WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL EXPRESSION AS THEY AGE:

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

by

KATE A. MORRISSEY STAHL

(Under the Direction of Jerry Gale)

ABSTRACT

The older adult population is growing as people live longer and are healthier to more advanced ages, and with this trend, sexual expression with age is changing. To explore these shifts qualitatively, sixteen women were interviewed in depth about sexual expression over their lives. The experiences of these women as they have aged included claiming sexual agency to find pleasure and finding opportunities for sexual expression in the course of marriage and divorce. The women interviewed, who ranged in age from 57 to 91, had not concluded their sexual lives. Instead, from the youngest of the group to the eldest, they were considering what sexual expression meant going forward.

INDEX WORDS: Aging, Sexual expression, Women’s sexual expression
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KATE A. MORRISSEY STAHL

B.A., Ripon College, 2003

M.A., Pennsylvania State University, 2005

M.S.W., University of Georgia, 2009

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by

KATE A. MORRISSEY STAHL

Major Professor: Jerry Gale
Committee: Denise C. Lewis
Douglas Kleiber

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Bennett and Camille Stahl, who were so small during the conception and completion of this project, and the next generation. May a better understanding of sexual expression make their sexual lives richer and more freely discussed.
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Many people have contributed to this project and to my overall career. First, to the women who offered to voice their personal experiences for this study, I am grateful. Your willingness to share your experience has made my life richer, and hopefully will also impact others through reading this dissertation and the articles in it. Thanks to my committee, who have been supportive every step of the way, including giving feedback throughout the process and allowing me to craft the project that was most meaningful to me. I have benefitted from the help of many mentors along the way, including my sex therapy supervisors, Anni Tuikka and Natalie Elliot, my late social work mentor, Nancy Rothenberg, and my undergraduate mentor, Jody Roy. My twin sister, Meghann, and older sister, Anne, have helped me to thinking through questions of sexual expression over my life in a judgement-free zone. Finally, my spouse Roger Stahl has offered feedback throughout this process as well as delicious meals, countless lessons in sexual expression, children and taking care of the children when I worked overtime, and often making me laugh just when I needed it.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Sexual expression contributes significantly to the well-being of older adults as they age (Thompson et al., 2011; Zeiss & Kasl-Godley, 2001). Although survey research has been conducted on older adult sexual and intimate satisfaction (e.g. DeLamater, Hyde, & Fong, 2008; DeLamater & Sill, 2005; Lindau et al., 2007; Penhollow, Young, & Denny, 2009), a richer exploration of the perspectives and experiences of older adults can be obtained through in-depth interviews. This richer data might include information that has been overlooked by researchers using survey studies to explore sexuality and aging. Many interview-type articles have, for example, contributed important insights to research on sexuality and cancer treatment (e.g. Gilbert, Ussher, & Perz, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2009; Juraskova et al., 2003; Lindau, Surawska, Paice, & Baron, 2011). My project involved interviewing a group of older women to cultivate better understanding of what factors influenced sexual expression as the women aged. To put the experience of the women I interviewed in context, I offer a review of the literature, a statement of my subjectivity as the interviewer, and an overview of the rest of the chapters of the dissertation.

Review of Literature

The older adult segment of the population is a growing demographic (Easterbrook, 2014). People in the United States are living longer lives and are healthier as they age, and so sexual expression in older age is becoming an issue that affects a growing number of people
(Easterbrook, 2014). Also, the current cohort of older adults lived through the sexual revolution, and so may have different attitudes towards sexual expression than previous generations (Yelland & Hosier, 2015). Even people over the age of 80 say that sexual expression is important (Lindau & Gavrilo, 2010). In one study, 85 percent of older men and 61 percent of older women said it is integral to their quality of life (Fisher, 2010). In most Western societies, sexual expression is even considered a basic human right (Bouman, Arcelus, & Benbow, 2006; Tarzia, Fetherstonhaugh, & Bauer, 2012).

Like younger adults, older adults care about sexual satisfaction as a dimension of sexual expression (DeLamater, Hyde, & Fong, 2008). Sexual satisfaction is the degree to which someone is happy with the sexual aspect of their life. It can be broken down into the closeness of one’s sex life to one’s ideal, or what one expects; having a sense that one has adequate opportunities for sexual expression; and having an overall feeling of contentment with one’s sexual expression or lack thereof. Sexual satisfaction is an important outcome in several ways. It is positively correlated with relational satisfaction and stability (Sprecher & Cate, 2004). For women, it also positively correlates with life satisfaction overall (Woloski-Wruble, Oiel, Leefsma, & Hochner-Celnikier, 2010). Sexual satisfaction is an important component of what some researchers call successful aging (Thompson et al., 2011; Zeiss & Kasl-Godley, 2001). In Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, sex is considered important beyond reproduction because it can contribute to a sense of love and belonging (1970).

Adding to the complexity of the issue of aging and sexual expression is the fact that even with fairly healthy aging, older adults are likely to need various forms of support as they face conditions like illnesses that limit their ability to care for themselves (Lynn, 2005). They may
face the death of a partner. They may experience some form of dementia, which can affect both a person’s ability to consent to sexual expression and how consent is expressed; for example, non-verbal versus verbal consent (Kaplan, 2015b). Caregivers, as well as the older population, may or may not be sexually literate. In popular culture, older adults often are portrayed as undesirable and not having desire themselves, leading the population as a whole away from sexual literacy (Benbow & Jagus, 2002; Bouman et al., 2006; Loe, 2011). Many hurdles face older adults who want to continue to engage in sexual expression throughout their lives.

Because women live longer than men, women face unique opportunities and challenges in terms of aging and sexuality. Women have different experiences of sexuality than men do, especially in terms of cultural norms that are more likely to downplay the importance of sexuality for women’s wellbeing and to moralize about female sexual expression more so than male sexual expression (Gott, 2005). Female perspectives on sexuality also have often been ignored in mainstream studies of sexuality and aging, with a focus more on intercourse and less on other types of sexual expression despite the fact that most women do not experience orgasm through vaginal penetration alone (Loe, 2011). A focus on intercourse has possible negative repercussions, such as pathologizing difficulty achieving or maintaining erections or people being uneducated about the range of options for sexual expression or too ashamed to try something new and different than penetrative intercourse. That cultural assumptions about sex are masculine is brought to the fore in the confusion both young and older people in US culture express about lesbian sex—what is it that lesbians do during sex if there is no penis involved (Vernacchio, 2015)? Learning from lesbian sexual experience may be valuable, however, as
lesbians experience orgasmic and satisfying sexual expression more than any other sexual group (Nichols, 2005).

Thus, unfortunately, sexism, heterosexism, and ageism affect older adult sexuality. Popular culture includes a widely held belief that only youth is beautiful or sexy and that age is linked primarily to decline, especially for women (Gullette, 2011). These unhelpful and simplistic beliefs create and sustain negative expectations of how aging might affect sexual expression. They reverberate to shape attitudes about sex held by older people, medical providers, and society more broadly. Interestingly, even the stereotypes are not consistent. Older adults have been seen as both asexual and hyper-sexual (Gott, 2005), creating a public caricature of older adult sexual expression as either “too little” or “too much.”

This cultural bias against older adult sexual expression extends into institutional care. A majority of older adults in long-term care report interest in sexuality, and yet this expressed interest is not consistently met with a proportionate amount of training for healthcare providers at such institutions (Frankowski & Clark, 2009). The significance of sexual expression may be especially pertinent at the end of one’s life, when relationships with loved ones are vital, especially when sexuality and intimacy are understood as “the need for contact, tenderness, and love” (Bowden & Bliss, 2009, p. 124). Extensive research, for example, supports the idea that sexual expression is still important to patients with terminal diseases (Gianotten, 2007; Hordern, 2008; Lemieux, Kaiser, Pereira, & Meadows, 2004; Panke & Ferrell, 2004; Zeiss & Kahl-Godley, 2001). However, in mainstream US culture, the role of sexuality and even intimacy is often ignored or even frowned upon in older adults, even at the end of life (Bowden & Bliss, 2009; Morrissey Stahl et al., 2017).
Sexual expression can also be an important, authentic form of communication. As philosopher and feminist psychotherapist Susie Orbach puts it,

Sex is, as we know and appreciate, a potentially powerful meeting of bodies. It is also the place where people can be sufficiently vulnerable and open and find the confirmation that they and their body are all right, acceptable, beautiful and alive. We seek it in sexuality precisely because the erotic, with its physical power, can cross the feelings of inauthenticity—both physical and emotional—which beset so many people today. (2009, p. 145)

Sexual expression may well be an important part of self-actualization as a person ages. It may be a way to connect with other people and with one’s own body. Shaw (2012) says that older adulthood may be an especially rich time for sexuality. She defines sexual actualization as the height of personal capacity for sexual expression and pleasure, and says that this actualization may be more likely in older adults than younger adults. It may be that especially for women, sexual satisfaction increases with age (Gullette, 2011). It is possible that like the so-called paradox of subjective well-being—the research finding that despite many losses subjective well-being remains quite stable as people age (Baltes & Baltes, 1990)—older adult sexual satisfaction stays the same or even increases despite difficulties associated with aging. Some unknown factor or factors may support wellbeing as people age. It could also be that although older adults overall exhibit similar sexual well-being, certain types of issues like health interfere with satisfaction (Kunzmann, Little, & Smith, 2000).
The issue of sexual expression in older adults is, then, important for a number of reasons. For the sake of this dissertation project, older adult is defined as people over 55, following the literature on older adult sexuality. This norm may have stemmed from 50 being a common time for menopause in women, which often marks a shift in women’s experience of sex, if only because they can no longer become pregnant. The difference between a person who is 55 and who is 85 is vast, and yet many shared concerns bridge those differences. The terms "sexual expression" and "sex" will be used to include any activity intended for sexual pleasure. This is because sex can include penetrative intercourse, masturbating, oral sex, intimate contact like mutual masturbation, handholding, dressing up, engaging in fantasy, and more (Price, 2014). The starting point for this definition of sex came from sex educator Vernacchio (2015), who defines sex as “consensual activity that offers mutual sexual pleasure, connection, and possibly reproduction for those involved” (Vernacchio, 2015). Since this may at any age also include solo sexual expression, and since reproduction is very rarely important in older adult sexuality, a better definition for this project is **activity that offers sexual pleasure, connection to self and/or others, and possibly self-actualization for those involved.** This definition is offered in an attempt to be inclusive, as “a holistic view of sexuality incorporates an integration of emotional, social, intellectual, and somatic experiences, represents diverse sexual experiences, reflects relationship context, and focuses on pleasure as well as on sexual dysfunction” (Syme, 2014, p. 36).

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2010) defines sexuality as “a central aspect of being human throughout life.” By this definition, sexuality encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies,
desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. (WHO, 2010)

Thus, as defined by the WHO, intimacy is an important dimension in the expression of sexuality. For the purposes of this paper, the terms “sexual expression” and “sexual intimacy” will be used to refer to the range of ways that people express themselves sexually, which may or may not include what may seem like explicitly sexual behaviors. Part of the project itself will be exploring how the older adults interviewed define sexual and intimate expression. The next part of the literature review will explore the issues that might impede or support satisfying sexual expression as people age, according to current literature.

**Issues Affecting Sexual Expression with Age**

Research into sex and aging has contributed many insights. Both men and women frequently engage in sexual behaviors well into their 70s and beyond regardless of whether they live independently or in a facility (DeLamater, 2012). Physical health, psychological health, a belief that sex is important, and having a satisfying relationship with a partner have strong positive influences on sexual expression (DeLamater, 2012). Below, literature around the key issues of the effects of health, attitudes, partners, family, friends, caregivers, institutions, policies, media, and interventions on sexual expression will be offered.
**Health.** Health is related to sexual expression in two ways: better health increases the likelihood and quality of sexual expression (DeLamater, 2012), and sexual expression may actually improve health as we age (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009; Price, 2014). Here, particular health conditions and how they affect sexual expression will be discussed. These include both biological changes, including the hormonal system, vascular system, and illness, and psychological influences including sexual information, attitudes toward sexual expression, and mental health changes (DeLamater, & Sill, 2005; Butler & Lewis, 2002).

Biological health has one of the most significant impacts on older adult sexuality of any other influence (DeLamater, 2012; Pendhollow, Young, & Denny, 2009). Hormonal changes, including a reduction of androgens in men and estrogens and androgens in women, may be part of a decline of general interest in sexual activity as people age (Morely, 2006; DeLamater & Sill, 2005). These hormonal changes can affect desire, but also affect the body in other ways. For example, when women go through menopause, they almost completely stop producing estradiol, a kind of estrogen, which can result in decreased vaginal lubrication and thinning of the vaginal walls (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). Androgens are associated with desire both for both men and for women, and the decrease of these, which happens in an especially pronounced way in men, can decrease the sex drive (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). The impact of hormones is ambiguous for women, however. In fact, the androgen level of women can rise, sometimes leading to reports of increased sex drive in postmenopausal women (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). In addition, since desire is not just a hormonal phenomenon (Nagoski, 2015), desire can increase in older adult women as fear of pregnancy is taken out of the picture. This will be discussed more in the attitudes section. In addition, menopause has been highly politicized, leading some scholars to
challenge the idea that menopause is a problem for women, or at least to contextualize that idea (Hinchliff, Gott, & Ingleton, 2010; Rotosky & Travis, 1996).

Changes in the vascular system, including myocardial infarction, hypertension, and atherosclerosis, can have a dampening effect on sex drive (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). This is through decreased functioning of erectile tissues for both men and women as well as issues like decreased energy from oxygenated blood circulating less easily (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). Hypertension may itself reduce one’s sex drive or the medications used to treat the condition may be the cause, but overall people with hypertension often experience less sexual desire (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). The risk of hypertension increases with age (DeLamater & Sill, 2005).

Other physical illnesses that are more likely with advancing age also can affect sex drive. Diabetes can affect the vascular system as well as nerve sensitivity in ways that negatively impact sexual health (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). Discomfort from arthritis can make sexual expression more painful, although ways to work around this exist (Price, 2014). Cancers of the genital systems can have a negative impact on sexual expression (Price, 2014). In addition to illnesses affecting sex drive and sexual expression, their treatment can cause problems with sexuality, as in the above case of hypertension and as in the treatment of reproductive cancers (DeLamater & Sill, 2005).

A significant sexual issue for older adults is their susceptibility to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), especially paired with lack of education about this and less caution because concern about pregnancy is gone. Advanced age may also mean that doctors do not ask about
sexual activity or discuss it in detail (Gott, 2005). In 2005, people over fifty accounted for 25 percent of all cases of HIV (Simone & Appelbaum, 2008). The incidence is also increasing, with older adults accounting for more than 15 percent of new cases of HIV (Simone & Appelbaum, 2008).

Older adults are at increased risk of contracting HIV and other STIs due to low rates of condom use, which may be linked to reduced fears of pregnancy. Also postmenopausal changes like the thinning of uterine walls and decreased lubrication increase the likelihood of bleeding during sex. An increase in divorce, widowhood, and re-partnering increase exposure to STIs (Hillman, 2000; Lindau et al., 2007). The increase in sexually transmitted infections in older adults can be observed worldwide (Lindau et al., 2007). Despite the health risks of sex in older adulthood, health educators and healthcare providers rarely target this population, exacerbating the issue (Hillman, 2000; Minichiello, Rahman, Hawkes, & Pitts, 2012).

Psychological health influences sexuality as well. Mental health and its treatment impact older adult sexuality as they do sex at any age (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). Depression, for instance, is linked to a reduced sex drive (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). Also a variety of types of medication for mental health issues can reduce sex drive; for example, the use of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) to treat depression often reduces sexual desire (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). In fact, physicians are now using SSRIs in some cases to treat premature ejaculation.

**Attitudes, knowledge, and ideology.** One’s attitudes, knowledge, and exposure to ideologies can affect how one’s sexual expression changes as one ages. To some degree, these
can be tracked from individual to more social beliefs, as will be done below for convenience. However, the line between individual and cultural beliefs is a gray one, and individuals affect culture and vice versa in a recursive way.

**Individual.** Older adults, like people of any age, hold a range of attitudes towards sex. These include a range of interest in different types of sexual expression, different levels of self consciousness and different types of self image, and a spectrum of moral beliefs about the appropriate role of sexual expression and sexuality (Hillman, 2000; Walker, 1997). These attitudes likely vary by individual, cohort and region. They affect sexual satisfaction in a variety of ways. Interest in sex affects sexual satisfaction depending on fit to one’s situation. One could have low interest and low activity and be satisfied, for example. However, many women also define lack of interest as a sexual problem for them, which is associated with a reduced level of satisfaction (Lindau et al., 2007). Also, sometimes what is expressed as lack of interest is part of an internalized cultural myth that older adults should not care about sex (Price, 2014). For women especially, not being sexually expressive leads to less interest in sex (Nagoski, 2015; Price, 2014).

Openness to a range of sexual activities matters to sexual expression because as women age, fewer partners are available to them due to the longer life span of women versus men, so solo sexual activity may become more important (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). Also, even if they have partners, they and their partners’ health status may well change in older adulthood. Flexibility around expression would make it more likely that an older adult would have satisfying, workable activities available for sexual expression as changes occur.
Self-image may impact sexual activity as one ages. This may be especially the case for older women, who often have been exposed to unrealistic body image models that make it more difficult for them to have a sense that their bodies are attractive (Gullette, 2011; Lewis, Medvedev, & Seponski, 2011; Price, 2014). Studies have found that it is not uncommon for women to experience body image disturbances as they age as they are exposed to “ageist societal beliefs about beauty and youth” (Burgess, 2004, p. 445). In one study, only 12 percent of women over 50 were satisfied with their body size (Runfola et al., 2013). This could make women less likely to engage in sexual activity or more preoccupied during partnered sexual activity, possibly reducing their sexual satisfaction (Burgess, 2004). That said, other research has found that women in their fifties and sixties may be more able to ignore negative cultural messages about their bodies (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013).

Moral beliefs about the role of sexuality would affect one’s sexual satisfaction to the extent that they were in accord or out of accord with family and institutional norms and attitudes, as well as one’s level of moral comfort with her own desires. For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) people may face stigma around the morality of the sexual expression associated with their sexual orientation (Blando, 2001). Permissiveness of sexual acts like masturbation or sex outside of a committed relationship may also affect sexual satisfaction as one ages, as one may or may not be in a committed relationship. Historically, masturbation has been seen as more appropriate for men than for women, although it has been viewed as morally unacceptable for either in some religious traditions (Laqueur, 2003). Moral attitudes can impact sexual expression, including beliefs about whether marriage is important to
sexual expression or whether sex acts outside the marriage are permissible. These types of attitudes too appear to be generational to some degree (Wolfinger, 2017).

Knowledge about sex also has an effect on people’s sexual satisfaction, especially having accurate knowledge about aging and sex, accurate knowledge about one’s rights when interacting with formal caregivers, and willingness to find appropriately trained professionals and to learn from them if one needs support around one’s sexuality. Inaccurate knowledge can negatively affect sexual expression and satisfaction, such as thinking that sexual urges end after menopause or that masturbation is physically bad for people (White, 1998) or that most desire issues for older adult women are hormonal (Nagoski, 2015). These incorrect understandings can negatively affect sexual satisfaction by limiting options that might otherwise provide pleasure. Self image could also be affected if one has an inaccurate sense of normal aging, creating unrealistic expectations.

Knowledge of one’s rights in relation to formal caregivers could be supportive of sexual satisfaction. One job of ombudsmen is to make sure that residents in care institutions know what they can ask for and to advocate on their behalf (Cornelison & Doll, 2013). However the knowledge of one’s rights is gained, it could affect sexual satisfaction in that older women could possibly advocate more effectively for what they want (Cornelison & Doll, 2013). This could improve their likelihood of being satisfied with their sex lives in an institution.

Even more than having knowledge to begin with, being willing to seek knowledge from good sources, like medical providers who have appropriate training, is supportive of one’s sexual expression in aging. One study indicated that unless older adults bring up sexuality, their general
practitioners might not broach the issue with them, likely due in part to ageist beliefs about older adults’ likelihood of being sexually active (Gott, Hinchliff, & Galena, 2004). Without this willingness to ask what could be uncomfortable questions, one might just ignore issues and not correct problems if they arise (Gullette, 2011). This could get in the way of good advice that could ameliorate problems and increase sexual satisfaction as one ages. Little is written about advice people get from their friends, although it seems likely that talking to one’s friends about sexual questions could reduce shame and improve the likelihood of finding satisfying answers.

Aging offers a number of benefits for sexuality and intimate expression in terms of shifts in attitudes. Benefits of aging could include emotional and relational maturity (Shaw, 2012) and an increasing ability to claim one’s agency in terms of likes, dislikes, and sexual orientation (Gullette, 2011). Older adult women are sexually assaulted with less frequency than younger adult women, which is associated with less fear about sexual expression (Gullette, 2011). Because of this shift from objectification and fear of assault, women can become more confident as they age in relation to their sexuality. In addition, with sexuality defined broadly, rather than being trapped in performative visual representations of the body, people can experience a kind of authenticity through sexuality as they age (Orbach, 2009).

**Cultural factors.** From a symbolic interactionist perspective, people construct meaning in a variety of contexts, including sexual meaning (Sprecher & Cate, 2004). From this perspective, meanings that people have of sexuality will come from multiple places, with some being more individual or “bottom up” influences and some more cultural “top down.” In a cultural discourse marked by a strong emphasis on decline, the stigma of aging and sexuality can outweigh an understanding of the opportunities for growth as people age (Gullette, 2011). Ranges of cultural
discourses exist on what aging means for sexuality (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). One prevailing theme is that older adults are asexual and should be (Price, 2014). A counter-theme that has developed in response, and which still is restrictive, is that older people are hyper-sexual (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). This hyper-sexuality is often lampooned as pathetic in older women or perverted in older men (Price, 2014). This view also limits older adult freedom to choose whether and how to engage sexually. Another cultural sensibility is that youth sex is basically good and older adult sex is primarily marked by dysfunction (Gullette, 2011). Indeed, even popular books like The New Love and Sex After 60, which are ostensibly sex-positive, focus disproportionately on solving problems with sexuality due to aging rather than exploring possible benefits that come with age (Butler & Lewis, 2002). Other books, like The Ultimate Guide to Sex After 50, do more to consider the possibilities associated with aging (Price, 2014).

