boyfriends and clothes . . . . It's just totally who I am. I can't take my sexuality out of my personality. (#26)

These 12 women believed that their need to come to terms with their sexuality had produced a driving force for personal growth. They believed that being highly sexual had required them to individuate, to confront questions about who they were and how they would live their lives. As a result of this process, they reported that they had become very self-aware and independent of the beliefs and opinions of others, empowered to make all life choices very consciously.

### *The Experience of Social Interaction as a Highly Sexual Woman*

The overall tenor of participants' thoughts and feelings was that they accepted and would not change the fact that they are highly sexual. However, the preponderance of participants' reactions to their high degree of sexual desire and its effects on their lives was negative. Three negative themes emerged: constant struggle to find and maintain a sexually satisfying relationship, difficulties in relationships with other women, and a general sense of being at best misunderstood and at worst painfully rejected by society. The common positive themes in the interviews were satisfaction with having become a unique individual apart from society's judgments and expectations, physical satisfaction, and generally satisfying nonsexual relationships with men and sometimes women.

*Is a single satisfactory sexual relationship possible?* Every woman interviewed repeatedly mentioned the difficulty—and for most it seemed to be the impossibility—of achieving sexual satisfaction in a single primary relationship. Participants reported that their high levels of sexual desire had often made relationships relatively short-lived and created the need to seek new relationships. Women reported that the seeming impossibility of finding a single man who could meet their needs resulted in complex multiple relationships that could be time-consuming and that often produced internal conflicts. Of the 44 participants, only 15 reported relative satisfaction in their current sexual relationships. Of those 15, 10 were married or otherwise in

relationship situations that appeared likely to remain relatively stable in at least the near future, and 8 of these had patterns that included current or possible secondary sexual outlets, as did 5 of the other 7 women. Almost every participant had had a time in her life during which she routinely sought out multiple partners to achieve sexual satisfaction. Thirty-two still did so or considered it an available option.

*Men: You gotta love 'em, or do you?* Thirty-eight of the participants reported that overall, their relationships with men have been very comfortable. Nineteen participants felt that they have had a certain camaraderie with men, an attitude of joking around about sex, that they generally described as not “uptight” the way women usually are when they interact with men.

I seem to relate more with males. They like to have a female as a buddy. And they tend to be very comfortable, they can be themselves and say whatever they want without someone saying, “Oh, you shouldn't say that.” And I've been told that by many males. They can look at me as a female but also as a male. (#35)

Another, larger group of 22 (6 of whom also reported being “one of the boys”) reported positive relationships with men of what might be called a more traditional variety, involving flirting, teasing, and mild sexual banter.

Eight of the women who reported that positive relationships with men were common for them also mentioned that some men were uncomfortable with them. They believed that their assertive sexual energy was frightening to men, who feared being unable to satisfy them.

It's very powerful, actually. Men are very intimidated by it. Men are more afraid of a self-confident sexual woman than any other kind of woman. Smart doesn't scare them half as much as self-confidence that's stemming from sexuality. And that's left over from a mommy thing. Sexualized women are scary for men . . . . [So that really affects your life on a day-by-day or week-by-week basis?] Absolutely. I've always had a much easier time with men than other women who do not understand the power that sexuality has; why they run scared from their own, or don't know how to use it, or aren't comfortable with it, or have been taught to be nice girls . . . . So they're always much more at the mercy of men than I ever have been. (#26)

*The power of sisterhood.* How does society respond to the sexuality of highly sexual women? Many women reported experiencing a considerable amount of accusatory, rejecting, and judgmental behavior because of the attitudes of other women toward them, particularly female friends and peer group members. By far the largest number of participants, 29 women, reported that many women who were aware of the participants' sexual natures had exhibited negative and questioning behavior toward them and had sometimes appeared threatened, saying things like “I can't believe you're like that” (#3). Participants felt they had often been targets of negative gossip and very judgmental attitudes despite their almost universal lack of behavior that would have clearly warranted negative sanctions, such as sleeping with their friends' husbands or boyfriends. Participants believed that the attitudes and gossip of other women were almost solely the result of the

participants' greater comfort level in both talking about and seeking sexual satisfaction. They reported that other women seemed to have shown discomfort in social settings with them or even to have avoided them entirely.

Few of the participants appeared to have coped with their relationship disappointments and social opprobrium without considerable mental effort. Many women interviewed had experienced considerable pain in their lives.

