

## Quote Page

*“All the social action in the world will not save humanity, nor will all the meditations or contemplations with no action. But it is perhaps living the tensions between these two poles that results in the creativity and the fresh paths that can lead to positive change. This insight should undergird adult education as social education.”*

From Elizabeth J. Tisdell (2009). Reflections on Chapter 15: On Bread, Roses and Paradox in A.P. Grace & T.S. Rocco's (Eds.) *Challenging the Professionalism of Adult Education: John Ohliger and Contradictions in Modern Practice* (pp.279-285). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

# **University of Alberta**

## **Home Sex Toy Parties: A Non-Traditional, Uniquely Situated Venue of Sexuality Education for Women**

by

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this study to The Traveling Tickle Trunk and to the nine women who graciously participated. Thank you for joining me on this adventure and publicly sharing your stories. If not for the brave few, these topics will remain stigmatized and taboo. You opened a door to a new world for me, first as a home sex toy party facilitator, and second, as a researcher, and my life will never be the same. This research study belongs to you.

## **Abstract**

Shaped by Western, patriarchal attitudes, sex education is a contentious issue. Sex education for adults primarily focuses on health promotion and prevention for ‘at risk’ audiences. This approach contests progressive calls to ensure that sexuality-related interventions focus more on positive constructions of individuals’ sexual lives. The popularity of home sex toy parties creates a unique opportunity to provide education that includes information on sexuality, sexual functioning, and pleasure, in support of lifelong sexual wellness. This autoethnographic study examines my journey as a home sex toy party facilitator and a novice researcher and explores nine bioethnographies of female sex toy party guests. The combined data illustrate a cultural study of sexuality, grounded in history and moving into contemporary times, and provides the context to examine home sex toy parties as political and pedagogical sites where adults can build knowledge and understanding about sexuality in transgressive and potentially transformative ways.

## Preface

### *Sex Toy Party Virgin*

*There was something about it that pulled me in right off the bat. I even got dressed up in nervous anticipation, stopping to look out my seventeenth floor window as summer thunderclouds rolled in for the evening. Hair. Check. Makeup. Check. Purse. Check. What else do I bring to a sex toy party?*

*Everyone is laughing. I can feel my face is flushed as I pretend to bite the penis eraser on the tiny golf pencil handed to me by the sales rep. We are all gathered in a living room on this summer evening. Chips, dips, meats and cheeses are set up on the breakfast bar in the kitchen and there is a seemingly endless supply of wine bottles lined up on the counter. "Omigod. Did I just do that?" I thought to myself as I put the pencil down to take a generous swig of my cabernet sauvignon. I could feel my face cooling off as the sales rep took charge of the room.*

*"Today we are going to play with toys," she exclaimed. And the room went quiet. "I am going to show you a lot of really great sex toys." Nervous laughter pitter-pattered through the room. "As we go through the list you have in front of you, I will pass them around for you to touch and turn on. Feel free to stop me and ask questions as we go along." And off we went.*

*What I remember from that first party was the talking and the laughter filling the apartment. I was there with close friends, acquaintances, and people I had never met before that night. There were so many of us - women, men, gay, straight, single, coupled - packed into that living room that the air was thick with bodies. And nervousness. And wine. Everyone sat together - on couches, chairs and cross-legged on the floor - all eyes on the resident sexpert. Soaking up the openness, the acceptance, and the freedom to talk about sex.*

*"You can do what with that??" I thought as the nipple nibblers were being passed from hand to hand. When the tiny plastic tub made its way to me, I looked around the room. Others were busy applying the waxy substance to their lips, pursing and pouting them as the tingling sensation began to swell. Sean, the ever-flamboyant party host, was pulling down his v-neck tee and applying generous amounts to his left nipple. "Omigod it tingles! Look how hard my nipple is!" he exclaimed. "What the hell," I thought "Why not?" and I scooped up some raspberry nipple nibbler on my index finger and slid my hand into my bra.*