Even in sexual research such as that of Masters and Johnson, a penetrative version of sex is prevalent (Gullette, 2001). Challenging this could create a wider conception of what is “normal.” It also could help to create better research, because if sex is measured as penetrative sex, then sex researchers could be missing important aspects of people’s sex lives at any age, but especially as they age (Gullette, 2011). This could lead to an overemphasis on “decline” and a corresponding under-emphasis on the benefits of aging for one’s sex life.

Women overall tend to have a broader view of sexual behavior and include a wider range of activities in what is considered “sex.” Their sexual activity tends to vary more with social and cultural influences than men’s does (Baumeister, 2004; Baumeister, 2000). Having access to a broad array of ways to achieve sexual satisfaction allows for behavioral variability that can be adapted to changing needs and physical capabilities (Butler & Lewis, 2002; Price, 2014). For
example, in one interview with an 87-year-old woman describing her particularly vibrant sex life with her 94-year-old partner, a sex therapist asked if they still had penetrative sex. “No, dear. I sit on his face,” the woman replied (Shaw, 2012, p. 182). Shaw suggests that the sense of varying activities to what “works” rather than what is predetermined by cultural norms is important. It may be especially important at the end of life as people face limitations based on the types of sexual activity in which they can engage. Cultural attitudes and ideologies influence whether a person is able to shift one’s views on sex fairly easily or whether the person has a sense that one’s changing sexual needs and activities is pathological, sub-par, or even shameful.

Cultural stigma against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender older adults may also impact sexual expression (Sargeant, 2011). This could include discrimination by care providers and peer discrimination. In some cases, being cut off from families can impact the level of support LGBT elders receive. It could also be that people who identify as LGBT are more likely to set up long-term supportive friendships and chosen family relationships, counteracting some of the isolation associated with living in a heteronormative culture (Cronin 2004). It could also be that advances in the legal recognition of LGBT relationships will help to reduce the cultural strain on LGTB people.

**Partners.** Intimate partnerships are a common way that people receive support and create a sexual self image (Gardner, 2008; Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). As people’s lives change as they age, individual and couples’ approach to sexual expression is likely to change. Partnerships are significant to many older adults. Indeed, 67 percent of older adult men and 50 percent of older adult women said that sexual expression is critical for a good relationship (Fisher, 2010).
As people live longer, long-term relationships are in some cases lasting longer than ever. People’s sexual expression can change as a partnership lasts for many decades. New skills may be needed to adjust over time. For example, couples can increase satisfaction by exploring new forms of pleasure together, by making sure to create time for intimacy, by negotiating change as it comes up, by showing non-sexual affection regularly, and by seeking counseling when it is needed (Price, 2014). That said, some older women report that they experience more sexual passion early in relationships and shift to a focus on emotional intimacy later in the relationship, finding both of these periods of the relationship satisfying in different ways (Clarke, 2006).

People’s sexual body image is affected by how their partner sees them. This may be particularly true for women (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). Many women in one study said they mainly experienced their sexuality through their appearance (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). Partners were helpful when they appreciated the women’s appearance, and less helpful when they were critical (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013).

Couples face many changes if they are together through the aging process and especially when experiencing health concerns. When one partner in a couple faces health concerns, couples may become nervous or assume the other does not want to discuss sexual activities during this phase of their relationship (Stausmire, 2004). This can lead to misunderstandings like healthy partners avoiding intimacy for fear of hurting their partners and their partners believing that the avoidance is because they are not attractive (Stausmire, 2004).

However, older adulthood is also a time when one can develop a deeper intimacy and connection with one’s partner or partners. At the end of life, for example, couples may explore
shared meaning in their relationship (Gardner, 2008). When receiving palliative care or other intensive health care services, individuals sometimes will shift their type of sexual expression and will focus on staying connected in less physically rigorous ways than when they are feeling better (Lemieux et al., 2004). “Sexual needs are not static for the patient, or the partner, over this journey. It is only availability for ongoing discussions and the anticipation of sexuality changes that ‘normalizes’ them” (Redelman, 2008, p. 370). With significant health concerns, people may need to redefine what sexual expression looks like in their relationships (Cagle & Bolte, 2009).

Many older adults are not partnered, especially women. For every seven men over sixty-five, there are ten women (“Sexuality in Midlife and Beyond,” 2013). Statistics on partnership are complicated by same sex marriage not being legal in all states. In addition, older adults may choose different forms of companionship that they may refer to as partnership or something else (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). It may be that partnership is more significant for men than for women when it comes to sexual expression because men tend to have most of their social support from one partner whereas women tend to have a broader network of people with whom they are very close (Hiryama & Walker, 2010).

People in same sex relationships face an especially difficult road for sexual expression. On one side, they may manage stigma better as they age because they have faced prejudice before and tend to have supportive communities (Quam & Whitford, 1992). However, they may also face barriers such as social stigma, hostility from family members, and other problems (Blando, 2011). These barriers may combine to create layers of disadvantage and stress.
**Family.** Family, including one’s children, can be an important influence on people’s sex lives as they age. For example, dating after one’s partner dies in older adulthood is influenced by and influences the relationship with adult children (Carr & Boerner, 2013). In one study, the researchers found that widowers were more affected by family in the decision to date, possibly because they were more likely to actually start dating (Carr & Boerner, 2013). This illustrates that within a family, it is likely that familial attitudes and beliefs impact the sexual decisions made by the older adult. Also, the older adult’s attitudes and beliefs probably have an influence on the family’s perspectives. For this reason, familial influence can be best described as bidirectional, moving from older adult to family and family to older adult in terms of attitudes and beliefs about sexuality. “Family” is used here to mean especially one’s children, but also siblings and other biological family impact older adults. Family could also include non-blood related and non-legal ties, but for the sake of simplicity those types of close relationships are discussed below as peer relationships.

If a family has a significant amount of control over their loved one’s caregiving, as with more dependent adults and possibly with people at the end of their lives, a family can do a lot to try to influence their loved one’s sex life. For instance, in one case a family was concerned about their parent’s involvement with a person of another race, and they successfully had the elder removed from the nursing facility in spite of the elder not preferring this route (Cornelison & Doll, 2013). Often hospices or inpatient institutions have family meetings. In that case, it can happen that family preferences are given precedence over the preferences of older adults, even though elders should have a right to their own approach to consensual sexual expression (Cornelison & Doll, 2013). The control families have over older adults may, at times, be more
informal, in the sense that older adults are afraid that if they upset their family, they will not receive visits or other types of support. However, this dynamic could negatively impact the elder’s sense that she could freely express herself sexually without negative familial consequences.

Family members can serve as educators and support their loved ones as they age. In institutions, family members can use their power to advocate for a family member’s right to sexual expression when consulted about sexual issues regarding their loved one (Cornelison & Doll, 2013). An example that made national headlines was when Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s husband of 55 years was experiencing dementia and fell in love with another woman in his nursing home. O’Connor and her adult children supported his new relationship (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). Being an advocate is not just expressing desire to learn, it also has to do with being aware of how an older adult’s sexual expression needs might change over time and willingness to find out about their current needs.

Older adults living in institutions often still rely on their families for various types of support, including care planning (Frankowski & Clark, 2009; Gaugler, 2005). As evidenced by a recent case in Iowa, family interventions can bring up complicated questions of consent by older adults with dementia. In that case, an older man and woman married after both being widowed. Soon after, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. At a certain point, her daughters and a local physician brought her new husband to a team care meeting and told him that she could no longer consent to sex (Kaplan, 2015b). He was alleged to have sex with her after this and brought up on felony charges before receiving a verdict of not guilty from a jury (Kaplan, 2015a). This trial was
fraught with differing opinions from the daughters of the woman in the nursing home on whom the alleged sexual assault was perpetrated (Gruley, 2015).

This case was important because non-consensual sex in institutions is a problem, especially for women (Everett, 2011). Because rooms may not be able to be locked in assisted living and nursing facilities so that caregivers have access, keeping people who are giving unwanted sexual attention out of rooms can be a challenge. Sexual consent in these cases is a complicated issue. Having a “loving will” can help to let families know what is preferred in the case of cognitive changes (J. Price, personal communication, July 15, 2015).

Because nursing facilities often do not have formal policies on sexual expression, it is currently best practice to make decisions like this on a case-by-case basis that involves one’s family (Wornell, 2014). One reason families report visiting their loved ones in institutions is to help employees of the institutions to deliver sensitive and individualized care that is appropriate to the elder (Gaugler, 2005). The worst-case scenario is that no planning at all happens until a crisis occurs (Wornell, 2014). Whether the effect of family is more indirect, as in the case of people living independently, or more direct, as in the case of institutionalized older adults with familial oversight, family is likely to have an influence on older adult sexual expression.

**Friends.** Friendships are important to people at every age. They are also likely important in terms of shaping sexual attitudes, as friends are the most common way that people at all ages learn sexual information (Graf & Patrick, 2015). In some ways, friends can function much like family. One definition of family used by a hospice is “[a]ll those in loving relationships with the person who is dying, the people who can be counted on for caring and support, regardless of
blood or legal ties” (Lattanzi-Licht, Mahoney, & Miller, 1998, p.29). However, whereas one’s adult children may, for various reasons, feel uncomfortable talking about sex with one’s parent, perhaps this is less the case with friends. Simply having friends that one would be willing to discuss sexual issues with may be part of a general sense of well-being, sexual or otherwise (Hirayama & Walker, 2011).

**Caregivers.** At various points in older adulthood, caregivers may be needed to care for older adults (Conidis, 2010). In that case, the care received will impact the older adult’s sexual expression. Caregiving is often divided into two types: informal and formal support (Kemp, Ball, & Perkins, 2013; Williams & Dilworth-Anderson, 2002). Informal support is care or resources provided by family members or close friends (Kemp et al., 2013; Williams and Dilworth-Anderson, 2002), and so would be covered by the discussion in the partner, family, and friends sections. Although spouses provide a significant amount of informal support, they also are often assisted by family members, friends, or neighbors (Conidis, 2010). Formal support, the type explored in this section, refers to services offered by professionals such as physicians, nurses, home health aides, social workers, support groups, adult day centers, and others (Kemp et al., 2013; Williams & Dilworth-Anderson, 2002).

Training in older adult sexuality is important for people working with the older adult population, and resources for medical providers are available. For example, occupational therapists have defined sexual expression as an Activity of Daily Living (ADL) to assess (McRae, 2013). The American Psychological Association has a list of resources for learning about aging and sexuality (Syme, 2014). Ombudsman services are available to protect sexual rights in long-term care facilities (Syme, 2014). However, many providers do not receive training
in how to support older adult sexual health. The avoidance of topics such as aging and intimacy can be linked to how uncomfortable the topic of sexuality is in US culture, particularly sexual expression by older adults (Stausmire, 2004). This problem may be especially acute with LGBTQ clients, as healthcare providers face the double burden of ageism and lack of knowledge about issues facing that community (Hinchliff, Gott, & Galena, 2005). However, because many older adults still identify sexual expression as important, intimacy needs should be assessed and addressed by formal caregivers (Stausmire, 2004).

**Institutions.** The institutions in which older adults live impact their quality of life and also their sexual expression, whether they are in an institution short-term to recover from an illness or injury or longer-term as a residence. These institutions also have an impact, including a financial impact, on other parts of society. The assisted living industry housed about one million older adults in the United States in 2008 (Frankowski & Clark, 2009). Nursing facility care, which is more intensive than the care provided in assisted living, cost Medicare 151.5 billion dollars in 2012 (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2012).

Giving attention to older adult’s sexual expression in care institutions, which are the homes for these elders, is crucial. Institutions can offer support or can create barriers to older adults’ sexual expression. The influence of institutions increases as more care is provided, creating greater dependence. For instance, staff in nursing facilities generally spend much more time with the residents and thus have stronger influence than the staff at assisted living facilities. Sexual complaints happen in all types of elder housing, although they are more common in nursing homes than in assisted living (Cornelison & Doll, 2013).
Opportunities for social interaction in institutions are important for sexual expression. Not all sexual expression happens in relationship, but some does. Social forms of sexual expression might include making oneself feel attractive in terms of dress and grooming for interaction with people who one finds sexually attractive (Walker, 1997). Sexual expression could also include dancing, acting, or other social activities that may not immediately seem sexual (Terra Nova, 1991). To the extent that sexual expression is important to someone, having adequate opportunities for social interaction can be supportive of sexual satisfaction. Of course, meeting people with whom one might want to be more physically intimate also is supported by social opportunities.

Policies held by institutions that care for older adults can make sexual expression more or less likely. On the extreme end would be barrier policies like prohibiting room visits between residents after a certain time, which interferes with social interaction (Kassel, 1983). These do not seem to be common currently. In addition, though, policies about whether doors can be locked, whether employees wait after they knock to enter a room, whether alternate spaces are provided for sexual activity if someone has a roommate, and whether sexuality is explicitly asked about and planned for in care planning all could affect how comfortable one feels about sexual expression (Gott 2005). Often, no policy exists around sexual expression in nursing homes (Tabak & Shemesh-Kigli, 2006; Wornell, 2014).

Even with formal policies, employee factors can make sexual expression feel more or less supported. In the absence of policies, employees are left to set the sexual tone with their own attitudes and knowledge. Some may be trained in human sexuality to some degree, such as the social workers or registered nurses at facilities, but others generally have not have received any
formal training (Gott, 2005). Both attitudes and actions of staff have a strong effect on the expression of sexuality by elders in institutions (Walker, Osgood, Richardson, & Ephross, 1998). Different types of employee factors, discussed in detail below, will affect the institutional climate around sexuality.

One factor that impacts how employees interact with residents is their general level of respect for older adults’ sexual preferences. This does not necessarily mean that the staff and the residents have the same opinions, but rather that the staff is sensitive to the fact that older adults may have different preferences than they do in regard to sexuality (Gott, 2005). In addition, to be respectful of sexuality, staff would need to be aware of and consciously reduce their limiting views on sexuality and discomfort in “consideration of sex within the context of altered states of health” (Gott, 2005, p. 131). If employees feel that their opinions supersede that of their residents, this could create an environment hostile to sexual expression. The dimension of respect is primarily an attitude, whereas more active forms of support are conceptualized as “openness.” This area also includes respect for different sexual orientations, which is a significant part of sexual satisfaction at any part of one’s life span (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011).

Beyond being willing to respect the preferences of older adults is openness to a range of forms of consensual sexual expression by the residents. This means possibly taking actions to explicitly encourage sexual expression, actively seeking questions, and making sexuality and its expression a topic that can be spoken about and planned for in a facility. When an employee is not open to sexual expression by residents, this preference may be expressed in more or less explicit ways (Frankowski & Clark, 2009). When a sex positive environment is created, then it also makes discussions of sex that are not wanted or consensual more likely and more productive
Explicit exploration of consent is a major part of creating a safe and open sexual environment.

Employees may have more or less accurate knowledge about sexual issues to effectively support older adults. For example, they may hold ageist stereotypes about older adult sexuality, they might hold heterosexist assumptions without basic knowledge of homosexual relationships, and they may have a “lack of theoretical knowledge about sexual issues,” including how aging typically affects sex and what types of support are available (Gott, 2005, p. 131). When employees have more adequate knowledge, they are less likely to pressure older adults to repress their sexual expression (Deacon, Minichiello, & Plummer, 1995).

In addition to factual knowledge about sexuality sexual expression, employees may or may not know residents’ rights around sexual expression. This knowledge of consent issues and decision-making is key to understand sexuality in an institution (Wornell, 2014; Mayers & McBride, 1998). This way, they also know how to respond should rights issues come up (Cornelison & Doll, 2013). Adequate response would include a plan for to respond in the case of unwanted touch, which is a significant issue that affects women’s sexual satisfaction disproportionately (Rosen, Lachs, & Pillemer, 2010). Balancing the right to sexual expression with the right to safety is a delicate task that requires informed caregivers and a clear policy (Wornell, 2014).

Other support institutions may also affect older adult sexual expression. For instance, Lemieux et al. (2004) found a substantial lack of privacy in hospital settings, and sometimes the size of the hospital bed made intimacy difficult. Couples voiced the request for health care
services to put more space for sexual expression. Inadequate care by healthcare providers may
due to a discrepancy between practice and theory (Redelman, 2008). Although health care
providers understand there is a need for older adults to remain intimate and have emotional
connections, they do not communicate with their patients adequately on this topic (Redelman,
2008).

**Policy.** Patients receiving care through Medicare, for which all older adults over 65
qualify, have protected rights. These include the right to “dignity and respect,” which include
respect for one’s sexual preferences (“What are my rights,” 2015). One also has a right to
privacy as long as one’s decisions are not infringing on the rights of other people residing or
working in the facility (“What are my rights,” 2015). The rights of people receiving care need to
be measured alongside the rights of workers to work in an environment that they find safe and
appropriate (Center for Practical Bioethics, 2006). Laws in terms of sexual consent in cases of
dementia are still being formed (Gruley, 2015).

Policies of particular hospices and other care organizations affect how sexual expression
is managed more often than laws do (Center for Practical Bioethics, 2006). For example, it could
be the policy of an organization to share sexual information with family members during care
planning, as some suggest is a best practice (e.g. Wornell, 2014). It could be a policy to ask
about sexual expression explicitly upon intake. It is best if the policy is clearly stated when
residents choose to work with or live in an institution (Center for Practical Bioethics, 2006).
Unfortunately, many organizations have no clear policy specific to sexual expression that staff
members are routinely trained on and of which residents are made aware (Doll, 2013; Gray,
2015).
As the literature makes clear, sexual expression as people age is impacted by a wide variety of factors, from individual to cultural. Research is not outside of these scopes of influence. To move from contextualizing the current project in terms of the literature on the topic to understanding the context of my background and assumptions as an interviewer, we now turn to the statement of subjectivity.

**Statement of Subjectivity**

I am impacted by values that I hold, including the importance of social justice in sexual expression and the significance of considering the role of gender and privilege in sexual expression. To acknowledge the impact of my own background and biases on my work, I offer this subjectivity statement to explicitly situate myself as the interviewer. I identify as a white cisgender female bisexual married middle class therapist, assistant clinical professor of social work, and student. I also am a practicing Buddhist, which impacts my thinking about moral issues and definitely affects my thinking about the nature of the self, making me very interested in culture and context as a fundamental part of being. I am a parent and value raising children, as well as being sensitive to and curious about the impact of caregiving on sexual expression. I have invested a significant amount of time in education, with double undergraduate majors in English and Communication, a master’s degree in Communication Arts and Sciences, another master’s degree in Social Work, and soon a doctorate in Human Development and Family Sciences, and I generally value education for supporting human growth potential. I also identify as a feminist, and am particularly interested in issues that impact women.

By identifying in the ways that I do, I am the recipient of a good deal of privilege. For example, by appearing white, I do not experience the same issues that a woman appearing to be
or identifying as another race would experience. The question of sexual expression and race is an important one, and yet due to issues of scope is not something I took on in this dissertation, although I would value reading and learning from such a project.

There are also ways in which I am not privileged. Identifying as a woman has meant that I, like many of the participants in this study, received a lot of misinformation about female sexuality and pleasure growing up. This included getting no information about orgasm or about consent from reliable sources. Perhaps not surprisingly then, my earliest partnered sexual experiences were exciting but not consistently pleasurable. I also experienced non-consensual sex in college—today I would know to call it rape, but it took years for me to become clear that I had a right to tell someone I was engaging with sexually when I wanted to stop and expect that person to respect my request. I also had a number of experiences of what I would now call sexual coercion—not rape, but being pressured or guilted into consent. These experiences influenced my becoming a sex therapist and an educator, and my sense that if sex is not openly discussed, that creates dangerous situations not only for women but also for men who are not educated about consent. These experiences may also be the reason Jolly, Cornwall, and Hawkins’ (2013) reflections about power, pleasure, and sexuality, specifically the benefit of foregrounding female pleasure, resonated so strongly with me: I am a woman before I am a survivor. It rings true to my experience that stories of danger, of infection, and of assault, were told to me more often than stories of pleasure. This left a discontinuity in my mind: I got the message that men were dangerous and they assaulted people, and that sex was dangerous because I could get pregnant and it was immoral, but I was left unclear of how then to negotiate pleasure and desire. Consent is important for the sake of pleasure for all involved, not merely to reduce danger.
During the study, I also gave birth to my second child. Being a parent and visibly pregnant with my second child certainly influenced how the participants approached me, with most of them having been parents, including by birth and by adoption, and many of them offering feedback and advice specifically about birth and parenting. Also, my pregnancy and the birth of my second child, who is female, increased the urgency with which I hope for sexual pleasure and consent to be talked about in thoughtful ways for the next generation. The changes in my body kept me consistently aware that I too am in the process of aging, and seemingly more quickly in these particular years than at any other time in my life.

Personal experiences have impacted how I think about aging and sexuality. I have worked as an intern in a skilled nursing facility, which has influenced my perspective on how discourses of sexuality and aging impact real people. While working at a nursing facility, I learned how often the sexual desires of residents are ignored or made complicated by roommate and caretaker situations. As someone whose life has been immeasurably enriched by masturbation, I bristle at the thought of older adults being shamed for masturbating or not being given the space to do so because of the preferences of caregivers. As I age, I hope that lessons from the sexual revolution continue to be learned and create sex positive spaces for people of all ages.

My mentors have trained me both as a feminist and as a cultural critic, and these influences make me want to explore cultural discourses about aging and to challenge or disrupt them if they seem to cause suffering by oppressing historically oppressed populations or by unduly limiting people's basic freedoms. I see sexual expression as a basic freedom, including the right not to value sexual expression particularly. I don't see old age as a time of limited potential or primarily decline. I see it as more a culmination of a complex range of
influences in life and an opportunity for continued or newly discovered growth and actualization.

In this, I see physical decline as a part but not necessarily and inherently as a problem, and
certainly not only as a problem.