The women who reported negative social effects described reactions ranging from a general discomfort or coldness to active name-calling and an adversarial stance. The reasons for this reaction from other women as seen by study participants may be characterized in two main ways. First, participants perceived that other women were as uncomfortable with, if not as judgmental about, the basic sexual natures of the participants as they were with their behaviors. Participants suggested that this discomfort might be due to other women's lack of comfort with their own sexual feelings.

I think they're jealous because I am so free with my sexuality and who I am. It's not just my sexuality, though, I think it's because I am comfortable with who I am and I know what I want . . . . The sexuality is such a part of me that I have had women write me nasty notes and letters, and I just say, “I'm sorry, I don't know what to tell you. It looks like your problem not mine.” [Writing you nasty notes and letters about what?] Oh, about my sexuality. “You're a slut.” Although I'm not, because I don't go just sleeping around with everybody . . . . (#31)

The second major cause of negative responses that participants suggested was the competition for men that other women might think highly sexual women create. This response is noteworthy given that many participants reported regulating themselves very carefully to avoid pursuing male partners of the women in their immediate social network.

They see me as sluttie . . . . They don't understand it. Some people don't experience the pleasure or the passion that I experience or they don't know how to orgasm . . . . They don't know how to communicate with their partner, say, “Yes, no, try this, try that.” They don't understand how it really feels to have a sexual experience . . . . You get vibes from people . . . . Usually in their eyes, the way they look you up and down. The way they size you up when you walk into a room. The way they watch you when there's a male in the room. And they get upset, or they tend to tense up. (#3)

Thirteen participants stated that they were grateful to have found women friends who were also highly sexual. This permitted them friendship and a support group with whom they could be honest about their feelings and their lives. Participants who had not found such friends or who had women friends from whom they had to hide themselves or whose friends were uncomfortable with them were saddened and sometimes bitter.

It's caused huge problems in relationships with men, with girlfriends. . . . I have a posse of girlfriends that I'm very attached to. Any of them who . . . know me well . . . know about my sexuality. You can't hide something like that. And some of them are uncomfortable. And it's always the ones who are uncomfortable

with their own sexuality, that then further polarize . . . and throw all the sexual elements in any relationship we have, on me, as though it's all coming from me, when truly I think a lot of it's coming from them. . . . They put on you all the bad stuff they've ever associated with sex. The "bad girl" shit, and they throw it on you. And it's a pain in the ass. (#26)

Several women were quite clear that they kept their sexuality very hidden so that they would not be sanctioned.

It's not that it's a big handicap in the relationships, but it's just something that makes me feel alienated. It's something that I've learned now that I pretty much, with my women friends, have to keep it to myself. It's almost like an achievement. It's a success that I can't share with my friends (#15).

*U.S. society does not yet accept highly sexual women.* Few participants reported markedly negative experiences from a list of possible influences such as physicians or religious leaders. Most, however, reported growing up and still living in a society that is at best ignorant of the notion that women can be highly sexual, and at worst actively hostile. They reported being labeled for their behavior, with "slut" the derogatory label most often mentioned. Many participants were acutely conscious of how society views and labels highly sexual women, and perceived this to be communicated in the mass media.

The women interviewed almost unanimously shared a negative view of how they were perceived by society. Five believed that perceptions and behaviors in society were at least moving in the right direction, and 7 others perceived society as not ready to deal with highly sexual women, but this group did not express strongly negative feelings. The remaining 32 participants expressed varying degrees of negative feelings about how society views them. They expressed a general attitude of pessimism that change would happen quickly, if at all.

I think that people have a long way to go. I think the stereotypes that bother me more are that women generally don't like to have sex or don't want it. Even on like, "Mad About You" or some sitcom where they were talking about having sex, "See, I just make my grocery list in my head, while we're having sex." And I thought, "That's terrible. What kind of a message is that, you think about your grocery list, while your husband is making love to you?" [Laughter.] So I think that people don't think that there's that many women that are really, sexually . . . on an elevated sexual plane there. But I think that they are becoming more and more aware. (#25)

### *The Satisfactions of Being Highly Sexual*

The experience of life as a highly sexual woman was also reported to be filled with satisfactions and pleasure. When asked, each highly sexual woman stated that she would not change permanently if she had that option. Three women said that if they had had that option earlier in life they would have taken it, and 3 said that they would like the ability to reduce the felt imperative at times when it is very strong. Six women said that they would like to become more sexual.

Participants often mentioned their physical satisfactions, or struggled to express the importance or meaning that their sexuality or sexual activities had for them. Sexuality was so all-encompassing that defining it was difficult for many participants.