*The same pattern of surprise, questioning, and curiosity was repeated time and again as products made their way around the room. Lubricants. Floggers. Dildos. Vibrators. Butt plugs and beads. Most things I had never even heard about before let alone held in my hand. Personal anecdotes and experiences were flying out of all corners of the room. "I LOVE that toy! Oh just wait until*

*you try THIS toy! I had never had an orgasm until I did this or that or the other. You too?? I don't think I have either!" they cried out. "Since when could we say these things?" I thought, "I can't believe we have never talked about any of this before now."*

*As the last toy made its way back to the rep, she quietly slipped into the bedroom to set up the ordering room. Most guests took a turn, meeting with her one on one and emerging with a bag full of goodies, then dumping them out on the floor to share and compare purchases. That night I entered something new: A conversation with myself about personal and intimate ideas and experiences that had always been silenced before. And I was scared and excited and titillated because I wasn't sure if I could turn it off. Or if I even wanted to. When I emerged from that ordering room with my shiny plastic bag and dumped the contents on the ground for all my friends to see, I thought to myself with a little smile, "I'm hooked... just like the tip of my new pink, plastic vibrator."*

## **Acknowledgements**

There are so many people to thank for helping me to reach this point. I appreciate everyone in my life that asked questions, listened to my enthusiasm for research and for this topic, and challenged me to continue my exploration further over the past three years. Family, friends, coworkers and classmates, too numerous to name, have helped and inspired me and I sincerely thank you.

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I would like to acknowledge and thank my incredibly supportive family. Thank you to my Mom for introducing me to feminism at a young age and teaching me that it is necessary to stand up for what you believe in, even if it is uncomfortable or unpopular. Thank you to my Dad for becoming a feminist through the process of raising two daughters, for debating with me all aspects of the world, which was excellent preparation for academia, and for reading and editing my papers throughout my graduate program. In spite of any discomfort with the subject matter, the resulting discussions and advice you offered me was

invaluable to the successful completion of my program. Thank you also to my Sister for your help and support. You were always ready with a bottle of wine to discuss, debate and share ideas.

Last, but definitely not least, I would like to acknowledge and thank my Husband for making it possible for me to return to the academy and achieve my goal of obtaining a Master of Education degree. You often worked long hours in jobs that you were less than thrilled about so that we could make this happen. I promise that I will return the favour! Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you.



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## Chapter 1

### **Historical Background: Sexuality as a Historical and Cultural Construct**

The first two chapters of this thesis explore the historical and contemporary culture of Western sexuality. Chapter three through chapter five describe the research methods, research context, and present the research data. The final chapter synthesizes the research data through a poststructural feminist framework in order to conduct a cultural analysis of home sex toy parties as political and pedagogical sites where adults can build knowledge and understanding of sexuality in transgressive and potentially transformative ways.

### **Sexuality Through the Ages**

*Women and their bodies are the symbolic-cultural site upon which human societies inscript their moral order.*

**Benhabib, 2006, p. 153**

From antiquity to the Renaissance, sex was defined in a hierarchical, ‘one-sex’ or ‘female-as-male’ model, which positioned sex on a gradient of maleness. This sexual perspective thrived across millennia due to the way in which the body was understood in relation to culture and the link between sex and power. “The one-sex model can be read, I want to suggest, as an exercise in preserving the Father, he who stands not only for order, but for the very existence of civilization itself. Ancient authorities make both philosophical and empirical arguments for the self-evident greater potency of the male over the female for the absolute necessity of the generator” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 58).

During this era, there existed no anatomical nomenclature for the female genitals and reproductive system. In some instances male anatomical terms were

applied to the female body; however, this made it difficult to clearly distinguish female anatomy, which tended to be conflated within male-oriented anatomical nomenclature. “Language constrained the seeing of opposites and sustained the male body as the canonical human form” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 96).

The longevity of the ‘one-sex’ model can be attributed to the relationship of both culture and power to sex. With the public sphere overwhelmingly dominated by men, “the standard human body and its representations is the male body” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 62). However, the ‘doctrine of the separate spheres’ began to unravel the ‘one-sex’ model in order to justify who should occupy the public and private realms. “Nature had to be searched if men were to justify their dominance of the public sphere, whose distinction from the private would increasingly come to be figured in terms of sexual difference” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 194).

