

4. Gender, agency and the sexual self: A theoretical model for social work

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ABSTRACT

The enduring agency and structure debate has in recent years become newly—and variously—fused via sociological theories of the self. Such scholarly work has entailed theorising that differing degrees of agency are embedded within practices, which in turn, constitute social structure. Such projects successfully unite these dichotomous concepts. However when the debate is applied to gender, notions of victimhood and survivorship proliferate. I argue that the application of sexual scripting theory to understanding the late- modern gendered, sexual self helps to move beyond the polarising structure/ agency debate. Understanding participants' gendered experiences through the lens of sexual scripting theory highlights the ongoing and day-to-day experiences of gendered inequality in contemporary life. Emerging from data, this theorising moves beyond individual victimisation and points instead to a broader sociocultural sexuality characterised by embedded inequality and injustice. Understanding this in social work opens up new possibilities for theorising about diversity, sexuality and social work education.

EVERYDAY SEXUALITY AND GENDER

Many claims are made about the new social landscape in late modernity. While recent scholarship in social work points to an interest in the constraints to agency (Marston and McDonald 2012; Baker 2010) social work has yet to develop its critical literature and theory about agency itself. One of the key claims in social theory, which clearly is relevant to social work, relates to the relatively recent shifts in gender roles. The theory of detraditionalisation sees globalisation as a major force in setting actors free from lifestyles that historically would have been fixed to traditions such as the gender roles set through marriage, which reinforced women's subordination in the home environment.

Feminism has shaped actors' contemporary understandings of their identities, and prompted women to question how to 'liberate themselves from the home' (Giddens 1991, p. 216). However, his assumption that self-identity is exempt from class or gender (Adkins 2003; Skeggs 1997) fails to take into account the prevailing inequalities evident in late modern life. There is little evidence to suggest that gender has indeed been 'detraditionalized' (Brooks 2008, p.539). The problem with depicting detraditionalisation as permitting unbounded choice in self-making is that it not only fails to recognise continued material inequalities between men and women (Skeggs 1997) but it also threatens to disembodify selfhood (McNay 2000).

Given the centrality of the agency versus structure debate in understanding the late modern self (Walklate and Mythen 2010, Leaker and Dunk-West 2011), moving beyond seeing gendered inequality as either an individual or social issue is a key concern in this paper which examines everyday sexuality and gender. Theoretical models of agency and self are important to sexuality in social work because they suggest ways to act (Dunk-West, in press, Dunk 2007; Dunk-West and Hafford-Letchfield 2011). Social work is beginning to engage with issues related to everyday sexuality (Dunk 2007) but there is much more work to be done to expand this knowledge base. Better understanding the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect in everyday life is crucial to this project. Theory is therefore inductively generated through the analysis of data. The finding of this research—that the sexual self is constituted through social processes—concurs with recent scholarship in which sexual self-making is placed within a Meadian framework (Jackson and Scott 2010a).

Participant Accounts of Gender and Everyday Sexuality

My qualitative research into everyday sexuality was undertaken in Australia. A Schutzian phenomenological (Schutz 1967) approach was taken to yield rich data about the sexual self in late modernity in which thirty unstructured interviews were undertaken with the non-representative sample of fifteen men and fifteen women between the ages of 30-65. Basic identifiers were recorded, such as participants' occupations, highest education level and age. Occupation helps to frame people's responses since it is often associated with education level and increased reflexivity. This middle age range is under-represented in empirical work examining sexuality, particularly compared with the growing research which focuses on young people's and older people's sexualities (Gott 2006; Vares 2009). Schutzian phenomenology seeks to highlight individual meaning-making processes and underline the role of shared social meanings.

Examining gender is of central importance in understanding everyday sexuality, particularly in relation to the claims made by reflexivity theorists of late modernity where agency is ascribed to actors through detraditionalising forces, enabling them to reflexively create and recreate selfhood (Giddens 1992). The following accounts demonstrate how gender is intertwined with the sexual self as well as one's corporeal self. The complex and idiosyncratic ways in which gender is interlaced into one's everyday sexuality is particularly evident.