My training as a sex therapist with the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) has also influenced me during this study. I have had the opportunity to present initial research at an AASECT conference and to have rich discussions with other scholars, such as Joan Price, and sex positive older adults, educators, and therapists about sex and aging. I attended an eye-opening 30-hour Sexual Attitude Reassessment in Toronto in which I was introduced to people negotiating sexuality from a number of different places, from living with major disabilities to being sex workers to identifying as being on different parts of the gender spectrum to being gay clergy. This experience challenged biases that I held about sex and sexual expression, and led me to reword the call for participants to invite all people who identify as female to participate, rather than assuming “female” as a natural category. I have discussed sex and aging with my AASECT supervisors as well as with older adult clients I work with in my private practice. I have also been enriched through discussions with my major advisor and with my committee over time, as my entire committee consists of older adults, as defined by this study. My training as an AASECT-certified sex therapist undoubtedly made me less reactive to sexual stories, even if they were outside of social norms, which likely made interviewees feel more comfortable sharing their stories than they would if my nonverbal or verbal responses appeared judgmental.
Review of chapters

This manuscript-style dissertation includes this introduction, two manuscripts, and a conclusion. Chapter two, Pathways to Pleasure, considers the paths that older adult women take to claim their own sexual being-ness and sexual pleasure. The chapter explores how, for the women interviewed, pursuing pleasure meant challenging social norms and the risks associated with that. It also includes a discussion of the value of telling the story of women's pleasure first when considering female sexuality, rather than beginning with issues of danger or pathology. Chapter 3, Older Adult Women’s Reflections on Divorce and Sexual Pleasure, offers a discussion of the role of divorce in the older adult cohort and the ways in which divorce affected sexual expression for the participants in the study. For many participants, although their divorces were not pleasant in the moment, they provided significant opportunities for the women to explore their sexual expression in new contexts and to clarify what their likes and preferences were. I argue that this is especially important in a generation in which marriage did not seem completely voluntary to women. Instead, a majority of the participants felt pressured into marriage by a sense that was the main work they could do, sometimes by social pressure around sex, and sometimes to leave home. For this reason, I argue that although much literature on divorce shows several types of negative outcomes over time, the participants in this study did not tend to express regret about their divorces. In the concluding chapter, I review findings from the study, consider how the conclusions of the two chapters intersect, and lay out the next steps for writing with the experiences of these women in mind, including plans to explore in further detail the topics of abortion, mixed-orientation marriage, affairs, menopause, non-consensual sexual activity, caregiving, and solo sexual expression.
Conclusion

Although the population is aging, women are disproportionately represented in this population, and the aging population is healthier and more sexually exploratory than the previous generation, the research on women's sexual pleasure as they age is somewhat limited. This project seeks to learn from women in their own words what impacted their experiences of sexual pleasure over time. By understanding in detail the experiences of these women, new insights into ways of approaching the study of aging and female sexuality may be available.
References


CHAPTER 2

PATHWAYS TO PLEASURE:

OLDER ADULT WOMEN’S REFLECTIONS ON BEING SEXUAL BEINGS

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Abstract

Older adult women make up a growing part of the population, and yet literature on their experiences of sexual pleasure over their lifespans is lacking. This qualitative interview study explores the experience of sixteen women aged 57 to 91 to better understand how they sought sexual pleasure over a lifetime. To seek pleasure, the women in the study described having to challenge certain cultural rules to create a supportive environment for sexual expression, which meant access to Novel contexts in which to learn, cultivating Intimacy with partners and with oneself, being Creative with particular sexual activities, and Extending one’s sense of sexual possibility into advanced age (NICE) to make pleasure more likely as women aged.
I was 40 when I kicked over the traces.
-Martha, 79-year-old study participant

To kick over the traces - to shake off control; show insubordination or independence (Definition, n.d)

The older adult segment of the population is growing (Easterbrook, 2014), with women making up more of this group due to longer lifespans. People in the United States also are healthier into older ages, and this combined with changes in social norms are making sexual expression an increasingly significant issue (Easterbrook, 2014). Older adults say that sexual expression is important to them (Lindau & Gavrilova, 2010). In one study, 85 percent of older men and 61 percent of older women said it is integral to their quality of life (Fisher, 2010). Indeed, much research on older adulthood has supported the idea that sexual expression remains important with age to many people (Gray & Garcia, 2012; Hinchliff, Gott, & Ingelton, 2010; Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011; Kleinplatz, Menard, Paradis, Campbell, & Dalgleish, 2013; Lindau et al., 2007; Minichiello, Plummer, & Loxton, 2004; Schick et al., 2010). Depending on how "sexual expression" is defined, these numbers could change, because sexual expression defined liberally can and should include things like dancing or dressing up. Because of the larger population of older adults and the likelihood that at least some of them are interested in sexual expression, exploring in more detail what people mean when they describe sexual expression is important. The project is important for improving understanding of women's sexual experiences. This article adds to the literature in providing rich detail about ways in which older adult women think about sexuality and pleasure, providing an opportunity for broader understanding for
clinicians who offer care to older adult women and researchers who study sexual expression in older adulthood.

Unfortunately, sexism, heterosexism, and ageism impact both older adult sexual expression and sexuality research. An example would be research that focuses on types of sexual expression like penetrative intercourse or partnered sexual expression, which is unduly narrow when it comes to women particularly, who are less likely to be partnered than men in older adulthood (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006). Also, women are less likely to find penetration alone satisfying than men are, and issues with penetration increase with age for both sexes (Nagoski, 2015). One of the most cited sexuality and aging studies does not include masturbation (Lindau et al., 2007), although studies do exist that include consideration of masturbation throughout the lifespan (Habenick et al., 2010). Continued exploration of what sexual expression looks like as people age, then, is likely to prove crucial to understanding, especially exploration that offers narratives that counter hegemonic narratives of decline (Gullette, 2011). Compounding the problem of narrow definitions is a widespread belief that only youth is beautiful or sexy and that age is linked primarily to decline, especially for women in terms of their attractiveness (Gullette, 2011). These unhelpful and simplistic beliefs create and sustain negative expectations of how aging might affect sexual expression. They shape attitudes about sex held by older people, medical providers, and society more broadly. Interestingly, even the stereotypes are not completely consistent. Older adults have been seen as both asexual and hyper-sexual (Gott, 2005), creating a public caricature of older adult sexual expression as either "too little" or “too much,” rather than being open to the idea that older adult women's desires exist on a spectrum in which many different types of expression could be considered normal (Fileborn et al., 2015; Nagoski, 2015). The heterogeneity of sexual expression with age means that the richness
achieved in details provides more understanding than aggregate data that misses contextual details.

Because women live longer than men, women face unique opportunities and challenges in terms of aging and sexuality, and yet their experiences are studied less often than men's experiences (Fileborn et al., 2015). Women have different experiences of sexuality than men do, as they face cultural norms that are more likely to downplay the importance of sexual pleasure throughout the lifespan for women’s wellbeing and to moralize about female sexual expression (Gott, 2005; Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013). In addition, heteronormativity marks many explorations of female sexuality, with an emphasis on penetrative intercourse as the main form of sexual expression, which leads to pathologizing issues with erectile dysfunction or vaginal dryness (Fileborn et al., 2015). This is true even though a majority of women do not reliably experience orgasm through penetrative intercourse (Nagoski, 2015).

For the purposes of this paper, sexual expression and sex will be defined broadly to include any activity intended for sexual pleasure. Sex can include individual or relational activity, including penetrative intercourse, masturbation, oral sex, intimate contact like mutual masturbation, handholding, dressing up, dancing, engaging with fantasy material like pornography or erotica, and more (Price, 2014). A useful definition of sex to start from is “consensual activity that offers mutual sexual pleasure, connection, and possibly reproduction for those involved” (Vernacchio, 2015). However, because that definition does not include space for solo sexual expression, for this study the part of Vernacchio's definition "activity that offers sexual pleasure" was used. This definition is offered in an attempt to be inclusive, in agreement with Syme (2014), who argues that “a holistic view of sexuality incorporates an integration of
emotional, social, intellectual, and somatic experiences, represents diverse sexual experiences, reflects relationship context, and focuses on pleasure as well as on sexual dysfunction” (p. 36).

Over a lifetime, women experience a broad range of influences on their sexual expression and pleasure. Because research conducted on older adult sexuality may start with unhelpful assumptions about sexuality, considering how older adult women have come to define sexuality contributes to better understanding of an underserved population (Fileborn et al., 2015). Sexual expression is usually undertaken for pleasure, although it might favor one partner's pleasure over another, and there may be dimensions of sexual expression that are more about power than about pleasure (Sykes Wylie, 2016). Although women's pleasure is important, it also potentially challenges social norms of pleasure that are based on men's pleasure (Nagoski, 2015). As a group of feminist authors exploring the issue put it, "[t]he desiring woman becomes transgressive; her sexual agency makes her a potentially disruptive threat to the containment of women, and to family structures built on meeting the desires of men" (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013, p. 6).

This study contains reflections of sixteen Caucasian women identifying as heterosexual, bisexual, transgendered, and cisgendered who have shared their experiences of pleasure, which has meant in some cases claiming experiences that have previously been stigmatized or considered immoral, even to the participants themselves. Included in this interview study are women who have transitioned sexes, been in open relationships, divorced, had extended affairs, been to sex clubs, had transcendent masturbatory experiences, experienced orgasm during natural childbirth and more, and in taking the risk of sharing their experiences with the interviewer, they discussed topics that typically are not talked about with a stranger. Many participants, in sharing their stories, also expressed the hope their stories would be of use to others. In particular, the experiences of older adult women can provide some perspective on
sexuality in a population whose pleasure is sometimes ignored. Every participant has in some ways followed traditional paths for female pleasure and in some other ways challenged rules for female pleasure and partnership and found her own way in spite of those rules. The women who participated in this study challenged social norms to express themselves as sexual beings.

Gerontologists and clinicians can benefit from explicitly considering and challenging cultural stigma around aging. Because sexual pleasure is a social justice issue in addition to being a personal and family issue, it is an important consideration. To that end, this paper describes the research theory and methods, themes and categories from the interviews, lessons from the themes, and a consideration of limitations of the study and implications for future research.

**Theoretical Orientation**

This project has phenomenological, feminist, and critical gerontological theoretical roots. Seidman’s (2013) in-depth interviewing approach is based on phenomenology, as is phenomenological heuristic analysis (Moustakas, 2001), which will be described in more detail in the methods section. Seidman (2013) outlines phenomenological assumptions underlying in-depth interviewing as a method. First, he says that what matters in this approach is the experience of participants and the meaning they construct from their memories of those experiences, which is a transitory reality that change over time. For this project, that meant accepting participants' perspectives on their own lives while still asking questions to better understand the subjective reality of the participants and to invite participants to clarify. The interviewer asked questions to encourage reflection on the lived experience of participants. She worked under the assumption that the meaning of one’s experience is understood in context, and
so that context must be explored (Seidman, 2013). This emphasis on contextual subjective understanding led the decision to engage in in-depth interviewing with participants.

A feminist perspective also contributed to the study design. Calasanti and Slevin (2006) argued in the introduction of their edited book that age has been an underrepresented issue in feminist studies and sought to remedy that. They were concerned about ageism, a concept coined by Robert Butler to describe prejudice towards older adults and aging, discriminatory practices, and institutional structures that keep such stereotypes in place (Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2002). Calasanti and Slevin said that often gerontological scholarship on issues that matter for aging women have ageist assumptions in them, such as discussing successful aging basically in terms of not aging or discussing things like self care for caregivers more than systemic forms of support like programs that would pay family caregivers or provide respite programs (2006). In addition, they point out that many mainstream studies of sexuality do not include older adult populations (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Gullette (2011) extensively considers how social structures and meaning influence women’s sexual well-being as they age, including consideration of cultural stories of the nobility of not requiring care in old age, exploration of positive aging meaning not aging, ideas that youth sex is good and older adult sex is not. Also, Shaw (2012) considers how aging can affect sexual expression with an emphasis on opportunities created for the female experience with age. She writes about the possibility of aging being associated with benefits that can outweigh challenges for sexual expression.

Although feminist thought is quite diverse, it does have some unifying features. The experience of women is given primacy (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). In addition, “[f]eminist theories attempt to integrate micro and macro approaches to aging through linkages between
individuals and social structure, or between personal problems and public responses” (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011, p. 329). For this project, questions were designed to invite consideration of links between personal experience and social structures, which is influenced by a feminist perspective. Finally, the study's focus on the practical experience and wisdom of participants is influenced by a feminist approach.

Third, a critical gerontological perspective influenced the study design. In gerontology, critical theory was taken up and transformed into a critical gerontological approach. This approach has four goals that are resonant with the goals of critical theory overall, laid out in a seminal article by Moody and applied to older adults:

1. To theorize subjective and interpretive dimensions of aging
2. To focus not on technical advancement but on “praxis,” defined as active involvement in practical change, such as public policy
3. To link academics and practitioners through praxis
4. To produce “emancipator knowledge,” which is a positive vision of how things might be different or what a rationally defensible vision of a “good old age” might be. (1988, p. xvii)

This project links to those goals through a focus on how subjective and interpretive dimensions can lead to theories of aging. Through questions that focus on what has been important to sexual satisfaction as women age, the researcher aims to provide some useful suggestions for what supports sexual satisfaction with age.
Sandberg (2013) combines a feminist and critical gerontological approach in the idea of affirmative aging, which she developed in her work with older adult men's sexual experiences. She emphasizes that focusing on decline or on positive aging as binaries is not helpful, and that instead one could emphasize a "proliferative process of differentiation. If one thinks about ageing of the body as not solely something that happens when one gets old but in fact as a lifelong process, then the ageing body may be seen as a set in constant process of differentiation" (Sandberg, 2013, p. 19). In this way, "the very same person who may experience his or her bodily changes as a loss and threat or challenge to subjectivity … may also experience the changes in his or her body as producing something new or unforeseen" (Sandberg, 2013, p. 20).

Rather than commodifying female pleasure, this study offers a space for stories of pleasure to be heard and to create space for reflection on pleasure (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013). This is not to deny that difficulties exist for women in terms of sexuality—they do. The interviewees in the current study described experiencing difficulties, including in some cases nonconsensual sex, abuse by powerful men, abuse being ignored by powerful women, body changes that they themselves did not enjoy, and body changes that they had the sense were socially unacceptable. Further publications from the interviews conducted for the current study will likely include impediments to pleasure, menopause, masturbation, the roles of marriage and divorce, abuse, abortion, and resilience, and yet for this article, to aid focus and because women's pleasure is underrepresented even more than women's struggles, pleasure is featured. Although there are sometimes good reasons to look at difficulties and pathologies of aging and of women's sexuality for a clinical population seeking treatment, it is important to note that many different types of sexual expression can be normal and to understand these different versions of normal
(Nagoski, 2015). In short, counter narratives are useful (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013). These "counter-narratives must include stories of women's quest for erotic fulfilment, agency, pleasure and desire" (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013, p. 29).

Finally, the methods and approach were influenced by the idea of the life review (Butler, 1963). Having opportunities to review one's life can be helpful as one ages. Life review can be useful in terms of providing an opportunity for integrating things one has learned throughout one's life (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). The researcher in the current study hoped that potential harms would be minimized, and indeed, that thinking through one's life in terms of sexuality might be useful or at least interesting for participants in integrating their thoughts about sexuality over the life span and being able to share the perspectives that they came to have. The feedback received from many participants was that the process was enjoyable and that they thought through or said something they had not said out loud before.

**Methodology**

In a heuristic phenomenological approach, researchers seek to understand how participants experience particular phenomena from a place of "connectedness and relationship" (Moustakas, 2001). A topic is chosen that connects personally and significantly to the researcher. When the researcher is immersed in the topic, she sees it saturating her life and the world around her. Indeed, the researcher in this study ended up surrounded by the topic of sexuality. This included her work as a sex therapist, which tended to increase the likelihood of having discussions about and reflections on sexual expression, and having discussions in many venues about sexual expression. In sharing results, the researcher works to illuminate nuanced phenomena rather than to provide a statistical account of reality. To be able to do this, the
researcher built in time to sit with the stories of the participants and to reflect on the rich tapestry of meaning created by the interaction of the voices of the participants and the interviewer.

As described above, the choice of interviewing as a method puts language and meaning-making at the center of the research project. “Interviewing … is a basic mode of inquiry. Recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 8). Seidman researches education and argues that “social abstractions like ‘education’ are best understood through the experiences of individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built” (2013, p. 9). "Sexuality” and “sexual expression” are similar such abstractions, and so inquiry into their meaning to particular people is useful in understanding them. An interview-based approach has been helpful in a number of other studies of sex and health issues (e.g. Gilbert, Ussher, & Perz, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2009; Juraskova et al., 2003; Lindau, Surawska, Paice, & Baron, 2011), and so this is not an unprecedented application of the approach.

The methodology also was influenced by feminist qualitative research theory in order to bring to light stories that often are not shared (DeVault & Gross, 2012). The interview process, as well, was impacted by feminist thought, including taking on the opportunity to "conceptualize the interview as an encounter between women with common interests who would share knowledge" (DeVault & Gross, 2011, p. 211). Rather than feigning a position of objectivity, which was difficult in any case due, as just one example, to the researcher's very visible pregnancy, the researcher sought to understand the stories of the participants through sometimes sharing her own experience. The interviewer’s extensive training in sex therapy, which made creating an inviting environment for sharing personal stories possible, supported this
methodology. Without such training, a judgmental environment may have been created that would make it likely that less would have been shared by participants.

**Methods**

To explore sexual satisfaction with age, the researcher conducted interviews with fifteen women aged 57 to 91 in a variation of Seidman's in-depth interview design (Seidman, 2013). Two interviews were chosen to create time between interviews for the participants and the interviewer to reflect on the first interview. The age requirement was 55 and above in keeping with sexuality literature, which puts old age at 55 because of menopause. In the first semi-structured interview, the interviewer asked questions to better understand the history of meanings participants associated with their sexuality and sexual expression over time. The second interview, conducted a three to eight weeks later depending on schedules, offered an opportunity for the participants to review and edit their transcripts, provide a member check regarding initial themes the researcher noticed, and answer additional questions or share additional information. If participants requested edits to their transcripts, those were included in the final data. Some participants chose to edit their transcripts extensively, while others gave less feedback. Also, participants and the researcher were aware of the possibility of requesting additional interviews, although in the end each participant participated in only two interviews, some with phone calls in between.

The researcher recruited participants through public electronic bulletin boards, by presenting on aging and intimacy at the local public library, and by writing articles as the sex therapist on staff for a local magazine aimed at older adults. From initial participants, a snowball sample was gathered. Offering a gift card to participants at each interview encouraged retention.
No participants dropped out of the study. The main question guiding the research project was:
What factors are associated with satisfaction with one’s sexual life as one ages?

The group of participants included sixteen women who ranged in age from 57 to 91, with five in the 55 to 64 range, five in the 65 to 74 range, and six 75 or over (see Appendix A for a breakdown of participants by age). The "Baby Boomers" are born between 1946 and 1964, meant half of the participants were of that generation (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). All participants were white. Two identified as bisexual, with the rest identifying as heterosexual. One identified as male-to-female transsexual and had completely transitioned to living as female. All but one of the participants had been married at some point in their histories, but only one participant was currently living with a married partner. Other current relational configurations included three women cohabiting with romantic partners, six having partners with whom they did not live, and six being single. Six of the participants had been widowed in their lifetimes. Three were married to men who ultimately identified as gay or bisexual. The participants who were currently paired were paired heterosexually except for one who was partnered with a woman. In the below excerpts, the participants are named with pseudonyms in alphabetical order by age—that is, Anna is the youngest participant and Rita is the eldest.

As the researcher conducted and transcribed the interviews over a 15-month period, she reflected on the interviews and listed themes from the data at the end of the transcripts. These initial themes were member checked. She also kept a research journal for reflections on the interviews and any other details she did not want to forget. When all the interviews and transcripts were completed, she re-read all the transcripts, looking for surprises and larger themes and discontinuities. She then concept coded the data for themes within the groups of participants,
focusing on the larger categories of pleasure, marriage, divorce, widowhood, affairs, and menopause because these themes stood out as having interesting rich data from early analysis (Saldaña, 2015). Some themes had rich data but were set aside for later use, including sexual abuse, menopause, and the role of divorce in sexual expression. She used the online qualitative analytical program Dedoose to help with the coding and analysis, include looking at the themes as a word cloud to have a sense of the number of exemplars available per theme. Through immersion in the data, the researcher also got a sense of which themes had new or surprising information, even if the themes were not present in all or most of the interviews. Through the analysis, the meanings created by the participants and the meanings created by the researcher came together (Moustakas, 2001) to create the current article, which is intended to help to give readers a sense of the range of experiences of the research participants in seeking sexual pleasure in their lives.

**Results: NICE Women as Sexual Beings**

Women are sexual beings who desire pleasure in various forms throughout the lifespan. As is true in other samples of older adults (e.g. Fileborn et al, 2015), a major feature of the descriptions from this group of women was the diversity of experiences. Still, themes emerged regarding facilitators of pleasure. A number of factors emerged in the sample as supporting sexual pleasure. Major overarching themes, which can be summed up in the acronym NICE, included the importance of Novel contexts and ways of thinking, the benefits of Intimacy, the value of Creativity in terms of sexual acts, and the significance of Extending one’s sense of sexual possibility into older age (See Appendix B for a Theme Key). Quotes from participants are offered to illustrate the themes and categories, although the quotes do not exhaustively represent the reflections of all the participants on the themes.
A. Novel Contexts

Within novel contexts there are 12 subthemes. Finding novel contexts meant, as Helen aptly put it, "getting out of the bubble" of family and the culture in which one was raised to have a broader experience of sexual expression. Part of novel contexts also included sorting one's own moral ground, rather than being able to rely on the one given by tradition, since women's sexuality has been more highly moralized than men's (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013; Gott, 2005). Some participants left the bubble earlier and some later—some explored as soon as they left home. For others, it was circumstances like widowhood or divorce somewhat later in life that pushed them into considering their own sexual expression and how it linked to their personal moral beliefs.

a. Getting out of the bubble. Many of the participants spoke about moving away from being constrained to trying new sexual activities and being able to dedicate time to looking into new ways of seeking pleasure. Throughout their lives, people had times of freedom that facilitated sexual exploration and other times with less exploration. Having access to information, leaving home, being exposed to the women's liberation movement, political activism more generally, gender affirmation, safe partnerships, reconsidering traditional views of the role of marriage, experiencing new sexual environments, sexual friendship, divorce, and affairs all contributed to the contexts in which the participants had freedom to explore.