During the eighteenth century sex was re-defined as a ‘two-sex’ model in which male and female came to be seen as “opposite and incommensurable biological sexes” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 154). This shift occurred at a time when the public sphere was expanding and biological reductionism became the tool to separate the sexes into their ‘appropriate’ domains. As part of this project to divide male and female, the relationship between reproduction and sexual pleasure was heavily scrutinized. With new scientific understanding that ovulation occurred independently of sexual pleasure, the possibility of a ‘passionless female’ was born and female orgasm was “banished to the periphery of physiology” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 150). “The purported independence of generation

from pleasure created a space in which women's sexual nature could be redefined, debated, denied, or qualified. And so it was. Endlessly" (Lacqueur, 1990, p. 3).

Despite compelling advances in scientific understanding at this time, "culture and not biology was the basis for claims bearing on the role and even the existence of female sexual pleasure" (Laqueur, 1990, p. 189). The culmination of cultural forces shaping perspectives of sexuality is exemplified in the history of masturbation. Prior to the Enlightenment, masturbation was largely absent from medical and religious texts; more particularly, there was virtually no mention of masturbation in women and children. However, in the early eighteenth century, masturbation became a visible and disturbing vice, in which gender figured prominently. The obsessive public attention to the matter of masturbation occurred at a time in history in which pathophysiology and politics were blurred, the commercial credit economy created anxieties about bankruptcy and social order, the religious groups borne out of the Protestant Reformation raised anxiety about sexuality, and there was a growing movement for a "pedagogical project for creating morally self governing human beings who are capable of living in the new public sphere of civil society" (Laqueur, 2003, p. 268). "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadowed existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as the secret" (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 35).

According to Foucault (1976/1978) the proscription of masturbation can be scrutinized as an example of a practice of "bio-power" (p. 140) by which the state employed "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation

of bodies and the control of populations” (p. 140), which was essential to the development of capitalism. Sex was political. It was tied to the disciplines of the body and the regulation of populations. “Broadly speaking, at the juncture of ‘the body’ and the ‘population,’ sex became a crucial target of power organized around the management of life rather than the menace of death” (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 147). And “whatever one thought about women and their rightful place in the world could it seemed, be understood in terms of bodies endlessly open to interpretive demands of culture” (Laqueur, 1990, p. 217).

### **Hysteria and The Vibrator**

*The personal is political.*

**Hanisch, p. 76, 1970**

The electromechanical vibrator emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as the primary treatment for hysteria, an ailment first described in a medical text by Hippocrates in the fourth century B.C. “The perils of menstruation, including its onset, absence, and irregularities, as well as the precarious position of the morbidly mobile uterus, were considered responsible for women’s propensity to nervous illness, thought to be more than double the rate of men’s” (Starr & Aron, 2011, p. 378). However, “The sheer number of hysterics before the middle of this [the 20<sup>th</sup>] century and their virtual disappearance from history thereafter, suggests it is perceptions of the pathological character of these women’s behaviour that have altered, not the behaviour itself” (Maines, 1999, p. 7). The tendency to pathologize that which conflicted with the dominant sexual perspective in order to achieve larger societal

functions is what Foucault (1976/1978) termed “hystericization of women’s bodies” (p. 104), which he described as

a threefold process whereby the feminine body was analyzed – qualified and disqualified – as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practice, by reason of pathology intrinsic to it; whereby it was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of children’s education). (p. 104)

“In the Western medical tradition genital massage to orgasm by a physician or midwife was a standard treatment for hysteria, an ailment considered common and chronic in women” (Maines, 1999, p. 1). Demand for this treatment arose in a sociocultural climate that prohibited masturbation, in conjunction with a pervasive, androcentric definition of sexuality. Starr and Aron (2011) explain:

Masturbation in both sexes was discouraged; autonomous orgasm, which fell outside the realm of procreation, was considered unhealthy and immoral. However, there was an additional factor for discouraging clitoral masturbation in women that was not true for men, namely, the entire concept of women’s sexual satisfaction via the clitoris was intolerable because it had no connection with reproduction and made women seem too much like men—capable of autonomous sexual pleasure without

penetration... Viewed through the lens of a male-centric medical model, women's sexuality was put in its place—in a passive position and dependent on men. (p. 379)

While the androcentric model of sexuality was viewed as natural throughout society, “it has been clinically noted in many periods that this behavioural framework fails to consistently produce orgasm in more than half of the female population” (Maines, 1999, p.3). According to Maines (1999), “as long as the female orgasm could be medicalized, it did not have to be discussed, which would have called uncomfortable attention to its apparent conflict with the norm of coitus” (p. 117). Thus “doctors inherited the task of producing orgasm in women because it was a job nobody else wanted” (Maines, 1999, p. 4).

The confluence of social, cultural, and historical forces effectively distanced hysteria and its subsequent treatments, including genital stimulation, from sexual pleasure. Physicians used the clinical term ‘paroxysm’ to describe the result of genital stimulation, which served to medicalize and desexualize “orgasm by proxy” (Starr & Aron, 2011, p. 379). “Hysterical paroxysms are characterized by, among other things, ‘local spasms,’ loss of consciousness, flushing of the skin, ‘voluptuous sensations,’ embarrassment, confusion, and a very brief loss of control; in short, paroxysms are orgasms” (Glover, 2010, p. 557).

It is unclear whether women enjoyed the experience and the results of genital stimulation because there are no documented accounts describing their perspective. “[In] the histories of sexuality and medical massage in hysteria, it is important to stress that the voices of women are seldom heard” (Maines, 1999, p.



10). Additionally, “there is no evidence that male physicians enjoyed providing pelvic massage treatments. On the contrary, this male elite sought every opportunity to substitute other devices for their fingers” (Maines, 1999, p. 4). Thus, in the 1880s, the electromechanical vibrator was developed and patented by Dr. Joseph Mortimer Granville in response to demand from physicians for alternative methods of therapy. The technological improvements that resulted in the electromechanical vibrator considerably reduced the time it took physicians to produce orgasm in patients, thus improving clinical productivity. “Although the equipment was costly, mechanization made the tedious task of bringing a woman to orgasm via manual massage less tiring and more efficient and, hence, doctors’ private practices far more lucrative” (Starr & Aron, 2011, p. 383).

In the late nineteenth century vibrators were marketed in popular magazines, such as *Home Needlework Magazine*, *Popular Mechanics*, and *Sears and Roebuck*, as a home appliance; in fact, the vibrator became the fifth electrified household appliance, after the sewing machine, fan, teakettle and toaster. According to Maines (1999):

The social camouflage of the vibrator as a home and professional medical instrument seems to have remained more or less intact until the end of the 1920s, when the true vibrator (not massagers or electrotherapeutic devices) gradually disappeared from doctors’ offices and from the respectable household press. This may have been the result of greater understanding of women’s sexuality by physicians, the appearance of vibrators in stag film in the twenties, or both. (p. 20)

As vibrators began to appear in pornographic films of the late 1920s, it became increasingly difficult to deny their link to masturbation and sexual pleasure. This new conceptualization conflicted with the dominant androcentric sexual perspective and vibrators were soon driven underground.

We should hardly be surprised that sexuality, existing at the intersection of mind and body and bearing heavy, sometimes impenetrable overlays of social construction, should have been subject to successive waves of medical interpretation. What is impressive, however, is that the androcentric paradigm of sexuality – that sex consists of penetration (usually of the vagina) to male orgasm – is a fixed point in the otherwise shifting sands of Western medical opinion. (Maines, 1999, p. 112)

### **Sexuality and Masturbation in the Twentieth Century**

*The apparatus of sexuality lies at the heart of workings of power in modernity.*  
Atkinson, 2006, p. 598

Twentieth century conceptions of sexuality evolved through scientific research and cultural change. In the early 1900s, Sigmund Freud, the founding father of psychoanalysis, dominated Western understanding of female sexuality. Stemming from his work identifying and defining the Oedipal Complex, Freud held that women required men in order to experience their sexuality fully. He posited that young, immature girls focused their libido on the clitoris, which represented the mother, as it was a sexually inferior organ to the penis. In order to be classified as a mature woman, the focus of the libido needed to shift to the vagina, which was representative of the father. At this stage, women had two sexual interests: “to possess a penis and a child” (Freud, 1924/1976, p. 321).