Davina is a 39-year-old social worker/counsellor. At age 22, Davina gave birth to her son. She and her son's father were in an open relationship for eight years. At age 30, Davina met a man with whom she '...wanted to be in a monogamous relationship', and was for a period of seven years. She is currently single and describes herself as '...still working out how to own my sexuality'.

During our interview, Davina told me about the struggles she had with feeling entitled to sexual pleasure as a young person, which led to a discussion about pregnancy and sexuality. Davina disclosed that she was a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault as an adult, and that she 'was completely disconnected to my body as a result of that trauma'. Davina was pregnant twice while in her 30s but both children died. Her experiences of pregnancy were recalled as times when she was paradoxically less sexualised but more 'in synch' with her sexuality. Participant accounts of their sexual selves along with narratives about being a woman or a man raise the question: how does gender relate to sexuality for the late modern, everyday sexual self?

Davina's experience of sexuality is described as being very much tied up with her experience as a woman. Indeed, many women participants reported sexuality as being bound up with their gender, which perhaps is not surprising since gender and sexuality speak to both 'one's bodily and material existence' (Smith 1987, p. 97). Women are over-represented as survivors of sexual violence—both in adulthood and in childhood and for women in sexual minorities, the risk of sexual violence in adulthood is greater than for their heterosexual counterparts (Martin et al 2011).

For Davina, the effects of the violence take the form of recalling her feelings about both her body and her sexual self as experienced through being pregnant. She depicts a complex interplay between how her body was experienced at that time, and how connected to gender she was and the resultant sense of freedom this afforded her, manifesting as being more comfortable than ever with her sexuality:

... so it's been a really complex story, the whole sexual, reproductive overlapping thing. Um, when I was pregnant with my other two children, I, I felt so fantastic and I felt better in my body than I ever had and I felt really free and wanting to be sexual in in this really kind of organic, gorgeous, holistic kind of sense, in a way that I never really... had never really felt when I wasn't pregnant. I know lots of women feel really crap when they're pregnant but for me it was completely the opposite. I felt fantastic. And I've got photos of me like, you know, heavily pregnant, naked, and I don't feel naked, I don't feel naked, I just feel completely comfortable and in my absolute element as a woman and that did um and I felt more probably more comfortable with my sexuality than I ever have as well. (Davina, 39-year-old social worker/counsellor)

Recent research highlights the ways in which women, as recipients of a 'discourse of empowerment' make sense of their experiences in ways that overly ascribe agency, 'claim volition and evade victimhood' (Baker 2010). How is Davina's account best understood? Gagnon and Simon (1973), in their classic text *Sexual Conduct*, provide a theoretical project in which agency and inequality can be understood in relation to gender and sexuality. Scripting theory applied to sexual conduct means that sexual interactions between individuals are shaped by tradition and 'routinized behavior', rather than spontaneity (Gagnon and Simon, 2011 (1973) p. 13). Sexual scripting involves invoking scripts relevant to the sexual encounter. The notion of scripting, as well as providing an understanding of how sexual scripts fit with embodiment (Jackson and Scott 2010a, p. 148), can help generate a better understanding of Davina's recounting of her body as a previously scripted source of arousal, but in its pregnant state 'naked' yet non-sexual. Scripting also helps explain Davina's reflection on her sexual self at this time as 'more comfortable with [her] sexuality than... ever'.

Importantly, however, it is interactionist accounts (such as Gagnon and Simon 1973; Jackson and Scott 2010a, 2010b; Plummer 2007) that elucidate the divisions and connections between sexuality and gender that facilitate a better understanding of Davina's narrative. In these explanations, first developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973), gender and sexuality can be viewed as separate (Jackson and Scott 2010a, p. 162), with gender being socially assigned from birth onwards (Kessler and McKenna 1978). This means that an understanding of one's gender is realised before the sexual self is formed from adolescence onwards. Therefore, sexuality is always viewed through the lens of one's gender:

The period from twelve to sixteen is probably the period of priority in developing and integrating the sexual into general patterns of gender development in Western societies
[Gagnon and Simon [1973]] 2011, p. 53].