1. Acquiring information. Having information about sexual expression was important to sexual growth for all the participants. Sometimes this information came from partners or from classes or from literature, but it was a basic component of exploration that all the participants mentioned. Some people sought educational experiences, like dating experienced people or
seeking out novel sexual experiences with toys or with different configurations of people involved. For example, for Helen, a time of great sexual growth was in her 40s and 50s:

My 40s and 50s were the best. ... Um, because I was with people, if I chose to be with people, and I experienced a lot of things and I learned...I mean I seeked that out. I seeked what it would be like to, um, play with dildos or be with two men and myself or two women, another woman and a man, and it was just fun because it was safe and it was like wow—it’s kind of like, why doesn’t everybody do this? Because the expression of it—we’re raised to be monogamous, you know, that’s the way you’re supposed to be. You know, the whole thing about cheating. You know, the whole thing about negotiating and being with more than one person is still under…hidden in the basement or something. Um, so I would say the richest part was in my 40s and 50s and into my early 60s. Rich meaning it was just fun and expressive and safe and just fed me.

Other times the information came from literature. A variety of books and magazines were mentioned, but most often mentioned were *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and pornographic magazines like *Penthouse*, which in addition to photographs had stories called "Forum" that several people mentioned as being instructive and a turn-on for them and for their partners. The books mentioned were generationally situated according to what was available at the time, which makes sense, as anti-pornography laws were being challenged in the 1960s, which made explicit materials more available (Sykes Wylie, 2016). For example, several women mentioned getting a little book that Kotex made about menstruation that did not include sexual information in lieu of being given sexual education. Some of the eldest participants mentioned a marriage manual that gave very utilitarian information about sex. Those who came of age a bit later had literature like *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which was first published in 1971. Younger participants mentioned
reading magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, which featured women's issues starting in 1965. Women also mentioned the availability of information being different later in life because of the ability to access information through the internet privately, which made webinars and other forms of information more accessible.

2. **Leaving home.** Not surprisingly, leaving home facilitated sexual exploration for many of the participants early in their lives and in their sexual development. This leaving home, for many participants, went beyond simply living somewhere else to challenging norms with which they were raised. They described moving to bigger towns where they could be exposed to more progressively-thinking people and also could experiment more anonymously. Brenda described her experience of leaving home:

   I moved to Athens. I came to Athens, exactly where my dad did not want me to be. And did everything he thought I would do (laughs). ... You know, and then I had, you know, I remember the first time I ever had an orgasm, and it was not with that guy that I was with all those years. And then it was like “hoooooly moly!” (laughs).

In some cases, the possibility of leaving home was created by getting married. Norma, for example, had a brief marriage early in her life that facilitated moving away from home and into a city. She said "I got away, and I was in Atlanta, and then I was a free woman."

   Most of the participants in the study did not get significant information about sexuality at home. To the extent that they did, most of it was informal, like seeing family members' naked bodies or hearing parents having sex. In general, either due to age or family environment, after leaving home participants tended to explore their sexuality much more extensively.
3. Women’s liberation. Multiple participants discussed exposure to the women's liberation movement as being significant in creating opportunities to explore. Specifically, they reported becoming aware of double standards in society and of having more choices than they initially knew they had as women, including in terms of sexual expression. Several participants described participating in groups that taught about awareness of their bodies, including looking at their vulvas, being aware of having clitorises, and being able to see their cervixes with a speculum. Debra described starting to challenge assumptions about being female and about her right to pleasure:

I think that probably that definitely had to do with women’s liberation. Women started to question things. You know, women started to question everything about “why are we…why are we not working? Do we really have to stay at home?” I think it was the whole questioning thing, just realizing that women are people too, and that we might be normal…women might be different from men but we might also have the same…you know…different needs, same needs, whatever. That we were people too. It wasn’t just defined by men. Maybe that’s it. The standard didn’t always have to be male-centered.

A number of women learned about women's liberation in college women's studies classes, especially those who had grown up in more rural environments and then transitioned to learning a lot when they went to college. In those classes, several women became aware of consent and past types of treatment by men that they had known had made them uncomfortable but had not known were assault. Multiple participants also mentioned that an attitude of openness towards sexuality was pervasive in the late 1960s and 1970s, and that they benefitted from this general context of awareness and availability of resources and partners. As Laura put it, "That was the seventies then. It was the sexual revolution, and I screwed around a lot."
4. **Political participation.** Related to the sexual revolution was the importance of political groups for supporting women's right to explore sexual expression. For a number of the participants, activism, teaching, and other social types of work were key in exploring their own sexual expression and also in inviting other women to explore. Political groups of which the participants were a part included civil rights groups, sexuality/bisexual rights groups, and abortion rights groups. These rights groups helped women to find like-minded people who were open to same sex attraction and felt that sexual rights were a human rights issue. Helen, for example, had known that she was attracted to women, but felt comfortable claiming her identity as a bisexual woman through activism. She said of her activism work, "That was part of my sexuality." She continued:

I mean, it takes work to do this because you have to kind of get out of the bubble that you’re put in as a kid, wherever you came from, whatever was the norm. And um, so…It took me awhile to realize it’s bullshit. I mean, a while…I was in my 20s…but it’s bullshit. And so, um, and before I identified, before I discovered that, I’m sure I was in a little box. I mean, I kissed two women and that was like whoosh, shhhh, shhhh about that.

5. **Gender exploration.** For Elizabeth, affirming her gender opened up opportunities to explore after having many years of trying to find where she fit gender-wise. In her case, divorce from her partner also opened up a time of exploration. This included being clear about her gender, but needing further experience to discover her sexual orientation. She said

I had no idea what gender the partner would be. ... When I started living as the new me [after male to female sex transitioning], people asked “are you straight or gay?” And I was like “I don’t know. I haven’t experienced anything but one thing.”
6. Safe partners. Having a partner who was open to exploring and with whom they felt emotionally supported also made it more likely that participants would try different things. This included not being judged and also, importantly, having open lines of communication to discuss what participants liked and did not like. The communication allowed participants to try things and then to reevaluate their approach as needed. Anna described feeling "really safe with my partner, and I feel like he's really opened up the door to 'anything you want to do is fine with me as long as it pleases both of us,' and that was the beginning statement."

7. Reconsidering traditional views of marriage and sex. A consistent theme through the group was learning to hold more flexibly to their views on marriage as the proper context for sexual expression. Although many of the participants began with more traditional ideas about the role of sex being in marriage, by the time they were older adults, they typically held those rules more loosely. Sometimes that was from experiences of marriage, divorce, and widowhood, in some cases it was from raising gay children, but none of the participants at the time of the interview espoused a strong belief that sexuality was only to be experienced within a marriage. In fact, most of the participants were quite cautious about marriage, and a majority were in relationships without choosing to remarry. In several cases, the shift was associated with a change in religious views, especially when marriage was seen as the correct moral context for sexual pleasure for religious reasons. Many of the participants expressed the idea that marriage was a context that was set up to create a container for caring for children, but that after children were raised, that marriage was not necessarily as helpful of an institution. As Frances put it "I came to see that marriage is no guarantee that you're going to be happy. And so then I went through a series of boyfriends and a series of um, of sexual experimentation, like a teenager." The movement away from marriage was also influenced by issues of resource sharing in older
age, as participants described being met with suspicion from their partner's children or alternately having a sense that their resources were for their own children after they died, so not wanting to set up a merger of resources through the legal merger of marriage. Often people had their own houses and lives, and they did not particularly want to combine their lives legally with someone else's, although some still did desire marriage.

8. New sexual environments. Jill, after becoming widowed, began exploring a scene of swingers' campgrounds with a new partner. This experimentation was at the request of the new partner, and the participant ended up having mixed feelings about it. She described the experience as being fun in a relatively limited way before opting to stop going to the campgrounds:

And there’s dancing there [at the swingers' campground] and, you know…so he and I danced, and he could really dance well, and that was fun, and then you go up to this lodge area and he came with my partner and I and we walked around and there was people having sex and you’re observing it and um, so I had sex with him, and that was fun...

Being in a place to say "yes" to being in new environments, even when it led ultimately to saying "no" to that environment, helped participants to sort out what they liked and did not like. Several participants tried tantra to varying degrees and enjoyed it, with one trying it in a group context. Helen described her experience this way:

Tantra! So I did that too. You know, what I didn’t tell you which that reminds me—my life is so full—is that when I was in D.C. I was with this man who is polyamorous, and with the bi group people, and um I was asked and my boyfriend was asked to be in a sexual, a sacred sexual group, and we did that. ... It was fabulous, and everything was
around pagan holidays and, not everything but that’s…but it really was about sexuality
and spirituality and how they meet.

The tantra group ended less well for Helen, as someone joined whose sexual approach and
energy she did not like, but she appreciated many experiences from the group as she described
above. Even when participants ultimately decided they did not prefer new sexual environments
they tried, they reported having enjoyable memories from trying and none reported a sense of
being traumatized by the consensual adult experiments.

9. Sexual friendship. Another form of freedom a number of the participants experienced
was having sexual friendships, meaning having a sexual partner but no commitment to be
sexually or emotionally faithful to that partner. Some of these friendships were brief, and some
lasted for decades. People reported sweet memories from these friendships. They differed from
hook-ups, which were usually described as more like one-night stands, in that they were longer-
term friendships. Participants also had some of these, but were more likely to report issues with
sexually transmitted infections or other issues from them. The difference seemed to be time, as
well as a general regard for the other person and a relatively high degree of communicativeness.
Norma had many such friendships that created the main tapestry of intimate involvement in her
life, and she described sexual friendship this way:

I wanted to be friends. Yeah. And it’s really, I found, it’s really unusual to have a sexual
relationship and maintain a friendship. … But these men, I could. … We were friends,
and we had sex, but if I dated someone and we were becoming partners, um,
the…becoming sexually involved was hugely power oriented. These, these friendships
didn’t have, the power didn’t come in. It was mutual pleasure.
10. Divorce. As mentioned before, all but two of the women in the sample were divorced at least once. That said, these configurations were far from simple—some were divorced after becoming widows and then remarrying, some were divorced soon after marrying, and some were divorced after long marriages. Although some hardships were a part of divorcing—several women went back to school to be able to make a living, for example, and several reported waiting to divorce until their children were old enough due to financial issues—none of the participants expressed regret about the divorces themselves in terms of longing to be back with the partners from whom they were divorced. One participant whose partner left for an ex girlfriend expressed the closest thing to regret about the relationship, which had been very sexually pleasurable, ending. She wondered if she would find such an able lover again, although later she realized she was a significant factor in the very good sex too. In some cases, three most notably, bitterness from the divorce remained at the time of the interview. Two of these had to do with substance abuse and dependence issues and one with gender expression issues. In even more, that was not the case. In fact, one woman considered her ex husband her best friend until his death. Sexually, for many, the period after the divorce was a time of increased exploration and rediscovery of sexual energy if it had been missing from the start or dwindled in the marriages. Indeed, Norma described her divorce as "the best thing that happened to me. You know … there are some divorces that are so empowering, and that's what that was for me." She said that as a divorcee, people she dated expected to have sex with her and her with them, which she was grateful for. Participants described empowering divorces especially when they followed marrying to leave home, which was not an uncommon experience, or one divorce related to the husband coming out as gay. Cynthia was concerned that she was never going to enjoy sex again after she divorced, but a very enjoyable one night stand helped her to realize she was still a
sexual being, and that the difficulty had been in the relationship rather than in her own sexual desire.

**11. Affairs.** Affairs affected almost all the participants' lives in one way or another. If "affair" is defined either as being in a relationship and having a secret sexual relationship with someone outside that relationship, or being in a sexual relationship with someone who is married, then eight of the participants had affairs. If being affected by affairs because a partner had an affair was counted, the number would be at least eleven. Although affairs sometimes caused pain for both the person in the affair and the partner, they also were important sources of support and in one case a stabilizer to a marriage in which the husband was gay. Three women had an experience of being married to men who they later confirmed to be secretly gay or bisexual, which in this sample was more common in the older cohort, perhaps because the stigma of being gay or bisexual and the limited options for same-sex relationships left more men "in the closet." Martha had a series of affairs in her relationship, with one lasting over thirty years. She generally reported having a lot of fun in these affairs and also hoping that her husband also had an opportunity to have affairs with men. She suspected that he did have sexual affairs, but that he had not extended and emotionally involved affairs like she did. She said "despite the fact that of course I'm operating out of the traditional role, I've loved every minute of it," especially the sex. She described the excitement and playfulness of her affair:

Um, my lover really brought me out. Um, I became, I think, very, very free. Very free, and very uninhibited. Uh, we carried it down. Part of it was very playful, and um, for example, you might laugh or not. I must have been removing a t-shirt over my arms and I was looking for someplace to hang it and I hung it on his cock.
b. Finding new moral ground. Related to reconsidering traditional marriage but moving beyond that theme was the importance of participants cultivating a personal view on sexual ethics. These sometimes included how to treat other people and also sometimes included sorting out things like balancing one's own pleasure with that of partners. In terms of how to treat other people, participants described partnering with people and sometimes not wanting commitment but wanting to be open about that and also being clear that they still cared about the person with whom they were sexual. There were also questions of balancing one's own wellbeing with the wellbeing of a partner or of children. People reflected on which topics to bring up and which to leave alone for out of concern for starting fights or evoking shame in a partner, especially around issues of sexuality and of sexual dysfunction. Within these struggles, a general sense of "do no harm" prevailed, along with a sense that one must care for oneself and not expect someone else to do that. As Laura put it, "I never wanted to hurt anybody's feelings. … I cared about, you know, just a one-night stand. I never did anything to insult or demean … I loved him for just a minute or two."

In finding novel environments, women chose to or were in some cases pushed to reconsider common narratives of female sexuality and to challenge them. As women got to know the double standard for their own sexual expression more intimately, they had opportunities to some degree to move out of shame about alternate pathways of sexual expression and into a counternarrative in which women's sexual pleasure matters (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013). In some cases, they had easily found these environments; in others it took a good deal of searching, including soul searching.
B. Emotional and Intellectual Intimacy

In addition to freedom to explore and having a sense of one's own ethical approach, all of the participants described valuing intimacy in sexual relationships, meaning having a sense of tenderness and connection with their partners. Some intimacy was explicitly sexual, some more emotional, some intellectual, but this form of closeness was often what kept the participants in sexual relationships even if the more traditionally-defined sexual expression was diminishing. Because women are routinely objectified in popular culture (Shaw, 2012), intimacy was important to make women feel cared about and important rather than being simply the objects of sexual desire or worse, simply objects with which to have sex. Debra described sex without intimacy, saying

Sometimes you can feel used with sex I think, at least I could. I could feel like I’m being used instead of just being enjoyed for what I was, like if we could, can we just be intimate and just have this loving kindness, right? Without it being a reward, like you’re going for the reward maybe.

Sometimes the intimacy and sense of presence associated with the intimacy linked directly to partnered sexual pleasure. Participants could let go and enjoy touch when they felt very connected to someone. Also, their emotional connection, in some cases, heightened the experience of pleasure beyond the type of orgasm that a person could have alone. Gloria said

I’d never had a vaginal orgasm until the last relationship I had, and um felt uh the depth of physiological feeling, which in turn touched, I guess an emotional is what I’d call that, because there would be times when it would bring tears to my eyes. Not tears, but just sobbing … just being that close with someone.
For most of the women, over time they longed for intimacy combined with sex, rather than partnered sexual pleasure without intimacy. Helen stated her experience with this:

It was more exploring when I was younger, and you know, I did my exploring and I found out that I’m wide open to a whole bunch of different varieties of things as a sexual being, um, but now it’s kind of like, no, you know, I want it to be that if I wasn’t in a relationship with my current partner, that the people that I was being, person or people that I was being sexual with, they were really part of my life in a broader way. You know, like they’re friends, they’re not just a sexual being that I’m with for, you know, several times and then I’m not with.

In terms of meaningfulness, intimacy often was more important to the participants than sexual passion over time. Although they reported episodes of sexual passion that they enjoyed at the time and enjoyed remembering and savoring, the sense of being deeply loved and connected was important to the participants. Karen described a wonderfully intimate second marriage after her first husband came out as gay and then after a period of sexual experimentation. She said before she remarried

my daughter gave me a mother-daughter talk before I married my last husband, and she was like “Mom, are you sure about this? I don’t sense bells and whistles.” So I looked at her, I was like “well honey, you know, no I’m not sure, but I think this is a good thing. And you know it’s not bells and whistles, it’s more like a deep gong.” Which was true. ...

It seems like, you know, passion is so intense, it’s so uh powerful and physical and, you know, all of those wonderful things about it, but then you know, the deep gong is truly, you know, kind of a soul connection, I think, and um…that you, just, your hearts are
open to one another in a really different way. The body isn’t as demanding, getting in the way I guess (laughs).

Even in one participant’s case where sex had basically dropped off from the married relationship and most sex was secretly outside the marriage, intimacy mattered. That said, what types of intimacy count as sexual and which not was fluid in this sample, making intimacy a difficult concept about which to be completely clear. People enjoyed being able to have an intellectual or political conversation, spend time together, and to raise children together, even if the explicitly sexual part of the relationship was missing or lacking in quality. Laura, for example, described sex dropping off in her marriage, but even in the playfulness with which they approached the topic, "there were moments when we had that understanding that, you know, we were unconditionally okay with each other." Martha, whose sex with her husband was rare and whose husband may have been primarily attracted to men, said

my husband and I had much in common. We read, we loved to host, he cooked, I cooked, we had dinner parties, we’re both bleeding-heart liberals in the left wing. ... Uh, we had so much in common. Our rescued dogs. Our house. And of course the son and the granddaughter, and so it’s not as though we did not have good things in the relationship. We did.

The degree to which people desired sex in their relationships and the degree to which its absence bothered them varied significantly.

Intimacy was important to the women in the study. In some ways, this intimacy was a complement to contextual novelty. Debate exists as to what the role of intimacy and familiarity is to sexual pleasure, with sex scholar Perel (2006) arguing, for instance, that having some distance
and some degree of objectification in one's sex life is helpful. For some participants, this was true, like in the case of being able to have hot sex with someone new after having very little sexual desire in a previous relationship. For others, intimacy was part of a counter-balance of cultural themes that emphasize and valorize sexual expression that is penetrative or orgasmic over sexual expression that is mutually satisfying but looks different, like cuddling or dancing (Price, 2014). This counter-balance idea leads to the next theme: the importance of creativity in ways of expressing sexual energy.

C. Creativity with Sexual Expression

Bringing a flexible approach to sexual expression also facilitated sexual pleasure, especially with age. This dimension differs from getting out of the bubble in that getting out of the bubble mostly included external factors, and creativity included mostly being willing to use different types of acts for sexual pleasure. Being open to a variety of activities seemed to work well for women in claiming their own pleasure, which is consistent with literature on positive sexual aging (Price, 2014; Shaw, 2012). This may be especially the case because the types of sex most people started with in their marriages—intercourse rather than oral or manual sex—often was not as pleasurable for them as other forms of sexual expression that was more directly stimulating.

a. Exploring partnered activities. Trying new things was the most important starting point for creative expression, because a range of things had to be tried to sort out what was pleasurable. The attitude brought to this was one of openness and playfulness, trying different types of sexual activities including bondage and cuddling and sex with multiple partners, as well as phone sex. Martha described discovering phone sex with a current lover:
I’m the one who initiates on the phone. You know, I’ll ask him “where are you right now?” and he’ll tell me, and I’ll… I talk him through it. I’m much more imaginative, and then he’s imaginative in the physical actions, but I’m much more imaginative in the narrative.

Sometimes, health issues would create a barrier to old patterns of sexual expression, creating an opportunity to try something new. In that way, what could have been a problem emerged as a cultivator of flexibility. Frances described this in her experience of starting a sexual relationship with a man who was experiencing vascular issues leading to difficulty maintaining erections:

that’s the whole thing with me, is explore. And the little bit that I had looped in with about tantric, at least I knew that orgasm and pleasure are separate things, and uh, that you can get a great deal of pleasure and still not have an ejaculation, and so uh, he didn’t really… had never heard anything like that, and I didn’t use any Middle Eastern terms that would be foreign, I just said “let’s just play and see how it feels” (laughs). But just being open to exploring is what’s really cool.

Not all exploration ended up being enjoyable. For example, the participant who tried bondage found it to be just “all right” for her. People tried multiple things to find what they liked. At some point, they sometimes settled into a pattern; for example, a number of participants described starting by receiving oral sex and then moving to intercourse to facilitate pleasure for both partners by aiding lubrication and getting enough clitoral stimulation.

Some of the flexibility had to do with letting go of the need to orgasm and enjoying other types of pleasure. Women seemed more open to this kind of pleasure if they knew that they
could orgasm with the partner, or if the partner seemed to care about their pleasure, first. Sometimes, then, due to how long it would take to have an orgasm or other factors, it was more fun to enjoy sexual encounters without a particular goal except moment-to-moment enjoying. Anna explained this movement away from pushing toward orgasm:

maybe sometimes I don’t even get to an orgasm at this point, but it’s kind of like “I don’t care.” I really don’t care at this point. At this point, the touch is so incredible, blow my mind! I’m fine, even if I don’t get there, it’s fine. And sometimes when I do get there, it’s like “oh my God, it’s great!” But if I don’t get there, it’s just, it’s just being open.

In addition, some found that decreasing boundaries around what they wanted to do was fun; for example, being with multiple partners at once. Others mentioned that holding boundaries around not inviting in extra partners or being clear about what they would say no to were important as well.

b. Solo sex. Related to partnered sexual flexibility was the flexibility provided by having a solo sex life in addition to a partnered sex life. This solo sex life was not linked only to masturbation—it could include time spent fantasizing without masturbation or other types of arousing activities—but most participants talked about masturbation. The participants' perspectives on and experiences with masturbation varied. Some clearly viewed masturbation as an activity secondary to and less enjoyable than partnered sexual activity, or as primarily a support to partnered sexual activity through self knowledge. Elizabeth described a dip in her sex life after having children. She said "I’m glad we had kids when we did. But sex was, sex was a lot of masturbating." Cynthia said simply "for me, partnered sex is more satisfying [than masturbation]."
Masturbation seemed to be a source of guilt when it was kept secret from partners, which seems to have been relatively common. Usually, it seems to have been kept secret because it was seen as being indicative of not being satisfied through partnered sex, which would potentially hurt the partner’s feelings. This was a place where communication about sex seemed somewhat difficult for many of the participants. For example, Karen said she would masturbate to have some kind of pleasure with my body. But there was also a certain amount of guilt with that for me. ... Yeah, it wasn’t something he and I even talked about it. I guess I felt like it wasn’t natural, you know, like I should be having this experience with my husband, and I wasn’t.