Freud recognized that the first interest was a biological impossibility; however, the desire for a penis was translated into the desire for a male to provide a penis by proxy, with the aim of reproduction. If women did not make this transition from immature to mature womanhood, it would result in neurotic discontent, penis envy, hysteria, and hostility toward men. Women who did not renounce their clitoris were termed 'frigid.' Frigidity, as a psychoanalytic diagnosis, referred to the inability to experience vaginal orgasm through intercourse; however, this term was also applied to women whose sexual expression differed from the norm. "Frigidity thus became a label and a diagnosis that defined how much sexual desire a woman must have and in what kinds of sexual behavior she must engage to be 'healthy'" (Herald, 2004, p. 18).

From the 1930s to the 1950s Alfred Kinsey conducted sociological investigations to explore human sexual behaviours. His groundbreaking research as America's pre-eminent sexologist changed societal perceptions of sexuality, especially in relation to the sexuality of women and children. In *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948), Kinsey highlighted that 92% of men masturbate to orgasm; however, the frequency of masturbation drops steadily from adolescence to old age. This data challenged the pervasive sociocultural assumption that all men masturbated regularly. In *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953), Kinsey's research revealed that masturbation was pervasive in women both before and after marriage. Sixty-two percent of Kinsey's study sample reported masturbating at least once in their lifetime, with masturbation occurring in every age group, from infancy to old age. This research highlighted that women

experienced orgasm most frequently through masturbation and that women with higher levels of education were more likely to masturbate. Of note, “only a limited number of the females in the sample clearly indicated that they had used any object which had penetrated the vagina itself. Many males, however, basing their concepts on their understanding of coitus and upon their conceit as to the importance of the male genitalia in coitus, imagine that all female masturbation must involve an insertion of the fingers or of some other object into the depths of the vagina” (Kinsey & Martin, 1953, p. 162). By examining the rationale of women in the study sample, it is clear that insertion as a masturbation technique produced pleasure in some; however, others employed this particular masturbatory style due to existing sociocultural conceptions of female sexuality as dependent on heterosexual intercourse and the importance of being able to please male partners.

Kinsey’s research also dispelled myths of harm attributed to masturbation since the Enlightenment. “On the basis of our previous review of more than five thousand cases of males who had masturbated, and on the basis of the data now available on nearly twenty-eight hundred cases of females with masturbatory experience, we may assert that we have recognized exceedingly few cases, if indeed there have been any outside of a few psychotics, in which either physical or mental damage had resulted from masturbatory activity. We have, on the other hand, recognized a tremendous amount of damage which has been the result of worry over masturbation, and of attempts to abstain from such activity” (Kinsey

& Martin, 1953, pp. 167-168). On this point, Kinsey challenged Freud and the psychoanalytic perspective on masturbation as unscientific.

Freud and most of the psychoanalysts have recognized that masturbation does no physical harm, but they have introduced new sources of psychologic disturbance by rating the activity infantile, immature, and a personality defect that merits psychiatric attention when it occurs as an adult... Many adults who are not immature in any realistic sense do masturbate, and there is no science in refusing to recognize this fact.

(Kinsey & Martin, 1953, pp. 170-171)

Kinsey continued to challenge the Freudian psychoanalytic perspective of clitoral responses as immature and less desirable than vaginal responses, citing the lack of nerve endings in the vagina and providing data to support the assertion that pre-marital masturbation enhances the female experience of heterosexual sex in the context of marriage.