In Davina's account, there is a clearly referenced set of socially prescribed gendered expectations driven by her pregnancy. To what extent does Davina feel able to challenge and shift those expectations that have been set upon her? Her description of feeling 'free' from the social expectations placed upon her as a sexual woman paradoxically enables her to engage with herself as 'sexual'; that is, with the feeling of freedom from those expectations comes the ability to develop a 'new' sexual self.

There are theoretical disjunctions between seeing social processes as constitutive of self-making and individual perceptions. Mead's response to this conundrum, which is essentially concerned with the agency and structure debate, is that one's 'unique standpoint' (Mead 1934, p. 201) enables individual interpretations of social acts. Davina's 'unique standpoint' involves a complex interplay between biography and the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect. Her example shows that her experience as a woman at the time she was pregnant intersected with a freedom from being sexual which, in turn, enabled her to feel sexual.

Davina's notion of being sexual and non-sexual and 'free' invoke a decidedly scripted dichotomy where one's choice as a woman is either to be sexual or non-sexual, whereas in reality these can overlap in biographical and temporal terms. This concurs with the

assertion that varying sociocultural scripts can coexist despite contradicting one another, and can be linked to the varying forms of sexuality available to actors in late modern social life (Jackson 2007, p. 12).

Another participant excerpt offers a related story of how one's sexuality is viewed through an understanding of one's own gender as well as a wider understanding of gender generally. For Charlie, a 49-year-old earthmoving contractor who has been married to a woman for 26 years, gender is socially assigned (Kessler and McKenna 1978). However, Charlie is able to reflect upon it from the perspective of the 'other' gender. Throughout our interview, Charlie described himself as 'feminine' despite noting that others see him as masculine because he is a tall 'truck driver ... a crusty old fellow'. His wife's menopause was reflected on as potentially further damaging their infrequent sexual encounters. In line with recent research (see Dworkin and O'Sullivan 2007), his depiction of their interactions suggests a deeply embedded sexual script that draws from traditional gender norms.

As a man, Charlie notes that he believes that women are more aware of their gender because of the bodily presence of menstruation. The complex relationship he has with his gender is reflected in his statement in which he talks about being 'less' male than other men. This is because, he says, interacting with women is more enjoyable than interacting with other men. He is ambivalent about how this relates to his sexuality:

I don't enjoy male company to the degree I enjoy female company. And I don't know whether that's because I am more sexually driven than other men or whether it's because I am not as male as they are. It's a bit of a paradox ... with women I think it's a sort of, it's an everyday subject, or every month subject with them. (Charlie, 49-year-old earthmoving contractor)

In the same way that participants described intimate relationships as influencing their sexual selves, relationships with others also allowed for a reflexive examination of others' genders along with their own, which Charlie's narrative suggests. Thus, participants described being led to a sense of curiosity about not only one's own culturally or bodily assigned gender or sex, but also of how this interrelates with one's sexual self and others' sexualised and gendered selves.

In line with interactionist (Plummer 2007) and feminist accounts (for example, see Alexander's (1988) examination of gender and prostitution) in sexuality studies that argue that women's experience is sequestered to a category of difference from the dominant gender of male, Jane and Marijka referenced both being a woman and not being a man, and linked this with traditional social notions of both genders. Jane, a 53-year-old counsellor articulates this:

You know that that being female and what it means to be a woman is intrinsically linked with the fact that I'm not a man and so what it means to be a man in our culture certainly affects how I am as a woman sexually speaking. (Jane, 53-year-old counsellor)

Similarly, Marijka said she 'see[s] the world through female eyes':

I am a woman and a sexual being, okay, woman first, a sexual being and on top of that, and in addition I am a lesbian as well. So it's those kind of three all melded into one. I couldn't, I haven't had the experience of being a man [...] Because I think as I see it, I was raised a woman so I see the world through female eyes. (Marijka, 53-year-old program manager)

Both Marijka and Jane highlight the fact that gender inequality continues to shape women's experiences of themselves and their social interactions. Specifically, participants also reported gender as influencing their experience of their sexual selves. In contrast to the claims made by theorists of late modernity, in which gender is part of a detraditionalizing process, traditional gender roles were reflected upon by participants as being present in their everyday experiences. Given this clear manifestation of traditional gender roles in everyday life, to what extent did participants feel they were able to contest tradition in the ongoing process of sexual self-making? This is examined in the next section, in which I consider the role of gender and agency in the making of the sexual self.