Some participants valued masturbation very highly, even finding spiritual and existential meaning in it. Laura said "My relationship with myself deepened too as a result of [masturbation]. You know, being willing to say 'yes, I love myself.'" She went on:

I loved the intimacy with myself in self love, and I truly believe that that’s a somewhat spiritual satisfaction too. … Ecstasy. That’s heaven on Earth. That’s a hint of heaven. If there is a connection with the higher power on Earth, that has to be it.

Most participants did report masturbating at least sometimes, although one participant did not masturbate ever. Some of the eldest participants in the group had not masturbated for some years, but one of the eldest participants, who was in her nineties, called me after the interview and said that she had decided to try masturbating again to make sure she could still orgasm, and she enthusiastically reported that she could.

c. Expressing oneself as a sexual being. Participants also discussed moving into an awareness of sexual energy and sexual feelings outside of activities that are typically labeled as
sexual. These included enjoying the sexual energy in art, food, music, dancing, and motherhood. Sexuality became a way of being that one savored, rather than an act that mostly or only included other people. As Laura put it "I'm sexy all the time." In this way, some of the participants maintained a connection with their sexual selves outside of relationships or solo sexual activity. They talked about generally feeling sexy, about incorporating sensual pleasures in their lives, and about appreciating sexual memories as part of feeling sexy and sexual. This fits with descriptions in the literature about women experiencing sexuality through their appearance and dress (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). Some expressed surprise at still being a sexual being. Norma, for example, said "I can't believe that at 80 I feel sexually wholesome." Isabelle pulled the themes together in this way:

Sexuality is just integral to my life. ... [I]t’s all part of being a woman, being a mother, you know, having children. It’s, I mean … having an orgasm is one of the most wonderful pleasures you can have, but uh, it’s just…it’s all wrapped up in that great big, the whole thing of being a woman. … And even now that it’s not, you know, sex isn’t on my mind all the time, but it’s still there, you know. It’s still there. And it’s in my memories. And I have some very nice memories.

The most common ways that people brought up sexual energy outside of sex was in reference to art, food, music, and dancing, although one person also described the sexual dimension of birthing and feeding children.

1. **Visual art.** At least three of the participants were accomplished artists, and they each talked about a relationship between creativity and sexuality. Karen pointed out "you know there’s a real correlation I think between sexual energy and creative energy, so I had all of this repressed sexual energy, and it came out in creativity." Other people in the group discussed both
appreciating and making visual art as important to them as sexual beings. Norma described having "Georgia O'Keefe paintings everywhere. I enjoy seeing someone expressing sexuality, and I think that's what she certainly did."

2. **Food.** The theme emerged that pleasure for women was also linked to food. For example, Anna had struggled with anorexia earlier in her life, and she associated limiting food with limiting all forms of pleasure and body awareness. As she worked on feeling safer and more supported in sexual relationships, she reflected on the relationship between food and sex:

   Like, food is such a beautiful part of life. ... You know, and to mix and match flavors, and make it super yummy, it’s such a...you know, it’s a very sensual thing. But so, you know, it was...my sensuality was closed down too [in addition to sexuality], which is really, in retrospect, very sad. I know my work is really about sensuality, it’s about opening up to the sensual.

Helen also experienced great creativity and nurturance through cooking, which she associated with sexual energy. Sharma (2013) argues that "although sexuality, like food and taste, seems to be natural and instinctive it is socially constructed. Again like taste in food, sexual desire seems to be located in the domain of the body, the biological, but it is influenced by gender, class, region, and a host of other factors" (p. 47). She cautions that a discontinuity with food is the violence with which variant preferences are punished. Still, this dimension of food and pleasure for women was a rich site for consideration.

3. **Music.** Norma described music as having a pleasurable sexual dimension. She said "I um, love sexual music. I see it, I think jazz is sexual. Um, and a lot of music is sexual, and I love being in it."
4. Dancing. Several participants mentioned dancing not only as a precursor to more explicitly sexual activity but as a pleasurable sexual activity itself, which of course includes music but then adds movement. Gloria, who was not in a relationship at the time of the interviews, said

I get a lot of intimacy satisfaction with dancing, because I do partner dancing. ... There's the physical touch, there's the closeness, there's the interaction with a person following and leading and um ... Yeah. I've always said I'm a slut for a good dancer (laughs). And it's true.

Jill linked dancing with eroticism, saying "You know, I don't mind dancing with see-through clothing on [at nudist resorts]. It's just the eroticism of it that I like."

5. Motherhood. Rita described experiencing different types of sexual pleasure from the process of birthing and feeding her babies. Specifically, she describes orgasmic birthing with three of her four children and the pleasure of breastfeeding as a sexual sensation. She said "the orgasm you have with natural childbirth is the best orgasm you'll ever have," and that the only down side is that the orgasm ends too soon. She also said "when I was nursing my babies, I felt sexual."

Isabelle, too, described an aspect of motherhood as sexually satisfying. She said trying to get pregnant was sexually pleasurable even though the actual sex was not different or orgasmic. That said, it was more common in this group of women for pregnancy to be a concern than for it to be a facilitator of sexual pleasure, particularly in the older generation, as birth control was more unreliable and abortions harder to come by, especially when the eldest in the group were younger.
This sense of creativity expressed by the women moves beyond the idea that sexual expression is a partnered activity that leads to orgasm. It includes that, but also could include engaging with sexual energy in other ways. This might be especially important as partners are less available or as women choose not to repartner for whatever reason. It is engaging a counternarrative about being sexy in ways that challenge the idea of where boundaries of sexual expression are (Price, 2014). This general creativity and curiosity was a major part of what the participants in the study described, and extended into their general openness to what was to come in terms of their sexual expression, especially for the eldest in the group.

D. Pleasurably Ever After: Extending Possibility Throughout One’s Lifespan

Participants’ visions of the future varied, and they contained mixed emotions about the role of aging for sexual expression. These mixed feelings included an awareness of body changes, differences in availability of partners, and cultural norms that are well-documented challenges to sexual expression with age (Gullettte, 2011). However, even the eldest in the group had a sense of themselves as sexual beings. Martha bristled telling the story of a man who described a group of older adult women as "all used up," taking exception both to his characterization and to the tastefulness of stating that perspective publicly, especially since his wife was one of the women he was describing. Norma expressed some surprise at how sexually vibrant she still was despite not having dated for some time.

The part that participants expressed less hope about was finding partners. They seemed aware that there were more women than men in their cohort. Some also expressed a sense that men their age wanted something more akin to a housekeeper than a partner, and they were not willing to seek a relationship on those terms. That said, most of them also were open to partnered
sexuality and some had ideas about who that partnership might be with. Karen, who was widowed in her mid-seventies, said

I’m feeling my own sexual energy, my femininity coming out. … I just bought a watch, I just got myself makeup. I’m improving my wardrobe, you know. I mean … Which in some ways, I’m like “gee, I’m not sure what to do with all of this, you know, because at my age I don’t really expect to meet anybody, but I guess it’s okay, you know.” It’s just okay to feel this way again. It feels good to feel this way.

Patricia, a participant who was in her nineties, was still having partnered sex with her boyfriend. She said

I tell you, I think women need to think that their bodies, and you read a lot about this, that their bodies are still in need of, of a sexual love, you know. ... So, I don’t think that we should completely give it up, you know? Just, it just is kind of a natural instinct with women.

Laura was not seeking to partner again, but was not letting that get in the way of her sex life. She described being independent and content on her own:

I’m very um happy with loving myself. You know, my partner, my husband died nearly five years ago, and um, I’ve had a happy sex life even so. ... I don’t really feel motivated towards [finding a new partner]. Um, it would take a lot for me to become, to get back into a committed relationship, um because of the compromises that we make in relationship, and you know, I got some of the big joys of having been in a partnership. You know, that’s the part where you learn more about yourself and you and your partner are conflicting in order to be better yourself. … So I’ve had over thirty years of that, so I
don’t need to learn more about myself by being with a man. ... It would take a whole lot.
You know I’m older now. I really don’t want to show my body, although I love it, I’m not really interested in showing it off to other people. Um, I’ve had some illnesses, my stamina is different. And you have to make compromises and sacrifices when you live with somebody, and I don’t have to do that (laughs).

As Sandberg (2013) describes with her affirmative aging model, aging is a lifelong process, and although threats exist in the process of aging, it also provides new and unanticipated opportunities. For the women in the study, these new opportunities included chances to engage in various types of sexual play, to masturbate or not, to fantasize about lovers from earlier in their lives or take lovers, and to engage the world in a sexually energized way whether or not they chose to repartner.

**Discussion**

While each woman who participated in the study had a unique life course, there was common ground between all the participants as well: they all saw themselves as sexual beings, supporting the research saying that sexual expression is a significant issue for older adults (Fisher 2010; Gray & Garcia, 2012; Hinchliff, Gott, & Ingelton, 2010; Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011; Kleinplatz et al., 2013; Lindau & Gavrilova, 2010; Lindau et a., 2007; Minichiello, Plummer, & Loxton, 2004; Schick et al., 2010). In a culture where women's pleasure is often thought of as secondary to men's pleasure (Nagoski, 2013), pursuing pleasure often meant breaking someone's rules. These rules were family, church, or perceived cultural rules. At the time when the rules were broken, it was sometimes clear and sometimes not clear to participants that what they were doing was all right. In retrospect, some expressed regret, for example, for having brief affairs to facilitate leaving a relationship or for getting into sexual
relationships that were not nourishing or, at worst, abusive. Sorting out how to claim pleasure was an ongoing learning process.

More often than expressing regret, the participants expressed a fear of being judged for their choices or for things that they were doing to facilitate sexual pleasure or exploration. For many participants, this fear or shame was managed by not sharing their stories even with friends. This fits with the literature stating that women's sexual pleasure is the subject of more moral oversight than men's (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013; Gott, 2005). Many had rarely if ever discussed issues of sexually transmitted infections or affairs or even types of sexual exploration they had engaged in. And yet as they were discussing their pleasurable experiences, their faces often lit up and the room filled with laughter. It is likely that even with the participants reporting not sharing some of their stories prior due to a sense of shame or embarrassment, that overall their sense of their own sexuality was less shame-based than the population at large to the extent that they were willing to sign up to discuss their sex lives in depth with a researcher. It also seems likely that the opportunity to describe one’s sexual experiences with an interviewer who has trained to set aside judgement created an environment in which participants could be quite frank about their experiences. It is more fun to describe sensitive topics to someone who is clearly open to hearing about them and unlikely to be threatened by them.

Sometimes, women described not talking to their partners about sexual issues for a variety of reasons, including feeling embarrassed and also having a sense that their partners did not want to hear what they had to say. A particular area of secrecy that showed up between partners was discussion about masturbation. Most of the participants reported masturbating at some point in their lives, which may be a higher rate than in the population at large (Habenick et al., 2010), although masturbation may also be underreported by women (Bergner, 2013). Not all
participants experienced this, but in many cases, guilt around masturbation seemed to form around an expectation that partnered sex would meet all the woman's sexual needs. Because of that expectation, masturbation was seen as an insult to partners. However, arguably this model is more based on a male version of masturbation. Due to refractory periods, male masturbation may take the place of partnered sex in terms of taking time until one could orgasm again. For women, this refractory period does not exist. Concerns may also exist around men feeling objectified by things like pornography or vibrators used to orgasm. Multiple participants, who were of course female, did describe feeling objectified by pornographic images. It is feasible that the use of pornography or a phallic insertable vibrator would feel similarly objectifying to men. However, secrecy around masturbation did not seem to positively contribute to the pleasure of the participants. It has also been noted that perhaps female masturbation is culturally shamed more than male masturbation (Bergner, 2013), which was supported by this research, as the women generally reported assuming that their male partners masturbated.

Another fear that came up in sharing sexual stories was the fear of betraying sex partners. Because many sexual experiences were partnered, it was not always clear in what contexts it would be workable to get more information by discussing sexual issues with someone outside the relationship, even when information or support would have been helpful. This was not true of all participants, but it was true of a majority. They were cautious for good reason—sometimes trusted others were helpful, and yet sometimes trusted others were not, like a clergy person who encouraged a participant to stay in an increasingly violent marriage.

The idea of safety came up often in the interviews across subject areas, seeming to mean a number of things. Many times, participants referred to being in nonjudgmental contexts, whether with a partner or with friends or even like-minded strangers, as being safe. Being with
partners who managed their emotions effectively, especially anger, was also referred to as being safe. Sometimes safety was sought by avoiding sexuality all together, although that strategy worked for the short term but not for the long term for participants who had pursued it. Finally, intimacy provided a basic sense of safety and connection for participants—the idea that they were cared for as people and not just as sex objects. That questions of danger are closely interwoven with questions of pleasure is consistent with literature on sex and pleasure (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013).

The idea of responsive desire may be a part of the picture of why female sexuality may be so linked to partnered status. Responsive desire is common for women, and is different than spontaneous desire in that instead of feeling desire and then moving into sexual activity, they start desiring when they encounter an erotic situation, often after sexual activity has commenced (Nagoski, 2015). It could be that female sexual expression is so linked to partnered status because women are more likely to experience desire for sexual pleasure in erotic situations, and yet they are not encouraged to create those situations for themselves. When women did seek out the erotic, the eldest in the group still seemed to experience desire in certain contexts.

The lessons taken from the study in terms of what aids pleasure as people age can be summed up with the counter-narrative acronym NICE. Finding Novel contexts in which to learn sexually, cultivating Intimacy with partners and with one’s own body, being Creative with particular sexual activities, and Extending one’s sense of sexual possibility into advanced age supported sexual pleasure with age. Through NICE engagement with sexual expression, these women were able to claim their sexual agency over time. The old adage that might say “nice girls finish last” should clearly be amended for women in later life.
Making meaning out of life experiences is a process of construction. For example, participants often told their stories in episodes marked by significant events such as marriage, important relationships, or periods of parenting children. If our perspective is a continuously running camera documenting moment-to-moment experience, our memories are sorted into documentaries in the editing room, leaving significant parts of that moment-to-moment experience behind. How a person makes sense of life events offers a glimpse into what she values. Clearly, the participants cared about being sexual beings. Although they experienced hardships, they were agents before being survivors. Stated another way:

Telling stories about female sexual pleasure, agency and power allows us to uncover a tradition and community of powerful, feisty, indomitable women who will not be cowed by oppression or violation. In this way, we begin to show that violation is not the blueprint for women's sexual experience, rather, it is an example of agency gone awry. By telling a different story, still with the understanding that danger is always a potentiality that must be contested, we are providing a different beginning and therefore a different ending to what it means to be a sexual being in the world. … The quest for joy, intimacy, dreaming and desiring pleasure precedes any form of negation. (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013, p. 37-39)

The participants in this study had to take risks to explore their own pleasure, and they had all done so. The story of female pleasure is important for a number of reasons, but especially because it is so often a story left out about women as they age. This study offers a counter-narrative to trends that pathologize female sexuality in order to treat it or commodify female sexuality in order to exploit it. Although challenges to women's pleasure exist, and those also
were present in the interviews with participants, what is perhaps more striking is the power of the search for pleasure and wholeness in spite of forces that would oppose it.

**Limitations and Implications for Further Research**

This study has a number of limitations. The most serious one is that in how the sample came together, all the participants were white and middle to upper class, both of which are associated with privilege. More research is needed with other racial groups and people of a broader range of social classes. The women in the sample were more educated than the population at large, and to the extent that they were religious, they tended to have more liberal religious views. They also were willing to speak at great length about what for many people is a very private topic, which likely differentiates them. More research on this topic is needed with different samples and different methodological approaches to flesh out an increasingly nuanced understanding of female pleasure.

**Conclusion**

In spite of the limitations, this study offers rich and detailed storied examples of the search for pleasure as women age. In sharing their stories, many tears were shed, and yet even more remarkable was the abundant laughter that filled the varied interview spaces. Rather than sexual pleasure being a secret, these participants chose to break the silence and risk judgment for the sake of sorting and owning their stories and paving the paths to sexual pleasure of others. Through doing so, they share lessons about extending sexual pleasure through the lifespan.
References


CHAPTER 3
OLDER ADULT WOMEN’S REFLECTIONS ON DIVORCE AND SEXUAL EXPRESSION

Abstract

In research literature, people who divorce experience a number of negative impacts, and yet divorce also offers opportunities for growth over time. This qualitative study of sixteen older adult women offers the possibility that divorce also may be sexually empowering, especially for women who were married during a time when marriage was not seen as completely voluntary for a variety of reasons. Detailed examples of the experiences of sixteen women with divorce and sexual expression are offered, focusing on in which situations divorce might be empowering and how it could contribute to sexual exploration and satisfaction. Overall, for the fourteen women in the study who had experienced divorce, the quality of sex in the marriage impacted the quality of sexual expression after the divorce.
Older adults, those over the age of 65, have lived through massive social change, including the legalization of no-fault divorces, the impacts of second-wave feminism, and longer life spans with healthier older adulthood (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello, & Pitts, 2015; Lindau & Gavrilova, 2010; Sykes Wylie, 2016; Yelland & Hosier, 2015). As the population ages, more and more people reach old age having gone through one or more divorces (DeLamater, 2012), especially since the divorce rate rose between the sixties and the early eighties, peaking at 1981 and then beginning a steady drop that continues (Stevenson & Wolfer, 2007). There is a more recent upward trend in so-called gray divorce, which is older adults divorcing after many years of marriage (Brown & Lin, 2012; Gray, DeVaus, Qu, & Stanton, 2011). The research on the effect of divorce over the lifespan is scant (Glaser, Stuchbury, Tomassini, & Askham, 2008), and the research on the effect of divorce on sexual expression specifically is very limited. Considering how women make meaning of their divorces as older adults could offer additional understanding of how divorce impacts women's sexual expression over the lifespan.

In addition to rising divorce rate that was experienced by older adults, the generation of older adults who came of age during the sexual revolution—those born between 1940 and 1959—report having more sex outside of marriage than the younger population (Wolfinger, 2017). The data on sex outside of marriage, unfortunately, was not specific enough to distinguish between open relationships and affairs. Also, it is difficult to tease out what has affected this trend, and whether it is a result of age and development, of the period during which people were interviewed, or of the impact of things the cohort experienced growing up. Sometimes extramarital sex was associated with divorce, and there was an increase of divorce in this study for those married 20 to 30 years, although other times it was not. Twenge, Sherman, and Wells
argued based on large-scale survey data that overall, older adults' sexual attitudes have become more accepting of non-marital sex over time, with the exception of extra-marital sex, of which the majority still disapprove.

Divorce rates doubled in the sixties and seventies, so the older adult cohort was more impacted by divorce than even this generation is (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). As described above, after the divorce rate being historically low in the 1950s and early '60s, the rate peaked in 1981 and has since been going down (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007), although the picture is not completely clear. Other ways of measuring the incidence of divorce have rates going up more recently (Amato, 2014). For marriages that occurred in the 1970s, the divorce rate was high—almost fifty percent—and many people who are now older adults were married in that decade (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). In addition, the higher divorce rate was associated with a higher and earlier marriage rate in the 1960s. Understanding how this combination of early marriage, higher marriage rates, and higher divorce rates played out in people’s lives is important.

Available research tends to indicate that divorce has negative effects on several areas of life over time, including in terms of finances, health, and social support (Amato, 2010; Amato, 2014; Gray, DeVaus, Qu, Lixia, & Stanton, 2011; Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006). However, in some ways, such as earning potential (Tamborini, Couch, & Reznik, 2015) and personal growth (Thomas & Ryan, 2008), divorce may be a boon to women in particular. Although women who are employed do not leave happy marriages at higher rates, they do leave unhappy marriages at higher rates (Sayer, England, Allison, & Kangas, 2011). Changing social norms ushered in by the Baby Boomers have led to more acceptance of a range of types of relationships outside of marriage, including sexual relationships (Sears-Roberts Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2011), which may change the impact of divorce on sexual expression. Sexual
satisfaction is linked to relationship satisfaction (Butzer & Campbell, 2008), as well as a reason for seeking couple therapy (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). However, to date no one has studied how divorce impacts how women think about sexual expression and satisfaction in particular. The possibility of divorce may be important to women seeking sexual pleasure, as women sometimes have to break rules to find sexual pleasure for themselves in a society which is not consistently supportive of female sexual pleasure (Morrissey Stahl, Gale, Lewis, & Kleiber, in review). Although outcomes have often been measured quantitatively by looking at factors such as financial and social support outcomes of divorce (Glaser, Stuchbury, Tomassini, & Askham, 2008), fewer explorations include sharing the reflections women offer about their divorces, and none focus specifically on how divorce affected their sexual expression over time. This article contributes to the consideration of the impact of divorce on women, focusing specifically on sexual expression and suggests that divorce can be empowering sexually for women, and this was especially the case if the marriages were not sexually empowering.

For the purposes of this paper, sexual expression and sex will be defined broadly to include any activity intended for sexual pleasure. Sex can include individual or relational activity, including penetrative intercourse, masturbation, oral sex, intimate contact like mutual masturbation, handholding, dressing up, dancing, engaging with fantasy material like pornography or erotica, and more (Price, 2014). A useful definition of sex to start from is “consensual activity that offers mutual sexual pleasure, connection, and possibly reproduction for those involved” (Vernacchio, 2015). However, because that definition does not include space for solo sexual expression, for this study the part of Vernacchio's definition "activity that offers sexual pleasure" was used. This definition is offered in an attempt to be inclusive, in agreement with Syme (2014), who argues that “a holistic view of sexuality incorporates an integration of
emotional, social, intellectual, and somatic experiences, represents diverse sexual experiences, reflects relationship context, and focuses on pleasure as well as on sexual dysfunction” (p. 36). The definition also implies that there are some forms of sex that would not meet the criteria for sexual expression here, like nonconsensual sex or sex where someone felt obliged but had no pleasure in the experience. One way that a qualitative approach can support better understanding of sexual expression is being able to provide more detailed and nuanced distinctions of different experiences of sex than numeric frequencies of sexual encounters.

Sexual expression is impacted by whether people are in committed relationships, with women who are partnered engaging in more sexual expression (DeLamater, 2012). Still, the most common form of sexual activity for older adult women and men in one major study was masturbating alone (DeLamater, 2012), and divorce potentially would not impede this form of sexual expression. Women are more likely than men to experience desire as responsive—for example, having desire arise only once a sexual encounter has begun—which could negatively impact sexual expression with divorce because women would no longer be partnered (Nagoski, 2015). To better understand the factors influencing sexual expression, including divorce, in-depth interviews were conducted with sixteen older adult women. Below, the study's theoretical orientation, methodology, and methods will be described, as well as eleven themes about divorce that emerged from the interviews. This article concludes with a discussion of those themes and implications for further research.