Starting in the 1950s, William H. Masters and Virginia Johnson, pioneered laboratory research on physiological and psychological sexual responses. They predicated their research on the understanding that “every person has sexual feelings, attitudes, and beliefs, but everyone’s experience of sexuality is unique because it is a process through an intensely personal perspective” (Masters, Johnson & Kolodny, 1986, p. 3). Using the data gathered in these controlled laboratory experiments, Masters & Johnson (1966) proposed a general framework for human sexual response. Their proposed sexual response cycle refuted Freud’s distinction between clitoral (i.e., immature) orgasms and vaginal (i.e., mature)

orgasms, illustrated differences between male and female sexual response, which were previously conflated, and created the basis for defining sexual dysfunction. In later work, Masters and Johnson (1970) proposed a therapeutic model for the treatment of sexual dysfunction, which addressed the biophysical and psychosocial elements of sexual response. “Until the detailed studies of Masters and Johnson were released, it was generally thought that sexual dysfunctions were invariably due to deep-seated personal problems that originated in childhood. Today, most sexologists recognize that many people with sexual dysfunctions have completely normal personalities, no signs of emotional illness, and simple, straightforward explanations for their problems” (Masters, Johnson & Kolodny, 1986, p. 480)

Social changes regarding the structure of the family and the role of women within the family culminated in the sexual revolution of the 1960s. During this time technological advancements changed the workforce, the economy, and hormonal birth control (i.e., ‘the pill’) enabled women to control pregnancy, which reduced pressure to guarantee paternity and the necessity of marriage. While these changes may have offered women a degree of sexual freedom, the reduced importance of childbearing also reduced the status of women and they continued to be dependent on men due to educational and economic inequalities. “It is important to remember that you cannot decree women to be ‘sexually free’ when they are not economically free; to do so is to put them into a more vulnerable position than ever, and make them into a form of easily available common property” (Hite, 1976, p. 323).

These challenges brought about the women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. At this time women fought to extend the rights gained during the suffrage movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second-wave feminists campaigned against cultural and political discrimination and inequality, which were seen as inextricably linked within a patriarchal system. Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist theorist and philosopher became a key figure of the women's movement with the publication of *The Second Sex* (1949/2009), in which she detailed the history of women's oppression and their positioning as the Other. De Beauvoir (1949/2009) asserted:

Men's economic privilege, their social value, the prestige of marriage, the usefulness of masculine support – all these encourage women to ardently want to please men. They are on the whole still in a state of serfdom. It follows that woman knows and chooses herself not as she exists for herself but as man defines her. She thus has to be described first as men dream of her since her being-for-men is one of the essential factors of her concrete condition. (p. 156)

Betty Friedan, another key figure of the women's movement, echoed de Beauvoir's argument on the position of women citing the problem of 'the feminine mystique,' which served to keep women "passive and apart" (Friedan, 1963, p. 43). She claimed "women were defined only in sexual relation to men - man's wife, sex object, mother, housewife - and never as persons defining themselves by their own actions in society" (p. 18). For Friedan (1963), prescribed images of femininity and "the happy housewife heroine" (p. 79)

constrained options and left women feeling empty; the women's movement demanded an end to this through equal access to education and employment and the attainment of bodily sovereignty. "Feminism was not a dirty joke. The feminist revolution had to be fought because women quite simply were stopped at a stage of evolution far short of their human capacity" (Friedan, 1963, p. 144).

Starting with the sexual revolution and continuing with the women's movement, masturbation was redefined as an act of individual liberation and autonomy, an affirmation of the intrinsic value of pleasure, a practice of self-knowledge, and an act of consumerism. Key feminist texts such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971) rejected the historical positioning of female sexual pleasure and the ubiquitous Freudian analysis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as "the prototype of the modern patriarchal narrative" (Lacqueur, 2003, p. 77). Instead, sex-positive feminists positioned masturbation "as a practice in the service of freedom, autonomy, and rebellion against the status quo" (Laqueur, 2003, p. 75).

*The Hite Report* (1976), contributed data to the feminist current that challenged conceptions of female sexuality as lacking or even non-existing, and masturbation as dirty and immoral. Extending Kinsey's sociological research, researcher Shere Hite distributed largely open-ended questionnaires intended to elicit narrative responses from a broad cross-section of women. *The Hite Report* (1976) was a compilation of responses and, through the use of direct quotations, an abundance of women's voices were shared in an attempt to reflect women's lived experience and reevaluate female sexuality. "Sex as we define it is part of



the whole cultural picture; a woman's place in sex mirrors her place in the rest of society" (Hite, 1976, p. xi).