THE INTERACTIONIST PRODUCTION OF GENDER

Mead's thesis of socialisation through childhood play and games is that these allow for the life-long use of the imagination and provide a mechanism for engaging with the life worlds of others. Integral to participation in games is the understanding of others' roles. Thus, games and play enable learning about others' perspectives, which is central to taking on the view of the generalised other (Mead 1934, p. 155). Childhood gender socialisation is learned through participation in games, as evidenced in Lever's famous study which found that childhood play prepared actors for traditional adult gender roles (Lever 1976). Recent studies have highlighted the role of play in facilitating adult learning (West et al 2011).

Gender cannot be examined without considering the body (Grosz 1994). In some participant accounts, the body was reflected upon as being closely aligned with both gender and sexuality. Importantly, participants described seeking to understand their (opposite gender) partner's embodied gender as well as their own. In doing so, they recruited 'imaginative' accounts that interlaced relevant to aspects of their life stories with reflexivity, an activity akin to learning about the values and 'attitudes' of what Mead would call the 'generalised other'. The embodied and emotive consideration of gender, understood through taking others' perspectives, was evident in participant accounts. The ability to empathically take the perspectives of others has more recently been popularised through the helping professions, notably through the work of humanist Carl Rogers (1957). Appreciating the use of empathy alongside Mead's generalised other helps provide a better understanding of these accounts. For example, participants' imaginative accounts of their partners enabled them to predict and make sense of their partners' responses to events. This enabled participants to understand the responses to others as well as the broader gender scripts through which social interaction was shaped.

The following excerpts illustrate how knowledge of the generalised other is drawn on to recall general understandings of 'femininity' and what it means to be a woman in an intimate relationship. In particular, these participants reflect upon making sense out of relationships that had ended and demonstrate wondering how the need to fulfill

traditional gender roles might contribute to understanding the everyday event of relationship breakdown.

Ramon is a 45-year-old man who works in the education sector. In this excerpt, Ramon is telling me about the breakdown of an intimate, long-term relationship. He references what he believes are his ex-partner's sexual desires and offers an explanation of these being present because of her physical, embodied presence as a woman, and her need to fulfill the traditional expectation of being less physically powerful than a man:

Probably what she needed was the excitement of a big, strong man who could take control of the situation, as much as anything because she is quite tall and she is a fairly, you know, statuesque woman and I think that that plays into her psyche about having somebody that could dominate her, you know, not in an abusive way of course, but to make her feel more feminine [...] (Ramon, 45-year-old working in the education sector)

Mead (1934, p. 158) proposes that two processes are central to the making of the self. Firstly, one must engage in 'social acts' with others with an understanding of the 'attitudes' of others towards oneself. Secondly,

... the self is constituted not only by an organization of these particular individual attitudes, but also by an organization of the social attitudes of the generalized other or the social group as a whole to which he [sic] belongs (Mead 1934, p. 158).

Not only does Ramon individualise the stereotyped gender attitudes of the generalised other onto his former partner, but he makes sense of their breakup by attributing it to her 'psyche', which yearns for 'domination' through the physical presence of her 'tall ... statuesque' embodied self. Such an account offers new possibilities for appreciating the importance of the 'other' in late modern sexual self-making because it is not only in person-to-person interaction that the self is made; sense-making occurs when individuals creatively bring together their imagined notion of the 'other' person and the attitudes of the broader society or generalized other.

Mead's 'perspectivism' accounts for 'the emergence of agency within sociality, and to the nature of the self-societal dialectic' (Martin 2006, p. 233). This is relevant to late modern social life, which is 'marked by both diversity and contestation' (Martin 2006, p. 233). Participants made sense of the breakdown of significant relationships through imagining their former partners' perspectives, emotions and physical experiences of gender.

Similar to Ramon, Walter, a 54-year-old man working in the human services, speaks about a former relationship. He talks about how he experienced the sexual, embodied aspect of their physical selves in relation to one another, and also about how he imagines his then partner experienced this. Walter relates that he is unsure of how much women can disentangle themselves, or feel 'unbound', from their gender during sexual activity.

