

The Everyday Sexual Self in Late Modern Life

by

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Being a Thesis submitted for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences,
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December 2011

Table of Contents

SUMMARY	IV
DECLARATION	VI
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VII
DEDICATION	X
A GUIDE TO READING THE THESIS	XI
INTRODUCTION	1
DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS.....	8
<i>Identity</i>	9
<i>Self</i>	9
<i>Self-making</i>	10
<i>Sociality</i>	10
<i>Reflexivity and Reflectiveness</i>	10
<i>Late Modernity</i>	11
<i>Scripting</i>	11
THESIS OVERVIEW	11
CHAPTER ONE: EVERYDAY SEXUALITY IN LATE MODERN LIFE	17
INTRODUCTION	17
EVERYDAY SEXUALITY.....	19
<i>Gender and Sexuality</i>	21
PSYCHOANALYTIC AND SOCIAL THEORIES OF THE SEXUAL SELF	25
<i>Sociality</i>	35
<i>Sociality and Temporality</i>	40
<i>Reflexivity and Sexual Self-making</i>	46
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	51
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS	53
INTRODUCTION	53
METHODOLOGY AND METHODS.....	54
REFLEXIVITY AND INTERVIEWS	57
SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURE.....	63
<i>The Sample</i>	63
<i>Recruitment Method</i>	64
<i>Establishing Trust and Credibility</i>	66
<i>Interviews: Setting and Methods</i>	67
ETHICS.....	69
ANALYSIS	71
INTERVIEWEES' CHARACTERISTICS.....	74
<i>Frequency Tables</i>	75
<i>Distribution Diagram</i>	77
<i>Summary of Age and Gender Cases for Mean Table</i>	77
<i>Participant Information</i>	78
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	78
CHAPTER THREE: ROUTINE SEXUAL SELF-MAKING IN EVERYDAY LIFE	80
INTRODUCTION	80
MAKING THE SEXUAL SELF THROUGH EVERYDAY SOCIAL INTERACTIONS.....	82
SIGNIFICANT OTHERS AND SEXUAL SELF-MAKING	88
INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS AS PLAY.....	93
LATE MODERN LIFE AND SEXUAL SELF-MAKING.....	99

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SEXUAL SELF.....	104
THE ROLE OF OTHERS IN SELF-MAKING	112
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	119
CHAPTER FOUR: DISRUPTING THE EVERYDAY? TRAVEL AND ILLNESS	121
INTRODUCTION	121
TRAVEL AND THE MAKING OF THE SEXUAL SELF	122
CORPOREALITY, ILLNESS AND THE SEXUAL SELF.....	131
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	140
CHAPTER FIVE: THE SEXUAL SELF, GENDER AND AGENCY	143
INTRODUCTION	143
GENDER AND SEXUALITY.....	144
SEXUALITY THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER.....	145
GENDER AND AGENCY.....	152
AGENCY AND SEXUAL SELF-MAKING.....	156
RELIGION, INEQUALITY AND AGENCY	165
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	170
CHAPTER SIX: PROFESSIONAL AND FAMILIAL ROLES IN LATE MODERN SOCIAL LIFE	172
INTRODUCTION	172
PROFESSIONAL LIFE AND THE SEXUAL SELF	174
<i>Making Sense of the Past</i>	183
THE SEXUAL SELF AND FAMILIAL RELATIONALITY.....	194
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	204
CHAPTER SEVEN: SEXUAL SELF-MAKING—BIOGRAPHY, SPATIALITY, TEMPORALITY, SIGNIFICANCE AND PLAY	206
INTRODUCTION	206
THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SEXUAL SELF IN LATE MODERNITY	212
LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	217
CHAPTER SUMMARY.....	227
APPENDICES	229
APPENDIX A: INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS.....	230
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS	231
APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION FOR POTENTIAL RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS	232
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	233
APPENDIX E: ETHICS APPLICATION	234
APPENDIX F: PUBLISHED WORK DURING CANDIDATURE 2006–2011	254
REFERENCES.....	255

List of Tables and Diagrams

TABLE 1	SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWEE STATISTICS FOR FREQUENCY TABLES.....	75
TABLE 2	AGE FREQUENCY	76
TABLE 3	GENDER FREQUENCY.....	76
TABLE 4	EDUCATION LEVEL FREQUENCY	77
TABLE 5	SUMMARY OF STATISTICS USED FOR AGE MEAN ACROSS GENDER VARIABLE.....	77
TABLE 6	MEAN AGE BY GENDER	78
DIAGRAM 1	EDUCATION LEVEL DISTRIBUTION	77

Summary

This research, which seeks to better understand the everyday sexual self in late modernity, rests within the theoretical orientation developed by George Herbert Mead in which sociality constitutes the self. There is a clear sociological tradition that argues that Mead's scholarship about the self provides a coherent account of constitutive social interaction and applies it to sexual self-making. Data from this study resonate with this argument.