**Theoretical Orientation**

This project has phenomenological, feminist, and critical gerontological theoretical roots. Seidman’s (2013) in-depth interviewing approach, which influenced the choice of interviewing...
as a method, is based on phenomenology, as is the phenomenological heuristic analysis conducted of the data (Moustakas, 2001), which will be described in more detail in the methods section. Seidman (2013) outlines phenomenological assumptions underlying in-depth interviewing as a method. He emphasizes the importance of the experience of participants and the meaning they construct from their memories of those experiences, which is a transitory reality with meanings that change over time in the context of new experiences. The interviewer worked under the assumption that the meaning of one’s experience is understood in context, and so that context must be explored in detail (Seidman, 2013). This emphasis on contextual subjective understanding led the decision to engage in in-depth interviewing with participants to better understanding the meanings they ascribed to sexual expression.

Feminist theory also informed the study design. Calasanti and Slevin (2006) argued that the intersection of gender and age is a key and underexplored feminist issue. They expressed concern about ageism, a concept introduced by gerontologist Robert Butler to describe prejudice towards older adults and aging, discriminatory practices, and institutional structures that keep such stereotypes in place (Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2002). Calasanti and Slevin noticed that gerontological research often contains ageist assumptions, including the notion that successful aging means not aging. Research also often emphasized individual dimensions of caregiving more than systemic forms of support for caregivers. Finally, they pointed out that many mainstream studies of sexuality were conducted on a sample with an upper cutoff age of 55 (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Feminist social critic Gullette (2011) extensively considered how social structures and social discourses influenced women’s well-being as they aged. She critiqued cultural stories that found nobility in not requiring care in old age, misguided ideas that
youthful sexual expression is good while older adult sex is not, and the stigma associated with memory loss. Sex therapist Shaw (2012) described how aging can benefit sexual expression. Feminist narratives like those offered by Shaw and Gulette of growth and possibility influenced this study.

This study engaged feminist principles in several other ways, as well. The experience of women was given primacy (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). In addition, it abided by Hooyman & Kiyak's description that “[f]eminist theories attempt to integrate micro and macro approaches to aging through linkages between individuals and social structure, or between personal problems and public responses” (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011, p. 329). The study focused on the practical experience and wisdom of participants and invited participants to consider links to larger social structures. Also, the interviewer was explicit about her position as a woman with interests she shared with participants rather than as an objective researcher, which was influenced by a feminist interviewing approach (DeVault & Gross, 2011). The interviewer, who was in the third trimester of a pregnancy during many of the interviews, worked with the understanding that her identity would be co-constructed in dialogue with participants (Jorgenson, 1991). This meant that the interviewer would bring in aspects of her own identity and participants would also have meanings associated with the researcher and her pregnancy independent of the researcher’s experience.

A critical gerontological perspective informed this study as well. This perspective includes four goals according to the seminal work of Moody (1988). The first is to understand dimensions of personal meaning in aging. The second is to emphasize practical change. The third goal is to link practitioners of gerontology and researchers. Finally, critical gerontological
research is designed to help to create a vision of how things might be different or better for people as they age. Critical gerontologist and feminist scholar Sandberg (2013) developed the idea of affirmative aging in her work with older adult men's sexual experiences. She offered the idea that aging happens over the whole lifespan and produces both challenges and opportunities for new experiences. Her view influenced this study in the sense that the interviewer was open to different and even contradicting interpretations of various life events experienced by the participants, such as finding aging to be both sexually empowering and disempowering at the same time.

Finally, this study drew inspiration from life review approach (Butler, 1963). Making integrative meaning of one's life experiences can come from talking through one's life story (Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). Because critical gerontological research and feminist research tend to emphasize action research, the idea that interviewing itself might be useful for participants was energizing for the interviewer. Indeed, most participants, without being asked, described enjoying the interview process and thinking through things they had not thought through, as well as thinking through things in different ways than they previously had.

**Methodology**

In a heuristic phenomenological approach, researchers seek to understand how participants experience particular phenomena from a place of relationship (Moustakas, 2001). A topic is chosen that connects personally and significantly to the researcher, such as sexual expression in this case. The researcher also saturates herself in a topic, which the researcher in this study did during a full year and a half as she conducted interviews, during which she was
visibly pregnant, then gave birth, and finally acted as the primary caregiver for the new baby. Because of a leave of absence from other forms of study during this time, a supportive partner, and significant amounts of down time occurring during the sleepy first part of the baby’s life, plenty of space for reflection and saturation in the subject matter was available to the interviewer.

Interviewing as a method takes seriously the meaning the participants made of their experiences and how that interacted with the researcher's own meaning-making. “Interviewing … is a basic mode of inquiry. Recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 8). Seidman, an educational researcher, goes on to argue that “social abstractions like ‘education’ are best understood through the experiences of individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built” (2013, p. 9). "Sexuality” and “sexual expression," as well as "divorce" and "aging" also are well suited to this approach. Interviewing has been a part of helpful applied research studies for some time (e.g. Gilbert, Ussher, & Perz, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2009; Juraskova et al., 2003; Lindau, Surawska, Paice, & Baron, 2011).

Feminist qualitative research approaches can help to bring to light stories that often are not shared (DeVault & Gross, 2011). To encourage this sharing, the researcher "conceptualize[d] the interview as an encounter between women with common interests who would share knowledge" (DeVault & Gross, 2011, p. 211). Instead of claiming objectivity, the interviewer sought to understand the stories of the participants through her own, sometimes verbally acknowledged, experience. Knowing the impact of her own perspective but seeking to
understand the participants', the interviewer also used active listening, frequently reflecting the descriptions of the participants back to them to make sure she was understanding correctly.

**Methods**

The interviewer conducted individual interviews with sixteen women aged 57 to 91 in two in-depth interviews of up to two hours each. This was influenced by Seidman's in-depth interview series design (Seidman, 2013). Participants were screened only for age, with the requirement being above 55 (see a breakdown of the ages of participants in Appendix A). Fifty-five was chosen as the youngest age in keeping with sexuality literature, which puts old age at the time when most women would have experienced menopause. Participants were recruited through public electronic bulletin boards and by word-of-mouth snowball sampling, which was amplified by public appearances that the interviewer made in the community in her role as a sex therapist. Retention was encouraged and gratitude expressed by giving participants ten dollar gift cards at each interview.

In the first semi-structured interview, the researcher asked questions to better understand the history of meanings participants associated with their sexuality and sexual expression over time. A second interview was scheduled between three to eight weeks later so that the researcher would have time to transcribe the interviews, which she did herself in order to immerse herself in the data. At the second interview, the participants reviewed and edited printed copies of the transcripts of their interviews. Some chose to read the transcripts in great detail, taking up to an hour and a half to provide feedback, and others chose to review the transcripts more briefly or not at all. Some also took extra time to reflect and then mailed the transcripts with edits back to the interviewer. Any edits they made were incorporated in the final transcripts. The participants
also gave feedback on a list of initial themes the researcher had pulled from the interview.

Participants were aware of the possibility of requesting additional interviews, although in the end each participant participated in only two interviews, some with phone calls in between.

The theme of divorce emerged as a significant topic from data collected for a larger research project. Two research questions guided the overall project: What factors are associated with satisfaction with one’s sexual life as one ages? How does sexual satisfaction link to life satisfaction? Divorce turned out to be a rich factor that influenced sexual expression with age.

The sample of participants included sixteen women who ranged in age from 57 to 91, with five in the 55 to 64 range, five in the 65 to 74 range, and six 75 or over (See Appendix A for a breakdown of ages by pseudonym). Ten of the participants were "Baby Boomers," or born between 1946 and 1964, and six of the generation before the Boomers (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011). All participants were white. Two identified as bisexual, with the rest identifying as heterosexual. One identified as male-to-female transsexual and had completely transitioned to living as female as an adult. All but one of the participants had been married at some point in their lives, yet only one participant was currently living with a married partner. Other current relational configurations included three women cohabiting with romantic partners, six having partners with whom they did not live, and six being single. Six of the participants had been widowed. Three were married to men who they identified as gay or bisexual; one man came out as gay later in the marriage and the other men publicly identified as heterosexual. The participants who were currently paired were with men except for one who was partnered with a woman. All but two had experienced divorce. Two were first widowed and then divorced in later marriages. The two who had never divorced were widowed and had not remarried. The
participants are named with pseudonyms in alphabetical order by age—that is, Anna is the youngest participant and Rita is the eldest—in the analysis below.

As the researcher conducted and transcribed the interviews over a 15-month period, she listed themes from the data at the end of the transcripts and reflected on follow-up questions to ask. These initial themes and the transcripts were member-checked. She also kept a research journal for reflections on the interviews and on the data analysis process. When all the interviews and transcripts were completed, she re-read them, looking for surprises, overall themes, and discontinuities. She concept-coded the data, focusing on the broad categories of pleasure, marriage, divorce, widowhood, affairs, and menopause because these themes stood out as having interesting rich data from early analysis (Saldaña, 2015). Some themes had rich data but were set aside for later analysis, including sexual abuse, menopause, mixed orientation marriages, and affairs. She used the online qualitative analytical program Dedoose to help with the coding and analysis. Through immersion in the data, the researcher could reflect on the participants’ varying experiences of divorce, and she organized the themes in several different ways before settling on the structure featured in this article. Through the analysis, the meanings created by the participants and the meanings created by the researcher coalesced (Moustakas, 2001) to form the current article, which is intended to help to give readers a sense of the range of ways in which divorce impacted sexual expression for the participants. Themes emerged from the data that were featured either because they were common among participants or because they represented something uncommon but important to recognize about the impact of divorce in sexual expression.
Results: Divorce and Sexual Pleasure

The participants' experiences of divorce were varied and included both positive and negative experiences in terms of sexual expression, and yet the data supported the idea that the quality of sex in the marriage impacted the way the women would experience divorce and sexual expression after divorce (See Appendix C for a Theme Key). Overall, divorce affected sexual expression in mixed ways, but compared to the literature, more positively over time than one might expect. Here, the themes of quality of sexual expression in the marriage overall with three subthemes, and then the impact of divorce on sexual expression, including two subthemes, will be discussed.

Quality of Marital Sex

The quality of marriage affects whether people view their divorces as stressful or as a relief (Amato, 2014). Amato's divorce-stress-adjustment perspective can be used to organize ideas about how the quality of marriage, as well as meanings attributed to divorce over time, impacts the quality of divorce. The stories shared by the fourteen participants in this study who had experienced divorce support his claims applied specifically to sexual adjustment. For example, if marriage felt involuntary, then divorce was important for sexual satisfaction. Women need freedom to explore to have sexual satisfaction (Morrissey Stahl, Gale, Lewis, Kleiber, in review). Three subthemes explained the quality of marital sex.

Marrying for sex. Sometimes sex was a factor in the participants’ decision to marry, which meant that divorce was an important option to create a sense of agency for these women. Most of the participants were raised with the idea that one needed to marry before having sex or at least to marry the person with whom they first had sex, with sex defined as intercourse. All of
the participants mentioning this also said explicitly or implied in their sexual stories that they no longer considered sex an adequate reason to get married. In considering the importance of divorce for the current generation of elders, it is important to note that marriage sometimes did not feel entirely voluntary. Debra described marrying the first person she had sex with and thinking "I don’t want to marry this guy, but you know, that's what I need to do." Sometimes, the sex with this first person was pleasurable and sometimes it was not. Still, participants felt they needed to marry to experience sex, or alternately, felt obliged to marry the person with whom they first experienced intercourse.

**Positives of marital sexual expression.** In several cases, women had really wonderful memories of their relationships with their husbands, including sexual relationships. In that case, divorce did not come up as an important topic until later in life. For example, two women who had been widowed when they were fairly young, one in her thirties and one in her fifties, ended up remarrying and changing their perspectives on divorce in their second marriages. Frances, the speaker in the first exemplar, took an extensive sex education course at her Christian college the year she married, and she said that course had a positive impact on her early sexual relationship with her husband. She found both sex in marriage and the marriage overall very satisfying, saying

> my upbringing was that sex was part of marriage period. And there was no, it was described to me like you walk through this archway, like a lot of times a bride and groom will stand under an archway, and on this side of the gate, it’s “no, no, no,” and on that side, it’s “yes, yes, yes,” and you walk through the gate and you’re in another world. And you’re in the secret garden of a couple that’s theirs alone. So it was a beautiful experience. Not everyone has that experience. That was a beautiful way to start. … Um,
after I’d been married about ten years my husband got killed in an automobile accident and I had four children to raise while I was still believing that sex was for marriage. And um after a year, I knew that I really liked being married. It was a, it was just fun, it was wonderful. It was just a very positive all-around experience.

Frances later discovered that it was not being married she liked, per se, but her husband in particular after she remarried a man who ended up being abusive. Even in that relationship, her sexual education helped her, and she said sex was the easy part. Patricia also had a positive experience with marital sex, although there was a learning curve, which her husband supported, aided by good communication about whether she was enjoying sex and specifically whether she had orgasms. She said at first she found sex to be uncomfortably intrusive, but he was, as I said, very, very considerate. And he would explain things to me, too. ... Well mostly where he, you know, he said “did you come”? ... And I had not, I didn’t know what he was talking about, you know, so he had to explain that to me too (laughs).

Patricia, who had had less formal education, had more trouble when she was widowed and ended up in sexual relationships with men who were less willing to tend to her pleasure. She said she and her first husband could communicate, and he assumed her pleasure was important, but that was a problem with later partners:

After we had, um, you know, that kind of understood, intercourse, that a woman then felt like they had to satisfy her husband, you know. And I think he felt as if he had to satisfy me also, that was a considerate person that I’m sure all people are not that considerate.

Sometimes in marriage the sexual relationship changed significantly, but there was still a great deal of tenderness and intimacy. The affection and intimacy in marriage were important to
all of the participants. In fact, they seemed usually to be more significant than sexual passion. Karen described this vividly:

My last husband and I had a very sweet love, just very tender. He’s very touchy-feely, you know, he just loves sitting with his arm around me and holding hands, and we did have sex, you know, but it wasn’t the kind I had experienced with my lover, but it was still sweet you know? And um, so, you know, we stayed married for 21 years [before he passed away].

Noticeably lacking from the interviews were descriptions of strong chemistry in long-term relationships or marriages. This was not always a problem for people, as illustrated by the above example. Sex was only a one part of marital satisfaction, and not the most important one. Sometimes sex would get better with time, especially for first marriages, but for later marriages that ended in divorce, people more often described the opposite: that sex at first was very enjoyable and passionate and then it got worse for various reasons described in the next section.

**Challenges of marital sexual expression.** For various reasons, sometimes the marital sex described by participants was not pleasurable for the woman. This set up situations in which divorce or breaking up ended up being useful for women's pleasure, except in cases where finding different partners was difficult. The two most obvious factors in marital sex with age were issues with boredom and with physical changes associated with aging. Less commonly discussed but important issues affecting sexual expression in partnerships included differences in sexual function, reactions to stress, addiction, a sense of performativity, and managing mixed sexual orientation.
**Boredom.** Sometimes the sexual issues in marriages were a result of simple boredom. Participants described this in different ways, with one participant finding herself getting bored and having affairs in her multiple marriages. Brenda said that people might have thought she was crazy to leave a marriage that was all right in most ways, but she said "try to explain to someone that the boredom that you feel is just so overwhelming that you can’t stand it another day." When participants got bored and had affairs or left relationships, they were often able to find partnerships that were more sexually exciting, at least at first.

**Physical changes.** Sometimes participants described sexual expression getting worse due to physical changes. Some described changes in their skin texture or weight gain with menopause that made them feel less sexy. Sometimes the physical changes were their partner's. For example, Rita described her experience with her husband gaining a lot of weight, which had an impact on their sexual expression in the sense that she felt like she had to do the majority of the work during sex, although they also could rely on oral sex for her pleasure:

Well, he got to be really overweight, and um, he, uh, he worked all the time and he traveled a lot and he ate, you know, lots of rich food. He liked it. And he went on many diets and would lose quite a bit of weight and then he’d gain it all back. But anyway, when he was in the worst overweight part, um, he couldn’t really get on top, so I was on top, but we did have oral sex and I always enjoyed oral sex, so that was satisfying in that way.

Other physical changes were specifically in relation to sexual function, which was a rich enough topic to warrant its own thematic exploration.
**Difference in sexual function.** Sometimes there were issues that persisted through the relationship impacting sexual pleasure, or issues that developed over time in terms of sexual function. The participants described issues with premature ejaculation, with lack of foreplay, which was linked to vaginal dryness, and with erectile dysfunction. Premature ejaculation would not necessarily be a problem in and of itself, but it created significant problems when the female partner’s pleasure was not taken into account. For Isabelle in her first marriage,

> I was very disappointed, because he had premature ejaculations, so sex often didn’t happen, or if it did, it was a minute, you know. That was all there was to it, because he couldn’t even do foreplay without getting so worked up that he would have an orgasm.

Although they stayed married for over two decades, they never sorted out the issue with sex not being pleasurable for Isabelle. Similarly, Jill, who started dating after her husband died suddenly, found that she had trouble achieving orgasm or having much pleasure with sexual partners. Most of the participants found that as they aged the context of a sexual encounter was important and having plenty of time to let pleasure and lubrication build in addition to using lubricant. Jill described having trouble finding partners who were skilled in attending to the context.

> Well if he comes too soon (laughs), or if he doesn’t, you know, the whole foreplay thing, which I think most men are not that skilled at, at least the ones that I’ve encountered in my lifetime are not. Um, you know. Um, so yeah, a man coming too soon, or just, they just can be so much more cut and dried about it (laughs). … As opposed to mood and clothing and music and…yeah. Which is, certainly as I’ve gotten older, that kind of, need a lot more of that, and I’m not sure there are that many men that, my age, that have any skill at knowing how to do that (laughs).
Most of the participants described needing more foreplay for sex to be pleasurable as they aged. Those who experienced vaginal dryness found that lubricants, time, and oral sex helped, and yet reported some frustration that sex would be less spontaneous because they would need to have time and have lubricant available. Some also used estrogen creams to help with lubrication to plump their vaginal walls, which took planning because it would take a couple of weeks for the estrogen creams to have the desired effect.

Women sometimes also had difficulty in relationships dealing with the embarrassment their partner felt about sexual issues. Particia's partner, who had recently turned 90, used a penis pump to make his penis erect, but he would “get really embarrassed about that." Others described difficulty in reviving a sexual encounter after partners having difficulty getting erections because their partners became frustrated and shut down. Again, although sex was not the main dimension of the relationship that would decide satisfaction or dissatisfaction overall, when people were dissatisfied, then divorce offered opportunities to try something different with someone new.

Reactions to stress. Stress had a negative impact on sexual pleasure. Most of the participants had examples of times of stress that reduced their libido, often including times when they were caregiving for children or parents. In some cases, this did not cause problems because both people were stressed out and had low libido. However, in the instance below, Jill thought that her husband's libido also was low due to stress, but after his sudden death she discovered that he had been having affairs during a time when menopause combined with financial stress was making her less interested in sex. Although they got to work through some of the distance that had developed before he died, she said that the issue of difference in sex drive was more pronounced than she knew:
sex became problematic in the last years of my marriage to the degree that I did not realize that my husband was, had actually—these are things I discovered—he and I had problems in the last year of his life. We resolved them, but luckily, we sort of emotionally came back together, but—this is making me cry a little bit here—but after he died I actually found out that he had gotten into pornography I think and Adult Friend Finder and had had sex outside of marriage, and I didn’t know that until afterwards, so that was this huge thing I went through after he died. ... And so, so yes, I found emails that I came to understand what had been going on. Um, and so, you know, that was, that was a whole revelation about, you know, about, well, as I’ve thought about it more, male sexuality. It continues on, and I see that at these places. I mean, unless a man has really terrible health problems, they want to continue to have sex. They’ll take their pills and, you know, um, and I think women don’t maybe realize the degree to which men continue to want to have sex of some sort. I did not. I did not realize, you know, and I thought…I don’t know what I was thinking. We had financial problems, and I, we had to make a huge move and transition, and so I was concentrating on that (laughs), so.

Addiction. Various types of addiction affected the participants’ relationships, including in one case compulsive pornography use that a participant described as an addiction and, more commonly, substance addictions, including alcohol and marijuana. Norma talked about the impact of her partner’s strong sexual preference for pornography over partnered sex and the effect that had on their sex life, describing moving from more enjoyable partnered sexual activities to her holding his pornographic magazine while he masturbated to the pictures in it. Ultimately, Norma ended up feeling like she had become incidental in their sex life. Although
she knew going into the relationship that pornography was an issue, it grew to be out of control, getting to be more of a problem and not less as she had hoped.

Isabelle described a her partner’s growing addiction to marijuana causing sexual issues in her marriage, saying that although her marital sex had been pleasurable in the beginning, "he got to smoking more and more [marijuana], and so the libido went down, down, down, and it got to where we’d have sex maybe once a year or twice a year." Participants also mentioned alcohol as a substance that sometimes was misused and that put stress on the relationship, although some also described moderate amounts of it being a sexual support.

**Performativity.** Brenda discussed the high energy of early sex with her second husband becoming performative, and that sense of requiring performativity sapping the pleasure from their sexual life longer-term. She said "you know I was still having a good time, but some of it I was beginning to think 'dude, we’re not acting in a porn movie every time we have sex. It doesn’t have to be like this every time, like over the top. Sometimes just having sex is good, you know, it doesn’t have to be this production.'." She learned from that experience to have more flexible expectations about how sex would be, with it sometimes being good for her, sometimes for her partner, sometimes for both of them, and sometimes not that pleasurable for either of them. Another participant described having a partner say he was concerned about his performance, and assuring him that he did not need to perform in any particular way, a lesson she had learned in earlier marriages.