So that was, but that was really more about her than about me. So, it wasn't something I found very difficult. But probably never quite felt relaxed enough to be completely unbound

physically. And of course not having been a woman I don't know how unbound women ever feel as a gender as opposed to men. That's hard to judge. (Walter, 45-year-old working in the human services)

Both Ramon and Walter describe traditional gender roles in a way that draws upon their ability to 'imagine' what it must be like to be a woman. They describe what Mead (1934, p. 158) would call the 'attitudes' of the individual (in this case, their previous partners as women) as well as talk more generally about the limitations they feel are bound up with being a woman in late modern Western society. Ramon and Walter demonstrate that while some negotiation away from traditional gender 'scripts' is possible, the generalised other maintains clear 'attitudes' about sex roles.

Some participants highlighted what Giddens would claim as evidence that traditional roles are able to be challenged by individuals in late modernity. Whilst Giddens goes some way to account for late modern detraditionalisation based on gender roles, he overemphasises this process, citing the so called emancipation of women through their entry into the workforce (see Giddens 1991, p. 216). Critics of Mead claim that his theories of social interaction are not compatible with the diversified and fragmented nature of late modern social life (Elliott 2001). Alexander (1996) criticises Giddens' dichotomous understanding of tradition and post-tradition, noting that these are conceptualised too simplistically. Yet participants in the study clearly described some complexities inherent in making sense of gender roles, particularly through intimate relationships.

Indeed, it should be noted that the study participants highlighted engaging in a more complex relationship with previously accepted gender categories. This goes some way to underscore that for some, detraditionalisation is manifest in everyday interactions. This also reinforces the importance of understanding the meaning of interactions with others, both person-to-person and imagined interactions, in relation to sexual self-making. For example, 47-year-old Stephen told me that because he is a full time parent of school age children he has... *gone from the traditional sex model of being the bread winner and the father figure of the house to almost the woman's role.*

He hastened to add that whilst individually he has been able to take on a caring role in unpaid work, which is often associated with women's work, when he goes to 'barbecues ... you get the divided conversation between male and female' and he does not 'feel like [he] fit[s] in between either of them'. Here, Stephen describes the liminality of his role and identity with the 'attitudes' of the generalised other:

I think image wise, I don't think I fit the male stereotype. I feel, I don't feel different, I don't prance around or anything like that but I don't, as in, how can I put it. To, to isolate how your sexuality affects you through all those processes, I think it's got to affect you to a point that I still think, in my case, you have control, you have a choice about how you want to be. (Stephen, a 47-year-old full time parent)

SEXUAL SELF CONSTITUTION AS AGENTIAL?

Given the continuation of gender inequalities in late modern life, to what extent can one exercise agency? Participants noted that whilst there were some constraining characteristics of social notions of gender, there were ways in which these could be mitigated through conscious individual action/interaction. For example, Louisa, a 53-year-old nurse in a long-term relationship with a woman, told me she felt that there was some ‘typicality or typicalness’ around her choice of dress in relation to her age group but that her sexuality involved her ‘community’ and her sense of dress. Louisa said that she ‘very definitely identif[ies] as lesbian’ and this sets her apart from other women her age. Louisa was able to clearly articulate how her appearance differed from other women in her age group:

... so here I am with jeans and a vest on and my hair is short and I like it that way. And I like to wear a belt and flat shoes. Perhaps around the way that I am interested in fitness and health and physical activities. So perhaps more than women of my age. (Louisa, 53-year-old nurse)

Louisa depicts her ‘choice’ of clothing and interest in physical activities and sports as setting her apart from her heterosexual peers.

The extent to which agency exists in relation to gender is something that arises given the varying degrees to which gender stereotypes affected participants’ sexualities. Daniel, a 41-year-old social worker, told me that others often found he failed to fit in with accepted notions of masculinity. This was said to have affected the sexual identity category others assigned to him:

But many people don't see me as what they would consider heterosexual. Gay people try and say, 'Oh, you must be gay'. 'No I am not'. So, yeah, for me I describe myself as heterosexual[...]But then they would also talk about, how do I put this, my, not hyper masculinity, but the whole issue of sexuality and prowess with women and that side of my sexuality. (Daniel, 41-year-old social worker)

Participants’ ability to act against tradition is evident in their accounts. Jackson and Scott (2011, p. 94) argue that ‘the idea of the social self, originating from the work of Mead, provides a view of the self as social while allowing for agency through the emphasis on interpretive practices’. As Jackson and Scott (2010, p. 155) suggest, social inequality and individual agency are not mutually exclusive. Mead argues that it is through individual thought processes that the ‘attitudes of the generalized other’ are internalised—a mental representation of the attitudes and values of the wider community is necessary for individuals to be able to achieve social competence (Mead 1934, pp. 155–156).