And that's probably the most wonderful thing, it's so rejuvenating when you actually do get to that place of that physical ecstasy and can stay there. I mean, that's just amazing. Physically regenerative, spiritually regenerative. (#36)

## DISCUSSION

This research project was designed to allow women's voices to be heard as directly as possible. In presenting data I have followed the dictum of feminist psychology that women's lived experiences should be kept at the center of any research (Tiefer, 1988; Tolman & Szalacha, 1999; Ussher, 1999).

### *Sexual Addiction and Sexual Compulsion*

Many women interviewed reported that they had been labeled with terms historically used to pathologize sexually active women, such as *nymphomaniac* and, more recently, *sex addict*. I believe it is important to examine whether the women interviewed can appropriately be labeled as addicted or compulsive. Their behavior is, by definition of the study group, outside the norm of American society. Klein (1998) argues that addiction is not a concept usefully applied by sexologists and clinicians to human sexual behavior. As an experienced addictionologist I agree with that position and will argue specifically that it is not useful in understanding the behavior of the study participants.

Several authors have discussed very active sexual behavior using the phrase *compulsive sexual behavior* (e.g., Kaplan, 1979; Konopacki & Dei, 1988; Quadland, 1985). These authors seem to have as a common thread the concept of an actual or perceived inability to control the behavior (Slover, 1992). The term *sexual addiction* first received widespread attention when discussed by Carnes (1983). It has been used as well by other authors to describe sexual behavior considered inappropriate (Kasl, 1989; Schaef, 1989).

Neither the term *addiction* nor the term *compulsion* is applicable in describing the behavior of the participants of this study. In the addictions field the terms *compulsion* and *addiction* are generally used only when two conditions are met. The first condition is that addicts lose personal control over their behavior to the degree that they unpredictably engage in or ignore aspects of life necessary for daily functioning (Lesieur, 1984; Levin, 1987). Key elements of this condition are the unpredictability of normal and appropriate functioning because of the addictive behavior and the impact of the addict's behavior on his or her physical, economic, or social-emotional well-being (Carnes, 1983; Levin, 1987; Maxmen & Ward, 1995). The second condition is the probability that the addictive behavior will increase in frequency or intensity over time, which will



thereby increase the degree to which the person's life is negatively affected (Carnes, 1983; Kasl, 1989; Levin, 1987). Particularly germane to this condition is a strong discomfort with self and decreasing self-esteem over time (Schaefer, 1989). An additional condition for use of the terms addiction or compulsion is the idea that addicts engage in their addictive behavior as a coping mechanism for feelings for which they have no healthy coping techniques (Carroll, 1998; Kasl, 1989; Levin, 1987).

The sexual behavior of the participants in this study has sometimes affected their social functioning through its impact on friendship patterns with women. It has affected their choice of partners and has frequently resulted in a lack of marital stability. The participants' self-descriptions did not, however, suggest that they felt they were currently or had been in the past out of control in any meaningful way. Some of them would describe themselves as occasionally impulsive, particularly when in their 20s or younger. As Levine and Troiden (1988) noted, "The boundary between 'being in control sexually' and 'being out of control sexually' depends on the therapist's value orientation and purposes" (p. 359).

Participants did not fit the general conditions of compulsion or addiction, nor did they fit more specific descriptions of sexual addiction overall (Carnes 1983) or Schaefer's (1989) description of sexual addiction in women. Participants did not report any increase in frequency or impact on their lives over time (other than that caused by increased opportunity created by deliberate action). They did not report developing a series of progressively more negative consequences in their lives from their sexual behavior. The interviewees overall expressed strong satisfaction with themselves and their sexual choices and had grown to see themselves as psychologically strong because of having to make conscious choices in this area. Their behavior in meeting their sexual desires was typically planned, deliberate, and under their complete control. The participants did not describe their sexual behavior in ways that suggested they used it to cope with life circumstances to the exclusion of other coping mechanisms.

### *Sexual Desire, Sex Drives, and Social Constructionism*

In my opinion, the data on these research participants' arousal and desire provide evidence of a biological substrate, one that can and does affect some women's lives strongly. This is contrary to some models (Parker & Easton, 1998) that insist that sexuality is completely socially constructed. Almost all of the women interviewed felt they were required to cope with a force that they did not at first comprehend. They shared no set of common early experiences, religious upbringing, parental teaching, or socioeconomic status that might explain, even partially, their high degree of sexual desire. Their age range was broad enough that many of them were exposed to very different sets of historical circumstances. This biological substrate, although necessary, is in no way sufficient to explain the lives of highly sexual women. Social construc-

tionist thinking must be used in conjunction with concepts of biological essentialism to more fully understand highly sexual women. DeLameter and Hyde (1998) suggested that neither culture nor biology alone is sufficient to completely understand human sexual behavior.