**Discovering partner’s different sexual orientation.** Several participants married men who were either gay or bisexually oriented in a way that significantly reduced the quality and quantity of sex with their female partners. Two of the women realized what had happened early in the relationship, and one found out when her husband came out decades into the relationship.
In each of these cases, discussing issues of sexuality with the closeted partner was difficult due to the shame associated with homosexuality, especially since all of the participants with closeted husbands came from the eldest group of participants, and the most stigma around homosexuality was present in that group. The sexual orientation of the male partners affected the relationship in that there was a sense of secrecy impacting the bond, the men often did not desire sex with their wives, and when there was sex, it tended to not be very pleasurable for the women. Martha described her panic as she discovered her husband was probably gay, because she did not believe in divorce. She said she came to understand why her husband would marry a woman:

we didn’t talk about it very much because I knew it would kill him too. I think he had been hiding for so long, and in those days, and they may still to some extent, so many men married. It was a front. If you could produce a wife, things were, things could be okay. And I, I never suspected him of using me, I didn’t, but it was something that was done. Others married because they wanted children, and we weren’t into artificial insemination, we weren’t into surrogate parents, we weren’t into all that. So if they wanted children, they needed to find a wife.

In two of the three cases, the partner being gay or bisexual did not end the marriage. One participant had a long-term affair to fulfill her sexual needs, and another primarily developed a highly charged solo sex life and also had a brief affair at one point. Laura said "I know that he was seeing some men around the bluff, the low-cost basically prostitutes around the bluff, and I mostly just let it ride and took care of myself because of the person he was."

Whether marital sex was pleasurable impacted how the divorce would affect sexual pleasure. In most cases, by the time a couple divorced, sexual expression had diminished to a considerable degree. In some cases, it never had been enjoyable, which was more common with
first marriages because in many cases participants had not had sex with their partners before marriage, which was not the case with second marriages. In terms of sex, then, sometimes divorces were a relief to participants. Amato's divorce-stress-adjustment perspective can be used to organize ideas about how the quality of marriage, as well as meanings attributed to divorce, impacts the quality of divorce (Amato, 2014). The results of this study support Amato’s claims but applying them specifically to sexual adjustment, which he does not do. Amato’s theory suggests that people who interpret divorce in positive ways, such as divorce presenting opportunities for growth, and people with resources tend to recover from the stress of divorce more quickly. He says that adjustment includes taking on new roles, which almost all of the participants in this study did, after divorce, and also connecting with new partners, which all but one of the divorcees had by the time of the study. Thomas and Ryan (2008) also conceptualize divorce as a process, with stressors counteracted with supports, and that balance contributing to how empowering or disempowering divorce was seen to be over time. With these points in mind, the way that the quality of marital sex affects the quality of sexual expression after divorce can be explored, considering the subthemes of divorce as empowering and the issue of regrets.

Quality of Sex After Divorce

Thomas and Ryan (2008) found transformational learning occurring through divorce in their qualitative study of a sample of women—this study supports the idea that this same transformational learning about sexual expression occurred for many of the participants in their experiences of divorce. Again, the quality of the marriage impacted the experience of the divorce, and this was especially true with sexual expression. Less sexual pleasure in the marriage often meant that after the divorce, the sexual learning was experienced as very pleasurable.
**Divorce as empowering.** How stressful divorce is depends on a lot of factors, such as how stressful the marriage was, which can make divorce feel like a relief, and who initiates the divorce, with the initiator having an easier time with the divorce typically (Amato, 2010). For the participants, divorce created opportunities for sexual experimentation and pleasure, and so was seen in the rear view as a worthwhile move forward in their lives. Although some participants described divorce as quite painful, none said they would prefer not to have divorced in the long run. As Norma put it, "There are some divorces that are so empowering, and that’s what that was for me.” This empowerment stemmed from multiple roots. Sometimes, divorces helped the participants to leave home or challenge social norms. Sometimes they created some freedom from childcare or from an abusive relationship. Other times, they created space for new relationship energy and sexual exploration, and, perhaps paradoxically, sometimes they created a sense of security.

**Able to leave home.** Several participants married in order to leave home, and so the marriage and the divorce were stepping stones to moving away from a place they wanted to leave. Some reported that they could have left home for other reasons—to go to college, for instance—but for others, marriage was the main reason they would be expected to leave home. As Cynthia said, marriage "was my... independence, you know." In that way, divorce, via marriage, created freedom for some participants. This was a crooked path, and yet in some cases in important step along the way to freedom.

**Loosening social norms.** Most of the participants described the time of their divorce as a time of gaining some insight into social norms around sex and, through that, an ability to relate to those norms more flexibly. Norma said that she experienced a cultural norm that "divorcees were loose women...because you’d had sex, and once you’d had sex you couldn’t do without it."
That assumption suited her fine, and she went on to experiment extensively with sexual expression. Brenda described her divorce as starting "the whole change in how I lived my life," including challenging her own previous assumptions about sexual expression.

**Childcare implications.** Some, but not all, of the participants with children found the time after their divorces to have much more time available for sexual expression than they had in their marriages because of custody arrangements. This is in contrast to the research, which would indicate that childcare issues are a stressor in many ways (Amato, 2014). It does make sense that the impact overall might be different than the impact on sexual expression in particular. For the first time since being married, women could have new partners over for a sexual encounter without worrying about their children being at home. One participant who ended up with sole custody of her two children still ended up being able to experiment sexually as they aged with the help of childcare. Another participant who was the sole care provider also used childcare services to date. Brenda's comment was typical of how participants described the newfound space to have sexual encounters: "Well, it ended up being a time…you know because he would get the girls every other weekend, all of the sudden, I have free time."

**Escaping abuse.** For two of the women interviewed, their divorces freed them from relationships that were becoming increasingly abusive, which ended up being good for both sexual satisfaction and even more for life satisfaction. The divorces were experienced with a great deal of relief. In the exemplar below, Frances describes her divorce from her second husband, whom she married after her first husband died. She had not believed in divorce and had been counseled by a clergy person to stay in her marriage despite escalating violence, including her husband kicking a dog to death and breaking holes in walls. She said
I began going to Project Safe meetings and trying to figure out, you know. I went to Al Anon even though he wasn’t an alcoholic, his parents were both alcoholic, so I knew that he had the same mindset. And, uh, and just slowly sorted through to realize there’s worse things than divorce, and being in this relationship is way worse and it’s better for all of us, him and me and everybody, to divorce and get peace.

Although sex with her abuser had generally been okay, as their relationship deteriorated, their sexual expression had, as well.

Embracing sexual expression. After divorce, most of the participants entered into new relationships and described enjoying the energy and passion the new relationship had. For some, it was the first time they had pleasurable sex in their lives. The description of the intensity of this new time was not unambiguous—like limerence phases in general, the new sexual exploration was at times exciting and at times anxiety-provoking. Karen described her experience with delight, although she said at the time it was also a bit stressful:

I laugh about it because in some ways it was so much fun, you know, but anyway. Yeah, so along comes this guy, because I really gave myself permission, you know. There was nothing to work on with my husband, there was no hope of you know some kind of reconciliation or anything; it was over. I mean, I just had to go on with my life. So along comes my lover, who was this six–foot-two guy with a fabulous singing voice and his favorite thing in the world was making love. So, really, how could I have found …? It was such an awakening. It’s probably what happens to most women like in their 20s but I was this 48-year-old woman, I was just going off like a volcano or something. I mean all of that stuff that had been repressed just came out ... I mean part of me was just a little
crazy, you know, but I mean, I can see that sex could be addictive, because it is so pleasurable.

Cynthia described thinking after her first marriage that her time as a sexual being was done—as she put it "as a 26-year-old, I thought I was like a has-been, washed up." She found through her divorce that her lack of desire had more to do with the relationship than with her as an individual:

I was like “this is not for me” because I didn’t want him to touch me, I didn’t want anything, I didn’t feel any desire, and I really thought “this is so sad, like my sex life is over.” And um, and then we split up, we separated. I was in graduate school and my son was like three or four years old, so I was really busy and I had moved to my mom’s house and so a year later I went, it was a year or six months later I went to Florida to South Beach for spring break. I went out with my stepsister and I met someone and we went back to his apartment and we had amazing, incredible sex all night, and I was like…and I mean I didn’t know…it wasn’t about the relationship for sure, but it was just that, it was really good and I was like so happy that “oh, it’s not gone! I can do this” (laughs).

**Security.** Some participants described gaining a sense of security from knowing that they could weather a relationship ending. It created some degree of independence and made it easier to be in a new relationship with an increased sense of security. For example, Cynthia said "when I was younger I was more insecure or worried about leaving relationships, or the relationship ending, and then…I guess now it’s just…trusting or thinking 'well I’ve been through break[ups]…you know, and it’s okay. I won’t be worried if that happens anyway, you know?'.” From this place of increased security, most of the participants expressed wanting to be in partnerships, but that desire seemed more like a draw towards something rather than a move to avoid change or
pain by staying with something that was not working. From the place of increased security, participants described being able to ask for what they wanted sexually and to insist on tending to their own pleasure as well as their partner’s. Overall, the participants seemed willing to leave relationships that were not working in significant ways. Subsequent marriages to the first one are more likely to end in divorce (Amato, 2010), and although there are likely to be a range of reasons for that, this sense of security—that one could leave a relationship and things would still be all right—may be one of those reasons.

**Regrets, I've had a few.** Overall, the participants in the study did not describe their divorces with regret. However, there were some regrets that they had that overlapped with the question of sexual pleasure and divorce. One participant's relationship ended during a time when the sex was really good, and so she was concerned she would not find a lover like her ex-husband. She regretted, especially at the time, that the relationship ended. She ended up having enjoyable sex with more people after that, which she attributed to her increasing skill in knowing and asking for what she wanted, realizing she was not reliant on her partner's initial skill to experience partnered sexual pleasure.

Rita had hoped not to divorce, but wondered if that made her wait too long to divorce. Getting divorced later in life as well as her work responsibilities made it more difficult for her to date after the divorce. She expressed wishing that she had divorced sooner and also that she had expected to remarry, although she had not as of the time of the study. She stayed for the children and even had an affair with a potential partner while she was in the marriage, but she ultimately decided to wait until her children left home to get divorced. She said:

Well even when my parents got a divorce when I was a freshman in college. I didn’t want to be part of a divorced family. That’s one of the things that kept me in my marriage for
as long as I was. I thought maybe if things could change it would be better, you know, for the kids, but unfortunately it wasn’t. … But uh, actually I did have, once, see it took me forever to make up my mind to get a divorce. Um, 34 years that I was married, I should have done it 15 years sooner, but I didn’t know how I could take care of my children if I did that. So anyway, actually I thought maybe he would get better uh once they were teenagers and stuff because he was real smart, and he used to do, I mean, make things, but build things too. But um anyway, once I made up my mind for sure that I was going to get a divorce, which was when I was about 50, um, I did have a brief affair with a friend who’d married a good friend of mine because they were fixing to break up, and uh, it was kind of like testing out to see if there’s another man available to help me take care of my children as well as other things (laughs).

Her sense from this affair was that her children would be suspicious of a new man, and she let the affair go. She said later in a phone call that she thought that what made moving on from a divorce easier was a willingness to take risks on new relationships, which she had been reluctant to do.

One participant sometimes regretted not divorcing her husband. Martha had a series of affairs through her marriage to manage the fact that soon after her marriage she realized that her husband was gay. Although she was open to him having affairs, she was not sure if he had had extended sexual partnerships with people as she had, and so she sometimes wished she had divorced him so he would have been free to date as he liked so that they both could have sexual pleasure in their lives, which they did not have together. That said, she also very much valued the relationship she had with her husband and was ambivalent about letting it go for the sake of sex. As she described the situation, "I wished for him many times that I had released him. …"
However, he could have released himself. ... And we talked a couple of times, but it was not comfortable, and I think we sort of tacitly continued as we were." She also said that many things about the marriage were very enjoyable, although not the sex.

Getting divorced, then, was not without its regrets and its challenges; nor was deciding not to divorce. However, in retrospect, most of the participants described divorces as openings and fewer as a source of long-term regrets, especially in terms of sexual pleasure. This supports Thomas and Ryan's (2008) finding about transformational learning through divorce and extends that learning to sexual expression. It also takes seriously women's right to seek pleasure and to overcome barriers to pleasure even if those barriers are socially sanctioned through institutions such as marriage (Morrissey Stahl, Gale, Lewis, & Kleiber, in review).

**Discussion**

Divorce can be empowering for women, both personally (Stevenson & Wolfer, 2006) and sexually. Even when divorce was stressful when it happened, over time participants often found meaning in the experience. One source of meaning was having the opportunity for sexual experimentation. It is likely that divorce played an especially important role with the older adult generation because of dimensions of the choice to marry that did not seem voluntary to the participants. Women of a generation who were encouraged to see their work as primarily unpaid family work may have found not having paid work to be too risky of an investment in the long run in a time of no fault divorce (Stevenson & Wolfer, 2007). Also, many of the participants perceived the need to marry to have sex. The possibility of marrying someone whose sexual orientation was closeted because of cultural stigma also contributes to the importance of divorce for older generations. One participant in her sixties pointed out that she had grown up not knowing any divorced people. For the participant in the group whose parents had divorced, the
stigma had been so high at that point that she did not want to get a divorce. On the other side were participants who had witnessed their parents staying together unhappily. As a consequence, they had less concern about divorce for themselves, seeing unhappy marriage as an unsuitable alternative, especially if they were financially able to leave the marriage. Generational context, but also class, race, family history, and cultural norms all impact how people will think about divorce (Wolfinger, 2017). Many of the women in the study had to retrain to go back to work after long marriages, creating more voluntariness in their next marriages. Wives being able to work predicted divorce in unhappy but not happy marriages, lending support to the idea that being able to make a living will impact women's sense of agency (Schoen, Astone, Rothert, Standish, & Kim, 2002). Women who have other options will leave unhappy marriages but not happy ones. One dimension of unhappy marriages can be sexual dissatisfaction.

Divorce created new opportunities for sexual exploration for the women in this study. Splitting from partners with whom they had less satisfying sex lives created opportunities to explore sexual expression with a range of other people. This was true for the research participants at many different ages—much of the sexual reinvention experienced by this group was in the women's forties, fifties, and beyond. New sexual opportunities also might be a function of voluntariness—the increased threat of divorce caused by no fault marriages made men more likely to want to treat women well in a relationships as measured by reduced spousal abuse in one study (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2006). Treating women better in later relationships, which had an increased risk of divorce, may have included tending more to a woman’s sexual pleasure.

That said, sexual revolutions could also have happened within marriages possibly, but they mostly did not in this group of women. This could be because sex over time becomes less
passionate as a rule, so reviving sexual expression is unlikely (DeWitte, 2012). However, long-term married sexual expression exists (Nagoski, 2015). One participant who was married for decades was finding that partnered sex with her husband was getting more tender and satisfying for her over time. In some cases the marital sex experienced by the participants was not good from the beginning of the marriage. One exception was a participant whose husband had a flirtation with a woman, which made them talk frankly about the distance that had developed between them and re-establish their marriage. It is not clear from these stories what would have re-ignited sex within the marriages or kept marriages together rather than satisfaction coming in new relationships. That major changes are more feasible through divorce rather than within a marriage is supported by the longitudinal research of Vaillant about men. Vaillant argues based on longitudinal data from 240 men over 70 years that it is more likely that a divorce will lead to a happy outcome in the second half of life than staying in a marriage and working on changing it from within (Bingham, 2014). This may also be the case for women, which is supported by this study, although the reasons are not entirely clear.

Over time, regardless of whether they were partnered or not, there were times of more and less sexual expression that cycled through the participants’ lives, which was impacted by caretaking, health issues, stress, and many of the themes described above. However, in the case of divorce, the sexual expression did not cycle back in between the ex-partners. It was very common in women's descriptions that there was more sex at the beginning of the relationship and less at the end.

Being forced out of one's zone of comfort, whether through the threat of an affair in the one case or through divorce more often in this group, often meant trying new things to get intimacy and connection needs met. For people who were married for longer periods of time, it
often meant midlife revolutions in sexual expression. Like suffering, it is difficult to quantify sexual pleasure, and so it is not possible to know if people had more pleasure overall from these sexual explorations than they would have if they had experienced a revolution within their original partnerships, or if the discomforts of divorce were made up for by the additional pleasure. Qualitatively, though, the participants appeared excited and energized when describing the range of sexual experiences they had the opportunity to have, even when they were brief and did not end up in relationships that were otherwise significant. Thus, although divorce has been shown to have several types of negative impacts, including in availability of social support and less financial stability (Amato, 2010; Amato, 2014; Gray, DeVaus, Qu, Lixia, & Stanton, 2011), these were not the dimensions focused on by this group of participants. One interpretation of this could be that over time, women chose to focus more on what they have gained from experiences and less on the painful dimensions—what one research team called ‘socioemotional selectivity theory’ (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003) and another ‘positive looking’ (Isaacowitz, 2012). That said, this research did support the idea that more conflictual relationships led to divorces that were experienced primarily as a relief at the time of divorce (Amato, 2010).

One question that arose in the interviewer's mind from the analysis of the interviews was whether sex education would have helped to nurture marital sexual expression in some cases. For example, if women knew more about masturbation and their own pleasure and were in a place to give feedback about that rather than seeing it as a shameful secret and an insult to their husbands, they may have found more sexual satisfaction within their marriages and been spared the stress of divorce. Some also ascribed to widely-held cultural myths that it is typical for both men and women to orgasm during intercourse, or indeed that vaginal-penile intercourse is generally orgasmic for women, which it is not (Nagoski, 2015). Perhaps sexual function issues could have
been treated, or a range of sexual behaviors taught so that partners were not relying on penetrative sex for mutual sexual pleasure. That said, issues with sexual function are fairly common even in non-clinical samples, and people often still express satisfaction with their marriages and even sex lives while they are experiencing dysfunction (Metz & McCarthy, 2012). Also, although information could affect sexual expression within a relationship, issues of power and ability and willingness to talk about sex by both partners would impact whether information could be applied within the relationship.

Although the reasons given for divorce are important, the problems described by participants in terms of sexuality might be accentuated by the divorce itself. Sexual expression tends to have a relatively small impact when sex is going reasonably well—researchers estimate fifteen to twenty percent—but a more significant impact when things are going wrong (McCarthy, 2015). People may be more willing to share sexual problems after a relationship ends and more time has been spent reflecting on problems in the relationship. It could be that being able to reflect on a sexual relationship that had ended was helpful for later relationships that participants had in terms of doing something different in later relationships, which seems to be true in at least a few cases. As one participant in her fifties put it, she was afraid that the divorce would end her sex life, but then she noticed that she had been there too—that what had been good about the sex had a lot more to do with her than she initially gave herself credit for.

Being in relationships with closeted gay men had a negative impact on the sex lives of three of the sixteen women interviewed. This issue in the older adult cohort speaks to the importance of culturally validated avenues for the full expression of a range of sexual orientations. Although the researcher personally knows some people in the older adult cohort who have made open arrangements for partnering with people of different orientations, for the
participants in this study the amount to which the men could speak openly about their sexuality was very limited, and that caused suffering for both partners, whether it ended in divorce or in the perceived need to keep uncomfortable marital secrets.

In relation to the literature on divorce, which points to many negative outcomes of divorce as described in the introduction, it is somewhat surprising that women in this study did not express much regret about their divorces. Indeed, some participants expressed regret about not divorcing sooner or not divorcing at all. Research on parenting describes a phenomenon in which asking a parent moment-to-moment how she enjoys parenting will result in relatively low scores of happiness, but asking for the overall remembered impact of parenting leads people to describe a sense of meaning and joy that they found in parenting (Senior, 2014). Some have described this as being delusional (Cloud, 2011), but perhaps a more helpful interpretation is that upon reflection, even difficult moments in life can be utilized for the purpose of growth. In other words, the big picture of how something impacted one's life might be more obvious in the rear-view mirror. Thomas and Ryan (2008) found transformational learning occurring through divorce in their qualitative study of a sample of women—it could be that this same transformational learning about sexual expression is available for women in their experiences of divorce. Divorce, although distressing and disorienting at first, was often sexually empowering for women in the study.

**Limitations and Implications for Further Research**

This study has a number of limitations. The participants in the study were white and middle to upper class, both of which are associated with privilege. More research is needed with other racial groups and people of a broader range of social classes. The participants were women, and research on men is needed. The women in the sample were more educated than the
population at large, and to the extent that they were religious, they tended to have more liberal views. As an exploration of divorce in the older adult population, a difficulty accentuated by this research is the complexity of family structures. Participants in this study were widowed then divorced, divorced several times, divorced very early and then cohabiting, in serious relationships that were non-marital, and many other configurations. Creating research that incorporates such richness is important. Overall, more research on divorce and sexual expression is needed with different samples and different methodological approaches to flesh out a nuanced understanding of the role of divorce in older adult well-being.

**Conclusion**

Divorce changes people's lives in profound ways, including in terms of sexual expression. How these changes occur and the types of changes have received little attention in the research literature, especially the dimension of sexual expression. This paper starts to lay a groundwork for considering the rich breadth of women's experiences of the impact of divorce on sexual expression by arguing that the quality of sex in the marriage impacts the quality of sexual expression after the divorce in key ways. Sexual dissatisfaction in marriage were associated with the possibility of sexual revolutions after divorce, and for divorce being experienced as sexually transformational.
References


CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED, PATHS IN SIGHT

Having the opportunity to study sexuality and aging for my dissertation has been a source of deep pleasure and richness in my life. This dissertation marks the beginning of my research on this topic. To that end, I conclude the dissertation by describing lessons from the study and laying out future work that I plan to do to continue to unpack the wisdom shared by the women who participated in the study.

Lessons Learned

In analyzing the data from this study, many themes emerged. For the substantive manuscripts in this dissertation, I focused on the topics of female pleasure and divorce. The two linked in the sense that both in finding pleasure and in being able to choose to divorce, the participants in the study needed to challenge the social norms of men's sexual pleasure being more important than women's, and marriage being a privileged relational form. Below, I share conclusions from each of the manuscripts and then offer a discussion of how the results from the two manuscripts can be integrated.

Pleasure

While each woman who participated in the study had a unique life course, there was common ground between all the participants as well: they all saw themselves as sexual beings, supporting the research saying that sexual expression is a significant issue for older adults
(Fisher 2010; Gray & Garcia, 2012; Hinchliff, Gott, & Ingelton, 2010; Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011; Kleinplatz et al., 2013; Lindau & Gavrilova, 2010; Lindau et al., 2007; Minichiello, Plummer, & Loxton, 2004; Schick et al., 2010). In a culture where women's pleasure is often thought of as secondary to men's pleasure (Nagoski, 2013), pursuing pleasure often meant breaking someone's rules. These rules were family, church, or perceived cultural rules. At the time when the rules were broken, it was sometimes clear and sometimes not clear to participants that what they were doing was all right. In retrospect, some expressed regret, for example, for having brief affairs to facilitate leaving a relationship or for getting into sexual relationships that were not nourishing or, at worst, abusive. Sorting out how to claim pleasure was an ongoing learning process.