Maxwell describes the specific ways in which he is able to exercise agency through a kind of ‘playing’ with the degree to which he projects—or performs—a stereotypically masculine persona, noting that if he felt ‘uncomfortable or unsafe’, this performance would be ‘happily put...on’. Recently, Maxwell said he had begun to think about being a man and how that related to himself as a human being:

I think recently I have discovered that being a man springs from me being a person. And not the other way around. And so if I can choose to identify strongly as being a man, and sometimes I will take that role on, you know, really strong, if I am in a place where I feel either uncomfortable or unsafe without being a classic gender male, then I would happily put that on. (Maxwell, 46-year-old sexual health educator)

In Maxwell's narrative, the ease with which he reports changing his behaviour is clearly seen. Whilst he is aware of the generalised other attitude of the 'classic gender male', he does not feel the need to conform to it—only to pass at being the 'classic gender male'.

The notion of late modern reflexivity does not fully account for the choices relating to gender that participants reported. While it may appear that Maxwell—and others' accounts—are explained through the 'extended' (Adams 2006) late modern reflexivity thesis (see Giddens 1992) in which identity is reflected upon (for Maxwell, this involves reflecting on being a 'man') and subsequent behaviour altered as a result of the reflection ('choosing' to project the 'classic gender male'), late modern theories of the self do not fully appreciate the social, or Mead's generalized other.

The late modern sexual self has become de-differentiated from other aspects of social life (Dunk-West 2011). Participants' narratives reveal that although they have a clear conception of the social expectations around gender, they were unable to transcend these fully. As noted previously, agency is overstated in late modern theories of detraditionalisation (King 2009).

The placement of 'the social in the form of the generalized other' (Gronow 2008, p. 252) within Mead's theory of sociality of selfhood instead offers insight into how individual interpretations characterise sexual self-making. Mead was a pragmatist: his personal involvement in addressing inequality, for example, points to the 'inseparability of thought and action' (Bushman 1998, p. 264). This suggests that turning towards Mead's theoretical work helps in understanding the mechanisms through which inequalities are made. Although interactionist conceptualisations of the ways in which actors come to imagine the lives of others are critiqued for being overly theoretical and outside the everyday realm of experience (Shilling 1999, p. 551; Smith 1992) Mead's theory of self offers an explanation of the prevalence of inequalities in everyday life. This is because the generalised other:

... refers to the general social process and does not say anything about its particular contents, which certainly can, in many cases, be repressive. However, there is always the creative output of the individual 'I' that reacts to the habitual and conservative 'me' (Gronow 2008, p. 251).

The ways in which participants think about themselves in relation to the generalised other come through in their accounts. Considering Edward's account, for example, I note the way he describes not only how he thinks of himself, but how he does not think of himself. The way he does not think of himself is a reference to a more generalised conception of men as 'purely ... male driven sexual being[s]'; an image he sees in opposition to himself:

[...] now I don't think of myself as purely a male driven sexual being. And I just think of myself as a person. And sexuality is connected to that but it's not the driving force. (Edward, 57-year-old working in education)

RELIGION, AGENCY AND THE SEXUAL SCRIPT

Finally, the question of agency is also relevant to narratives in which institutionalised religion, and in particular, the interactions that occurred in childhood were reported to have influenced sexual self-making. In particular, religious discourse was depicted as being an important source for normative scripts about gender and sexuality. In understanding these narratives, a greater appreciation of the ways in which social structure limits sexual self-making emerges.