The degree to which the women interviewed varied from the cultural norm in sexual desire and behavior was quite striking. The premise that the sexuality they felt was somehow completely constructed by their culture and upbringing is highly questionable if regarded in the light of several factors, including (a) the degree to which their life functioning was affected if sexual satisfaction was not present; (b) the complex partner patterns that some women had evolved to meet their needs; (c) the intensity of the desire expressed; and (d) the degree of centrality to their lives and the years-long struggle to come to terms with their felt needs, both practically and emotionally. The culture in which the participants lived is relatively unaccepting of women with a high degree of sexual desire. Almost all the participants gave the impression that they had had to "swim upstream," to fight against the culture so as to make a place for themselves.

The existence of a biological substrate, however, does not negate the importance of the social construction and feminist analysis models of the development and expression of sexuality. The participants perceived themselves to be in a negative social role; the social impact of this role is well represented in the data. The data also show the impact of a partially negative construction of women's sexuality, both internally in the creation of conflict and emotional struggles and externally in relationship struggles. The interview results document the importance of the socially constructed sexual script of the double standard.

In their attitudes toward sexual desire and behavior, the interviewees appear to have what has been described as a typically male motivation for sexual behavior (Buss, 1998; Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985). Although Hill and Preston (1996) proposed a complex and multidimensional motivational construct, the women in this study appear to have been motivated by lust and orgasmic release. That is certainly not to suggest that highly sexual women do not have many motives for sexual behavior. Instead, the research data on arousal and the participants' experience of desire suggested that traditional biological drive reduction theories remain at least partially useful in understanding the sexual behavior of highly sexual women.

The research data on highly sexual women do not support a strict social constructionist analysis of sexual behavior. Social constructionists such as Gagnon and Simon (1973) believe that the impact of sexual desire on sexual behavior is minor compared with structural elements such as age and income. Feminist and postmodernist authors such as Bohan (1993), Foucault (1978/1986), and Tiefer (1992) emphasize history and social context as the almost exclusive factors in the construction of sexual identity and behavior. I have no doubt that the sexuality of both men and women, as outwardly expressed and probably as inter-

nally experienced as well, is strongly affected by the cultural messages in which they are immersed, both as children and as adults. The women interviewed here appear to have become highly sexual despite their interactions with society. The internal conflict experienced by most of the interviewees demonstrates awareness of their social context. A process of self-definition as very independent agents acting outside social norms has resulted from their reaction to internally generated motivations counterposed against the social context.

Although I would argue that the social construction of women's sexuality in the U.S. appears to be changing toward greater acceptance, I believe that the women I interviewed were more active in their own development than feminist social constructionist theory would permit. Feinstein and Krippner (1997) suggested that people could become active agents of change in their own life patterns of behavior and functioning. The participants' active personal involvement with their own life development is consistent with that personal growth framework. Some participants actively sought out early sexual experiences despite, for some, heavily negative social consequences. Some women worked consciously to develop personal philosophies that were consonant with their own felt needs, struggling to overcome guilt and conflict.

### *Implications for Relationships*

Highly sexual women are aware of being different but often have little sense of the acceptability and normalcy of their internally sensed position. If the range of possible differences were widely recognized, and relationship strategies to cope with the desire discrepancy were considered necessary and appropriate to learn, the resulting relationship discomfort might be avoided. Although there are sexual relationship therapists who do not suggest that one partner necessarily has to accommodate to the other and attempt to change his or her own or the partner's desire level, such therapists do not represent the norm in this field.

It is often not considered legitimate to act upon one's desire without one's partner, which makes it even more difficult for highly sexual women to deal with desire discrepancies. Several of the women interviewed indicated that their partners had angry, even violent, reactions when the women masturbated to satisfy themselves.

If highly sexual women can learn to consider their level of desire to be valid, if they can learn to feel unashamed of what has heretofore been unacceptable in this society, then their lives may change. Once the validity of their internal experience has been established, couples with markedly discrepant desire levels may then choose to talk and act in ways that will deal more effectively with such discrepancies.