More often than expressing regret, the participants expressed a fear of being judged for their choices or for things that they were doing to facilitate sexual pleasure or exploration. For many participants, this fear or shame was managed by not sharing their stories even with friends. This fits with the literature stating that women's sexual pleasure is the subject of more moral oversight than men's (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013; Gott, 2005). Many had rarely if ever discussed issues of sexually transmitted infections or affairs or even types of sexual exploration they had engaged in. And yet as they were discussing their pleasurable experiences, their faces often lit up and the room filled with laughter. It is likely that even with the participants reporting not sharing some of their stories prior due to a sense of shame or embarrassment, that overall their sense of their own sexuality was less shame-based than the population at large to the extent that they were willing to sign up to discuss their sex lives in depth with a researcher. It also seems likely that the opportunity to describe one’s sexual experiences with an interviewer who has trained to set aside judgement created an environment in which participants could be quite
frank about their experiences. It is more fun to describe sensitive topics to someone who is clearly open to hearing about them and unlikely to be threatened by them.

Sometimes, women described not talking to their partners about sexual issues for a variety of reasons, including feeling embarrassed and also having a sense that their partners did not want to hear what they had to say. A particular area of secrecy that showed up between partners was discussion about masturbation. Most of the participants reported masturbating at some point in their lives, which may be a higher rate than in the population at large (Habenick et al., 2010), although masturbation may also be underreported by women (Bergner, 2013). Not all participants experienced this, but in many cases, guilt around masturbation seemed to form around an expectation that partnered sex would meet all the woman's sexual needs. Because of that expectation, masturbation was seen as an insult to partners. However, arguably this model is more based on a male version of masturbation. Due to refractory periods, male masturbation may take the place of partnered sex in terms of taking time until one could orgasm again. For women, this refractory period does not exist. Concerns may also exist around men feeling objectified by things like pornography or vibrators used to orgasm. Multiple participants, who were of course female, did describe feeling objectified by pornographic images. It is feasible that the use of pornography or a phallic insertable vibrator would feel similarly objectifying to men. However, secrecy around masturbation did not seem to positively contribute to the pleasure of the participants. It has also been noted that perhaps female masturbation is culturally shamed more than male masturbation (Bergner, 2013), which was supported by this research, as the women generally reported assuming that their male partners masturbated.

Another fear that came up in sharing sexual stories was the fear of betraying sex partners. Because many sexual experiences were partnered, it was not always clear in what contexts it
would be workable to get more information by discussing sexual issues with someone outside the relationship, even when information or support would have been helpful. This was not true of all participants, but it was true of a majority. They were cautious for good reason—sometimes trusted others were helpful, and yet sometimes trusted others were not, like a clergy person who encouraged a participant to stay in an increasingly violent marriage.

The idea of safety came up often in the interviews across subject areas, seeming to mean a number of things. Many times, participants referred to being in nonjudgmental contexts, whether with a partner or with friends or even like-minded strangers, as being safe. Being with partners who managed their emotions effectively, especially anger, was also referred to as being safe. Sometimes safety was sought by avoiding sexuality all together, although that strategy worked for the short term but not for the long term for participants who had pursued it. Finally, intimacy provided a basic sense of safety and connection for participants—the idea that they were cared for as people and not just as sex objects. That questions of danger are closely interwoven with questions of pleasure is consistent with literature on sex and pleasure (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013).

The idea of responsive desire may be a part of the picture of why female sexuality may be so linked to partnered status. Responsive desire is common for women, and is different than spontaneous desire in that instead of feeling desire and then moving into sexual activity, they start desiring when they encounter an erotic situation, often after sexual activity has commenced (Nagoski, 2015). It could be that female sexual expression is so linked to partnered status because women are more likely to experience desire for sexual pleasure in erotic situations, and yet they are not encouraged to create those situations for themselves. When women did seek out the erotic, the eldest in the group still seemed to experience desire in certain contexts.
The lessons taken from the study in terms of what aids pleasure as people age can be summed up with the counter-narrative acronym NICE. Finding Novel contexts in which to learn sexually, cultivating Intimacy with partners and with one’s own body, being Creative with particular sexual activities, and Extending one’s sense of sexual possibility into advanced age supported sexual pleasure with age. Through NICE engagement with sexual expression, these women were able to claim their sexual agency over time. The old adage that might say “nice girls finish last” should clearly be amended for women in later life.

Making meaning out of life experiences is a process of construction. For example, participants often told their stories in episodes marked by significant events such as marriage, important relationships, or periods of parenting children. If our perspective is a continuously running camera documenting moment-to-moment experience, our memories are sorted into documentaries in the editing room, leaving significant parts of that moment-to-moment experience behind. How a person makes sense of life events offers a glimpse into what she values. Clearly, the participants cared about being sexual beings. Although they experienced hardships, they were agents before being survivors. Stated another way:

Telling stories about female sexual pleasure, agency and power allows us to uncover a tradition and community of powerful, feisty, indomitable women who will not be cowed by oppression or violation. In this way, we begin to show that violation is not the blueprint for women's sexual experience, rather, it is an example of agency gone awry. By telling a different story, still with the understanding that danger is always a potentiality that must be contested, we are providing a different beginning and therefore a different ending to what it means to be a sexual being in the world. … The quest for joy, intimacy, dreaming and
desiring pleasure precedes any form of negation. (Jolly, Cornwall, & Hawkins, 2013, p. 37-39)

The participants in this study had to take risks to explore their own pleasure, and they had all done so. The story of female pleasure is important for a number of reasons, but especially because it is so often a story left out about women as they age. This study offers a counter-narrative to trends that pathologize female sexuality in order to treat it or commodify female sexuality in order to exploit it. Although challenges to women's pleasure exist, and those also were present in the interviews with participants, what is perhaps more striking is the power of the search for pleasure and wholeness in spite of forces that would oppose it.

**Divorce and Sexual Expression**

Divorce can be empowering for women, both personally (Stevenson & Wolfer, 2006) and sexually. Even when divorce was stressful when it happened, over time participants often found meaning in the experience. One source of meaning was having the opportunity for sexual experimentation. It is likely that divorce played an especially important role with the older adult generation because of dimensions of the choice to marry that did not seem voluntary to the participants. Women of a generation who were encouraged to see their work as primarily unpaid family work may have found not having paid work to be too risky of an investment in the long run in a time of no fault divorce (Stevenson & Wolfer, 2007). Also, many of the participants perceived the need to marry to have sex. The possibility of marrying someone whose sexual orientation was closeted because of cultural stigma also contributes to the importance of divorce for older generations. One participant in her sixties pointed out that she had grown up not knowing any divorced people. For the participant in the group whose parents had divorced, the stigma had been so high at that point that she did not want to get a divorce. On the other side
were participants who had witnessed their parents staying together unhappily. As a consequence, they had less concern about divorce for themselves, seeing unhappy marriage as an unsuitable alternative, especially if they were financially able to leave the marriage. Generational context, but also class, race, family history, and cultural norms all impact how people will think about divorce (Wolfinger, 2017). Many of the women in the study had to retrain to go back to work after long marriages, creating more voluntariness in their next marriages. Wives being able to work predicted divorce in unhappy but not happy marriages, lending support to the idea that being able to make a living will impact women's sense of agency (Schoen, Astone, Rothert, Standish, & Kim, 2002). Women who have other options will leave unhappy marriages but not happy ones. One dimension of unhappy marriages can be sexual dissatisfaction.

Divorce created new opportunities for sexual exploration for the women in this study. Splitting from partners with whom they had less satisfying sex lives created opportunities to explore sexual expression with a range of other people. This was true for the research participants at many different ages—much of the sexual reinvention experienced by this group was in the women's forties, fifties, and beyond. New sexual opportunities also might be a function of voluntariness—the increased threat of divorce caused by no fault marriages made men more likely to want to treat women well in a relationships as measured by reduced spousal abuse in one study (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2006). Treating women better in later relationships, which had an increased risk of divorce, may have included tending more to a woman’s sexual pleasure.

That said, sexual revolutions could also have happened within marriages possibly, but they mostly did not in this group of women. This could be because sex over time becomes less passionate as a rule, so reviving sexual expression is unlikely (DeWitte, 2012). However, long-
term married sexual expression exists (Nagoski, 2015). One participant who was married for decades was finding that partnered sex with her husband was getting more tender and satisfying for her over time. In some cases the marital sex experienced by the participants was not good from the beginning of the marriage. One exception was a participant whose husband had a flirtation with a woman, which made them talk frankly about the distance that had developed between them and re-establish their marriage. It is not clear from these stories what would have re-ignited sex within the marriages or kept marriages together rather than satisfaction coming in new relationships. That major changes are more feasible through divorce rather than within a marriage is supported by the longitudinal research of Vaillant about men. Vaillant argues based on longitudinal data from 240 men over 70 years that it is more likely that a divorce will lead to a happy outcome in the second half of life than staying in a marriage and working on changing it from within (Bingham, 2014). This may also be the case for women, which is supported by this study, although the reasons are not entirely clear.

Over time, regardless of whether they were partnered or not, there were times of more and less sexual expression that cycled through the participants’ lives, which was impacted by caretaking, health issues, stress, and many of the themes described above. However, in the case of divorce, the sexual expression did not cycle back in between the ex-partners. It was very common in women's descriptions that there was more sex at the beginning of the relationship and less at the end.

Being forced out of one's zone of comfort, whether through the threat of an affair in the one case or through divorce more often in this group, often meant trying new things to get intimacy and connection needs met. For people who were married for longer periods of time, it often meant midlife revolutions in sexual expression. Like suffering, it is difficult to quantify
sexual pleasure, and so it is not possible to know if people had more pleasure overall from these sexual explorations than they would have if they had experienced a revolution within their original partnerships, or if the discomforts of divorce were made up for by the additional pleasure. Qualitatively, though, the participants appeared excited and energized when describing the range of sexual experiences they had the opportunity to have, even when they were brief and did not end up in relationships that were otherwise significant. Thus, although divorce has been shown to have several types of negative impacts, including in availability of social support and less financial stability (Amato, 2010; Amato, 2014; Gray, DeVaus, Qu, Lixia, & Stanton, 2011), these were not the dimensions focused on by this group of participants. One interpretation of this could be that over time, women chose to focus more on what they have gained from experiences and less on the painful dimensions—what one research team called ‘socioemotional selectivity theory’ (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003) and another ‘positive looking’ (Isaacowitz, 2012). That said, this research did support the idea that more conflictual relationships led to divorces that were experienced primarily as a relief at the time of divorce (Amato, 2010).

One question that arose in the interviewer's mind from the analysis of the interviews was whether sex education would have helped to nurture marital sexual expression in some cases. For example, if women knew more about masturbation and their own pleasure and were in a place to give feedback about that rather than seeing it as a shameful secret and an insult to their husbands, they may have found more sexual satisfaction within their marriages and been spared the stress of divorce. Some also ascribed to widely-held cultural myths that it is typical for both men and women to orgasm during intercourse, or indeed that vaginal-penile intercourse is generally orgasmic for women, which it is not (Nagoski, 2015). Perhaps sexual function issues could have been treated, or a range of sexual behaviors taught so that partners were not relying on
penetrative sex for mutual sexual pleasure. That said, issues with sexual function are fairly common even in non-clinical samples, and people often still express satisfaction with their marriages and even sex lives while they are experiencing dysfunction (Metz & McCarthy, 2012). Also, although information could affect sexual expression within a relationship, issues of power and ability and willingness to talk about sex by both partners would impact whether information could be applied within the relationship.

Although the reasons given for divorce are important, the problems described by participants in terms of sexuality might be accentuated by the divorce itself. Sexual expression tends to have a relatively small impact when sex is going reasonably well—researchers estimate fifteen to twenty percent—but a more significant impact when things are going wrong (McCarthy, 2015). People may be more willing to share sexual problems after a relationship ends and more time has been spent reflecting on problems in the relationship. It could be that being able to reflect on a sexual relationship that had ended was helpful for later relationships that participants had in terms of doing something different in later relationships, which seems to be true in at least a few cases. As one participant in her fifties put it, she was afraid that the divorce would end her sex life, but then she noticed that she had been there too—that what had been good about the sex had a lot more to do with her than she initially gave herself credit for.

Being in relationships with closeted gay men had a negative impact on the sex lives of three of the sixteen women interviewed. This issue in the older adult cohort speaks to the importance of culturally validated avenues for the full expression of a range of sexual orientations. Although the researcher personally knows some people in the older adult cohort who have made open arrangements for partnering with people of different orientations, for the participants in this study the amount to which the men could speak openly about their sexuality
was very limited, and that caused suffering for both partners, whether it ended in divorce or in the perceived need to keep uncomfortable marital secrets.

In relation to the literature on divorce, which points to many negative outcomes of divorce as described in the introduction, it is somewhat surprising that women in this study did not express much regret about their divorces. Indeed, some participants expressed regret about not divorcing sooner or not divorcing at all. Research on parenting describes a phenomenon in which asking a parent moment-to-moment how she enjoys parenting will result in relatively low scores of happiness, but asking for the overall remembered impact of parenting leads people to describe a sense of meaning and joy that they found in parenting (Senior, 2014). Some have described this as being delusional (Cloud, 2011), but perhaps a more helpful interpretation is that upon reflection, even difficult moments in life can be utilized for the purpose of growth. In other words, the big picture of how something impacted one's life might be more obvious in the rearview mirror. Thomas and Ryan (2008) found transformational learning occurring through divorce in their qualitative study of a sample of women—it could be that this same transformational learning about sexual expression is available for women in their experiences of divorce. Divorce, although distressing and disorienting at first, was often sexually empowering for women in the study.

Integration

In beginning to unpack the data from these interviews, starting with the question of pleasure was important to me to provide a counter narrative to dominant cultural narratives featuring danger for female sexual experience. The role of divorce in seeking pleasure was a surprise to me. I had read research about costs of divorce, but less about potential gains from
divorce. I had not considered sexual expression and divorce at all, although it makes sense that
divorce might be a part of a search for sexual pleasure. The idea that a person has to be able to
say "no" to say "yes" also links the question of pleasure and divorce, as the right to divorce is the
right to be in a marriage voluntarily. Claiming pleasure was a learning process for the women I
interviewed, and sometimes divorce was a part of that process. Being able to make a decision,
change that decision even if the change was not culturally supported, and make a new decision
was a part of being able to grow.

The two manuscripts also overlapped in terms of expanding a case for responsive desire
as to why women are so much more sexual in partnerships than outside of them (Nagoski, 2015).
Women described needing contexts that were arousing more and more as they aged to experience
desire. Some marriages did not adapt to this change. Also, sometimes the context of new
relationships was more sexually arousing for women than familiar relationships. That said, the
women described appreciating the intimacy of established relationships, as well. Although the
tension between the roles of novelty and familiarity for sexual pleasure was not resolved, the
manuscripts contributed to the discussion by offering in detail how familiarity and how novelty
can contribute.

Issues of secrecy and shame impacted the results of both of these parts of the study.
Clarity about sexual orientation had a big impact on this sample, both in terms of seeking
pleasure and in terms of marriages. Sometimes this included discovering one's own sexual
orientation. Other times, it was about creating space for a partner's sexual orientation. The most
problems seemed to be caused when sexual orientation was a source of shame and secrecy.
Similarly, masturbation was important to the women in this sample, and yet it potentially was a
source of stress when people felt that it needed to be kept a secret. If this source of pleasure could be talked about openly, it may have been supportive of well-being in several of the participants' relationships. It also was important that women be able to talk to their partners about what brought them partnered pleasure and to have a sense that their partners were responsive to this feedback. In general, openness to pleasure and open lines of communication supported relationships that the women in the study valued, and breakdowns in communication were often linked to divorce.

In any situation, we make meaning out of our lives. From parenting to partnering to sexual expression to divorce, what we experience moment-to-moment may be different than the way we come to think about life events. It could be that how we think about life events is even more important than objective measures of how the life events affected us. As Thomas and Ryan (2008) point out, divorces can be opportunities for learning and growth. That the women in this study generally viewed divorce as providing opportunities for learning more about sexual pleasure and about relationships may matter as much as other kinds of measures of divorce outcomes.

**Future Directions**

The interviews with the participants in this study yielded rich data that will contribute to the lead researcher's future research program. Eight topics have emerged that invite continued study. Here, I will briefly explore the themes that have yet to be written about, including abortion, mixed orientation marriages, affairs, menopause, marriage, non-consensual sex, caregiving, and solo sex.
Abortion

Several of the participants in the study had abortions. One had an illegal abortion before Roe vs. Wade and described her experience of finding out how to get an abortion and how the illegal clinic worked in a good deal of detail. Other participants were encouraged by their partners to have abortions but bristled at the suggestion, having a sense that it was men's privilege to imagine abortion as being easier than it is, both emotionally and physically. The data from this group of older adult women could help to create more understanding about the role of abortion in women's sex lives and what it meant for the older generation to come of age in a time in which abortions were not readily available in terms of women's experience of sexuality.

Mixed Orientation Marriages

Four of the participants were in mixed orientation marriages, meaning a marriage between people of two different sexual orientations. This was often a secret in relationships, perhaps due to the social norms when older adults were coming of age and marrying. Exploring the question of mixed orientation marriages and considering lessons offered by the participants in this study could support couple therapists and others who work with people in mixed orientation relationships.

Affairs

More than half of the participants were impacted by affairs, either by having sexual relationships outside of their marriages or being in relationships with married partners or being in relationships with partners who were having sex with other partners in secret. This may be especially important for the aging population, as they are as a cohort having more affairs than younger cohorts (Wolfinger, 2017). Understanding the impact of affairs and why people choose
to have them is important for sex and couple therapists, and this data could add to the literature on this topic.

**Menopause**

The way that menopause impacts sexual functioning varies and is a source of debate (Avis, Stellato, Crawford, Johannes, & Longcope, 2000). Considering the role of menopause for the research participants on sexual expression could improve understanding of what menopause means for older adult women's sex lives. Because the experiences of these participants were so varied, from noticing not much at all to having relatively distressing symptoms for years, it is a good data set from which to explore a variety of types of experiences.

**Marriage**

Marriage had a range of impacts on the sex lives of participants in the study. In some cases, it allowed for exploration and learning within the safe environment of a coupled relationship. For others, it locked women into relationships with very poor sexual quality before they had a chance to understand and explore their own sexual preferences and pleasure. In still other cases, it made women feel like they had to stay in abusive relationships. Drawing together research on how marriage affects sexual pleasure and offering the experiences described in this data set would contribute to the research on the topic of marriage and sexual expression.

**Non-consensual Sex**

More than half of women in the study reported some nonconsensual sexual activity. The types of activity ranged from childhood sexual abuse to partner rape to spousal rape to workplace harassment. They described contexts in which abuse was more and less likely, and reflected on the shame and sadness that resulted from these experiences, as well as the types of support that
helped them to be resilient in the wake of non-consensual sexual experiences. Offering a consideration of non-consensual sexual activity from the perspective of those in the older generation would add to an understanding of how women make meaning of these experiences.

**Caregiving**

Caregiving, whether for children or for parents or for one's pets, impacted sexuality for many of the participants. The time and energy women spent caregiving decreased time and energy for sex, but also the mental load of caregiving—thinking about what to do to take care of someone—distracted some women, making pleasurable sexual activity more difficult. Some people who were caregiving pets also found that bedsharing or staying at other people's houses were issues. Considering ways in which caregiving affected sexual expression and what sex therapy literature suggests to improve sexual expression for caregivers would contribute to the literature on this topic.

**Solo Sex**

Most participants in the study described masturbation or other solo sexual activity, including fantasizing for pleasure but not to masturbate, as part of their lives. For some it was more important and for some less, but themes emerged as to what supported embracing a solo sex life and what got in the way. For example, some women conceptualized solo sex as competing with sex with their partners, which contributed to their sense that it had to be kept secret. Others kept it a secret simply because it seemed private or embarrassing to discuss it. Exploring the role of solo sex for older adult women is important, especially since older adult women outnumber men in their cohort and may have more difficulty finding a suitable partner for partnered sexual activity.
Conclusion

The rich data collected for this study will yield lessons beyond those initially chosen for this dissertation project, contributing to a range of topics regarding women's sexual expression. Pleasure and divorce began the exploration and provided important insights into how older adult women describe relating to social norms, and ways in which pursuing sexual pleasure as a woman sometimes means challenging those norms. Women are sexual beings, and their reflections on sexual expression over a lifetime can contribute in important ways to sexuality literature.
References


Appendix A

Age Distribution of Participants

55-60: Anna, Brenda, Cynthia

61-65: Debra, Elizabeth, Frances, Gloria

66-70: Helen, Isabelle, Jill

71-75: Karen, Laura

76-80: Martha, Norma

90+: Patty, Rita
Appendix B

Theme Key: Pathways to Pleasure

NICE Women as Sexual Beings

A. Novel Contexts

a. Getting out of the bubble

1. Having information
2. Leaving home
3. Women's liberation
4. Political participation
5. Gender affirmation
6. Safe partners
7. Reconsidering traditional marriage
8. New sexual environments
9. Sexual friendship
10. Divorce
11. Affairs

b. Finding new moral ground

B. Emotional and Intellectual Intimacy
C. Creativity with Sexual Expression

a. Exploring partnered activities

b. Solo sex

c. Expressing oneself as a sexual being

   1. Visual art

   2. Food

   3. Music

   4. Dancing

   5. Motherhood

D. Pleasurably Ever After: Extending Sexual Possibility Throughout One’s Lifespan
Appendix C

Theme Key:

Older Women’s Reflections on Divorce and Sexual Expression

Quality of Marital Sex

Marrying for Sex

Positives of Marital Sexual Expression

Challenges of Marital Sexual Expression

Boredom

Physical changes

Difference in sexual function

Reactions to stress

Addiction

Performativity

Mixed sexual orientation

Quality of Sex After Divorce

Divorce as empowering

Able to leave home

Loosening social norms
Childcare implications

Escaping abuse

Embracing sexual expression

Security

Regrets, I’ve had a few