For example, Edward described his experience of being taught about gender roles through participation in religion classes. Edward reported that his beliefs about women were shaped through these interactions, but that subsequent engagement in the 'blunt sexual environment of school' further challenged these ideas. He said that it was not until he reflexively traced back those ideas to religious dogma that he could challenge and transform his traditionally held views that women were to be 'put on a pedestal'. Edward reported feeling able to think through gender roles through the disparate experiences from:

...my schooling and religious teaching. Although I could never actually marry the two in terms of what I was taught in my religion was that women were, not necessarily equal but, in fact they were quite the opposite, I think they were to be put on a pedestal. And so, going into this sort of blunt sexual environment was, it stripped that away from me. But I would never really go back to the religious stuff. I never really understood why women should be put in a pedestal anyway, as a kid. (Edward, 57-year-old worker in education)

There are two points to be made about Edward's account. Firstly, his engagement with the utility of religiously-influenced ideas about gender reflects the broadly late modern preoccupation with religion's meaningfulness in all aspects of everyday life (Carol 2007). Secondly, Edward's reflection upon the religiously held traditional role of the woman being at odds with other aspects of society (school) highlights the tensions between religious and secular society. The rise of fundamentalism can be linked to the need for clearly defined roles in an increasingly complex and disordered world (Bauman 2000) yet is it problematic to assume that the secular world is differentiated from the religious order. This is because cultural scripts relating the subordination of women continue to flourish in the secular landscape and this is manifest in everyday life.

Charlotte's account, for example, demonstrates how the interactions which took place at her church shaped her sexual self. Here she tells the story about a young man who had been found to have been watching pornographic movies. The evangelical tradition Charlotte said she was brought up in dealt with such matters very publically. Charlotte said that at the time she thought 'you dirty... man' whereas now she enjoys watching pornography but this is sometimes punctuated with feelings of guilt.

...I remember in particular one guy was brought up to the front of the church, and everyone found out that he was into pornographic movies and it was almost: lay your hands on this man, get the devil out of you! I mean I only, I didn't really get what that was at the time, all I remember thinking was: you dirty, disgusting man, get the devil out of you. And now I look back and I think, and there are occasions when I think: I'm the devil, because I like it! [laughs]. (Charlotte, 36-year-old PhD candidate)

Like Edward's account, Charlotte's story helps us to better understand the ways in which religious engagement shapes the sexual self. Recalling the interactions that occurred in participants' past was a way to convey both the exercising of agency as well as the constraints to complete gender re-imagining. Agency is exercised through the rejection of religiously-defined gender roles; yet their very presence and subsequent manifestation in later life provide evidence of the prevalence of cultural scripts relating to gender. Distinguishing cultural scripts from religious ones is increasingly of interest to scholars of gender and religion 'although much literature in feminist geography recognises the dialectical relationship between gender, identity and space, relatively little attention has been given in this regard to religious spheres' (Bhimji 2009, p. 377). In this study, it is clear that the impact of interactions through participation in religious settings limited the possibilities for sexual self-making and sexual behaviour.

The ways in which institutionalised religion obfuscated other ideas about sexuality was also evident for Jane. Jane described not 'having available' to her alternative gender scripts. Her engagement with Catholicism was cited as affecting her decisions about sexual partners. Had Catholicism not been available, Jane said this might have altered her current sexual identity.

You know if I had available to me different ideas of um same sex attraction as a younger person as a child or teenager or I think that um I would have explored those attractions which I clearly had. Um in my life for other women, very deep, you know, love and attraction to other women. Yeah, I didn't... have available to me any of those frameworks, you know, that were available perhaps to other people but they certainly weren't to me at that stage in in my life, having grown up in my life in a very protected sort of arena, you know in the Catholic church and the sort of family I was in... (Jane, 53-year-old counsellor)

Jane's account resonates with the view that 'heterosexuality has its grave expectations. They are not articulated all at once—some are never openly articulated—but we all know that a lack of articulation of norms doesn't mean they don't exist' (Schwartz 2007, p. 81). Similarly, institutionalised religion in late modernity has clearly limited women's choices and impacted upon their interactions, sexual and otherwise, in everyday life. Two broad examples are in relation to birth control and choice about terminations/ abortions. Yet the distinction between agency and religion has been challenged as more complexly related to the framing of agency. Sarah White's (2010) work on Muslim women's agency, for example, seeks to disrupt the differentiation between religion and the other, complexly intertwining factors which include temporality, spatiality and individual and cultural contexts. She argues that:

It is now clearly established that the West has no privileged claim over modernity, and that there are many possible trajectories. From the stance of many of the people whose worlds this paper

describes, a modernity where women's economic and political empowerment is accompanied by their pervasive sexualisation is at least as 'paradoxical' as one in which religion is valued (White 2010, p. 342).