### *Other Research on Highly Sexual Women*

Sloggett and Herold (1996), using a self-selected sample and a self-administered survey, studied 51 unmarried female student and professional sexuality conference

attendees between the ages of 19 and 49 in Canada, Australia, and the United States. They then reported on what they called women with "high sexual interest" (p. 211). In this group, 31% reported that sex was extremely important and 43% reported that sex was very important. The highest category of actual weekly sexual frequency and preferred weekly sexual frequency were reported as 3+ and 5+ respectively, so an exact comparison cannot be made with the current study population. In Sloggett and Herold's study, 49% of the women said they would like to have sex with a partner five or more times per week, and 33% reported currently having sex with a partner three or more times per week. We do not know about masturbation frequency. The findings of Sloggett and Herold that their group had a high probability of at least occasional secondary sex partners, a short elapsed time before becoming sexual in a new relationship, strong dissatisfaction with celibacy, and a decreased likelihood of feeling guilty about their sexual behavior are all consonant with the results reported here.

### *Relationship of Current Findings to Other Research Data*

Several studies have suggested that women who are sexually very active have often become so because of having been sexualized at an early age by inappropriate contacts with adults (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Meston, Heiman, & Trapnell, 1999; Westerlund, 1992). These hypotheses about very sexually active adult women have been generated from retrospective studies involving women who had experienced incest or other inappropriate sexual activity as children. Because the data from the current study were drawn from a population of women who were highly sexual without regard to childhood experiences, a conclusion somewhat at variance with their hypotheses can be drawn. Although all participants were highly sexual, only 10 had had experiences of the kind hypothesized to affect adult sexual activity. It would appear that although some women who have been molested as children may exhibit sexually active and culturally inappropriate behavior as children or adults, it must not be assumed that all women who are highly sexually active as young adults or adults were molested as children.

According to Udry, Kovenock, Morris, and van den Bergen (1995), the age of young women at first sexual intercourse has been studied as a public health problem related to early teen pregnancy. It is usually seen as almost totally determined by social and environmental factors present at that time. Udry et al. (1995) examined the relationship between retrospectively reported age at first intercourse and childhood development variables recorded in a longitudinal study. They found that other than family attendance at church at age nine, no situational variables such as family socioeconomic status or mother's education were significantly correlated with age at first intercourse. The personal characteristics of girls who were reported by their mothers as "domineering," "mature," and "not shy" were

strong predictors. The study concludes, "This study should serve as a modifying influence on the highly situational approach that has dominated sociological thinking . . . . The picture that emerges is that children are individuals who have characteristics of their own" (p. 336).

Data reported by the current study's participants on their age and behavior at first sexual intercourse were sometimes quite markedly individualistic and support the conclusion of Udry et al. (1995). Sixteen of the 44 participants reported that they had their first sexual intercourse before age 16, and 6 at age 16. Six of the participants reported a very deliberately planned episode of first intercourse. One implication of the current study for future research is that if the data is to be of maximum utility, studies of the age at first intercourse of young women should also record the underlying level of their sexual desire.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Several aspects of the findings were quite unexpected; future research might usefully pursue these areas in greater depth. First, the intensity of the desire felt and its effect on daily life functioning if unfulfilled was greater than I might have imagined or predicted. Second, the degree to which some women reported compromising and altering major aspects of their lives was quite high. Third, many participants reported widespread and intense negative reactions from other women.

### **Limitations**

Scholars have written extensively on possible bias in sexual behavior research in the direction of underreporting information that may reflect negatively on research participants (Bancroft, 1997; Catania, 1999; Gribble, Miller, Rogers, & Turner, 1999). I have found no way other than my own subjective impressions to estimate the degree of accurate self-disclosure by the participants in this research. Catania (1999) noted two factors that have been found to reduce this bias in reporting: a conversational interview style rather than a completely standardized interview, and interviewer skill at authenticating the reasons for conducting the interviews and at asking questions in emotionally supportive ways. I believe that these factors were present in the interviews in this study.

### **Conclusion**

Many women share the attitude that to be sexual is to be vulnerable. For women to be allowed to experience their sexual selves fully, political and social changes permitting women to feel not only more sexual but also safer must occur. Perhaps, as Stock (1994) suggested, expansion of the available social models for women's sexuality will make it possible for women to choose from a wider selection of possibilities, despite the oppression that they may experience.

This research gives a voice to women in the U.S. who are at the high end of a broad spectrum of experienced sex-

ual desire and who have in the past been either invisible or considered pathological. Klein (1997) has noted the internalized oppression that many women face. I believe that knowing that they are not alone in their experience of high sexual desire will be useful for some women. Perhaps a greater awareness of highly sexual women by society as a whole may make it easier for any woman who so chooses to act upon her sexual desires with less guilt and emotional struggle.

Many interviewees stated that they were motivated to participate first by the hope that society overall would better understand and accept them, and second by the hope that other highly sexual women would be able to accept themselves with less internal conflict. Almost all of the women interviewed pleaded for professionals to increase their efforts to recognize and understand them.

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