Whilst scholars of late modernity highlight some of the key shifts present in contemporary life, their claims are overstated and problematically dichotomise tradition and post-tradition to the detriment of a deeper understanding of these concepts. Other scholars argue that the contemporary world has become so complex and lives so transitory that it is no longer relevant to think about the individual and society as separate from one another. In this new scheme of seemingly liquid social conditions, it is argued that the sexual self has become a key part of reflection on the past, present and future, and that studies of the everyday ought not inform theory. In this thesis, I argue against these positions and instead demonstrate that the application of Mead is vital to better understanding the everyday sexual self in late modern social life.

Using an inductive tradition data were obtained through in depth interviews with thirty men and women (n=30) aged between thirty and sixty-five years of age, the data highlight factors that generate increased opportunities for sexual self-making. In particular, participants cited specific biographical events such as experiences gained

through engagement with others in employment and travel, as well as relationships with significant others as transformatory for the sexual self because they provided new opportunities for sexual self-making. Participants in this study noted the constraining effects of social inequality.

The overall finding of this study is that the sexual self in late modernity is ‘made’ through social processes. Whilst agency may be theorised through the engagement in playful learning and imaginative accounts of the perspectives of the generalised other, ultimately sexual self-making is constrained by social and cultural scripts. It is vital to extend Mead’s theory of sociality to sexual self-making, his notion of play to adulthood and to critically understand the intersections between biography, spatiality and temporality to adequately theorise the everyday sexual self in late modernity.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Priscilla Dunk-West

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Date

Acknowledgements

I feel privileged to have participated in many conversations about the sexual self over the years. These have occurred in my varied roles at university, including as a student, activist, and later as a lecturer and researcher, as well as outside university life. Working as a social worker in London and later as a sexual health counsellor in Australia enabled me to hear how people made sense of their sexualities. It was here I witnessed people's shifting ideas and thinking about their sexual selves. Therefore, I thank my clients for being the inspiration behind this research. It was through them that I witnessed transformations evident at the 'everyday' level: transformations that had occurred despite what might be considered great social disadvantage. In my professional role I drew heavily on my sociological knowledge and I feel thankful that I worked in an environment where sexuality was viewed through a socio-political lens.

I have also been fortunate to have had the support of many colleagues from varied academic institutions over the past five years. In particular, I would like to thank Professor Lesley Cooper and Professor Hilary Tompsett who provided support and encouragement at crucial periods during my academic career. Similarly, Professor Fiona Verity has inspired and continues to inspire me, not least for being the only person I know who lists one of her hobbies as 'thinking'. Dr Trish Hafford-Letchfield has been a joy with whom to collaborate on various projects and I value her unbounded enthusiasm for this field.

In completing this project, I wish to acknowledge the institutional support from the

Kingston University, SHine SA and Flinders University, all of whom have provided collegial encouragement for me and my research. Being in paid employment and completing a PhD has been made easier by these learning institutions.

During 2006 I had various exchanges with Dr Jason Pudsey about my research. I cannot emphasise how transformational those conversations were: I wish to thank him for sharing his sociological imagination and his knowledge and expertise in the areas of intimacy and identity with me as well as his genuine interest in my research.

Thank you to all of those women and men who volunteered to tell their stories to me. Special mention must also be made of the people who passed on details of the research during my data collection phase: these people were my friends, my family, present and past colleagues, as well as those who did not know me. Without your support, this research would not have been possible.

Thank you to Daniel Scanlon, whose sociological imagination knows no bounds. I miss him terribly, especially his enduring ability to make me laugh, often at inopportune moments. Thank you to Dr Jennifer Taylor for her friendship and camaraderie in the face of both the thrill and ennui inherent in our respective PhD journeys. Special mention is also due to Penny Dunk, Angela Littleford, Martin Reeve and Richard Curran who provided encouragement and belief in me over the years. Thank you also to Mum and Dad: not least for stepping in at short notice to care for my sick baby so I could get in a few more hours of writing.

I am indebted to Professor Anthony Elliott and Dr Mary Holmes for their helpful

feedback and continued encouragement along this journey.

To my beautiful little babies, Blake and Paxton, both of whom arrived in quick succession during my PhD studies: your presence in my life has put everything into perspective. I am so much looking forward to spending more time with you, post PhD.

Dedication

To Brad, for teaching me how to play the long game.

A Guide to Reading the Thesis

This thesis is informed by inductive empirical work which highlights the importance of recognising the constructed nature of knowledge. In line with this tradition, I have, where relevant, chosen to write in the first person. This choice has been made to reflect my position as the researcher with the aim of not wishing to distract from the participant accounts upon which this study is based. Spelling is based on English language conventions except where terms have been popularised in literature with specific spelling (such as globalization, generalized other, detraditionalization and so on).

The chapters are arranged around the themes emerging from the data and discussion of theoretical material grows from an analysis of these themes. This means that data and theory are intertwined—with the former informing the latter. Again, this choice reflects the constructionist epistemology that underpins this study. Data discussion involves relevant theoretical ideas and makes up the bulk of the thesis. A general discussion of the material contained within the thesis as a whole precedes presentation of the chapters from One to Seven. The purpose in doing this is to highlight and cross-reference the ways in which the chapters examine material relevant to this project. Key terms are explained at the beginning of the thesis to assist in locating the work within a particular sociological tradition since there are many competing and complimentary traditions within sociology that examine the self, the everyday sexual self and periodization of the late modern era: all of which this thesis is concerned.