White's argument resonates with the assertion that divergent and competing discourses thrive in the complex landscape that the sexual self is made within (Jackson 2007) and helps to better understand Louisa's account. Despite the constraints to agency engagement in religion imposed, for Louisa, religion provided an opportunity to disengage from sexual self-making. A 53-year-old nurse, Louisa said that rejecting religion enabled her to move beyond heterosexual assumptions made by Christianity and more towards a process whereby her own sexual identity as a lesbian could be explored. Appreciating the complex landscape within which the sexual self is constituted helps to contextualise Louisa's account alongside the other accounts that position religion as clearly constraining or limiting sexual choices and identity. Whilst Louisa acknowledges that being 'caught up with a lot of Christians' is less than ideal to expressions of sexuality, the 'no sex before marriage' edict protected her 'lesbianism'.

... I was actually caught up with quite a lot of Christians back then. And I, well I am an absolute atheist now and have come to terms with that in the last two years probably. I guess that I have always thought that being Christian, having been baptised as an adult and gone through some various churches and spent some time in, spent a year in Israel actually, I think that, so I had decisions that I wasn't going to have sex before marriage. And I think well, well it's probably just my lesbianism saying why would you want to do that.
(Louisa, 53-year-old nurse)

For another participant, the coming together of complex social and biographical contexts drew together spirituality and sexuality through the ageing process. The rise of novel religions (see Melton 2007) including an interest in the pursuit of spirituality (as opposed to engagement in institutionalised religions) can be explained through the 'culture of individualism' (Elliott and Lemert, 2006, p. 7) in which spirituality is able to accommodate individual needs and desires. In an account where we can see the ways in which various roles in social life converge, Charlie describes how his unique spiritual beliefs need to 'fit' with his embodied self as well as his sexual self. Further, in advancing in age, Charlie has seen a diminishing of the need for immediacy of sexual behaviour: he speaks now of a need for a more spiritual connection through intimacy that takes the form of cuddling, kissing and hugging. In the following account we can track the shifting priorities Charlie affords to spirituality or intellect, his 'physical' sexual 'needs', his body, and his age as well as their complex, unique interplay.

... perhaps the physical side of it has sort of started to wane a little bit. But at the same time, as it's waned I find that perhaps the intellectual side or the spiritual side of my sexuality has sort of started to take precedent. It has probably always been there and always been evident but I, prior to that, but the physical, while my body has sort of been, what would you call it, yeah, I suppose, while I was younger, just the physical side of it overshadowed everything else. It's only now that, and I find I am not so interested in physical sex so much as like I said, the spiritual side, just having someone sort of put their arms around you and say you

are a beautiful person, give you a kiss and a hug or something like that, would be very nice.
(Charlie, 49-year-old earthmoving contractor)

CONCLUSIONS

The structure versus agency debate is manifest in the late modern project of detraditionalisation and individualisation. Developing theories of agency in relation to sexuality and social work are central to understanding the complexities involved in this project. Originating in participant accounts into this empirical project exploring everyday sexuality in contemporary social life, a more complex state of play emerges which sees agency constrained by broader, gendered sexual scripts. As we have seen, sexual scripting theory applied to G H Mead's generative sociality provides a theoretical viewpoint that emerges from individual biographical 'standpoints' as well as highlights the continuing prevalence of gendered and sexual inequality. This new orientation moves away from the question of either agency or structure or the ways in which the two are interrelated. Instead, the question becomes one which is oriented towards understanding why and how gendered inequality continues to manifest in everyday life for the sexual self in late modernity. New theorising about agency in relation to gender and sexuality has much to offer social work education and practice. Further research in this area is required to better engage with the nuanced ways in which the everyday sexual self is expressed and experienced in late modernity.

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