Over the course of four years and four questionnaires, 3,019 women were included in *The Hite Report* (1976). Of these women, eighty-two percent indicated that they had masturbated and 95% of those women reported that masturbation regularly brought them to orgasm. "The ease with which women orgasm during masturbation certainly contradicts the general stereotypes about female sexuality – that women are slow to become aroused, and are able to orgasm only irregularly. The truth seems to be that female sexuality is thriving - but unfortunately underground" (Hite, 1976, p. 3). Hite (1976) argued that misunderstandings of female sexuality stemmed from identifying intercourse, and by extension reproduction, as the main expression of female sexuality. Through this publication, Hite asked women about their thoughts, feelings and experiences surrounding sexual pleasure, which shed light on the complex nature of female sexuality. Hite (1976) concluded:

It is not female sexuality that has a problem ('dysfunction') but society that has a problem in its definition of sex and the subordinate role that definition gives women. Sharing our hidden sexuality by telling how we masturbate is a first step toward bringing our sexuality out into the world and toward redefining sex and physical relations as we know them. (p. 4)

In 1952 the American Psychological Association eliminated the diagnosis of hysteria from its repertoire of pathological disorders and as acceptance and encouragement of masturbation grew, a familiar device reemerged. "When the

vibrator reemerged during the 1960s, it was no longer a medical instrument; it had been democratized to consumers to such an extent that by the seventies it was openly marketed as a sex aid” (Maines, 1999, p. 20). Thus, the sexual revolution and the women’s movement “completed what had begun with the introduction of the electromechanical vibrator into the home: it put into the hands of women themselves the job nobody wanted” (Maines, 1999, p. 20).

Pro-sex feminism emerged in the late 1970s and with this movement came feminist-oriented, sex-positive sex shops, such as Good Vibrations and ‘Toy Box’ (Loe, 1999). This segment of feminism sought to “draw on women’s energy to create a movement that speaks as powerfully in favor of sexual pleasure as it does against sexual danger” (Vance, 1984, p. 7). Moreover, this form of feminism wanted to “cut through myths centered around women as chaste or asexual creatures, sex as reproduction, and compulsory heterosexuality” (Loe, 1999, p. 713). In the 1980s feminist activists “advocated a new kind of ‘speak out’ in which women were to educate themselves [and] openly share the shapes of their sexual desires” (Loe, 1999, p. 709-710). Through the goods and services offered in these sex shops, sex, masturbation and sex toys became “the basis for a healthy growing economy in self-pleasure” (Laqueur, 2003, p. 70). As this industry began to experience commercial success, many other companies, largely without feminist visions, sought to make a place for themselves and the sex industry became “a multi-billion-dollar endeavor featuring high salaries, a large workforce, brisk competition, and sales conventions” (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988, p. 328).

In the past, a “profound lack of understanding, both physiological and psychological, of female sexuality led to confusion about the role of female sex organs and the function, if any, of female orgasm. Much of this confusion continues to this day” (Glover, 2010, p. 559). As sociocultural conceptions of sexuality have shifted, the definition of female sexuality has broadened to include pleasure; however, the medicalization of female sexuality continues to constrain perceptions of normal and abnormal sexual expression. Although women have far more of a voice in the 21st century than in previous centuries, views of female sexuality are still influenced by patriarchy. Still there is recognition that female sexuality is much more complex than previously thought.

While there is still surprisingly little research on female sexuality, the research that does exist is by in large conducted within a medicalized framework. Recent studies have indicated that forty-three percent of women experience sexual dysfunction (Laumann, Paik & Rosen, 1999, p. 537). Herald (2004) reflects:

These numbers are consistent with earlier studies of the ‘frigidity’ rates of women. It is a wonder that the high percentage alone does not alert us to the fact that it may not necessarily be the woman who is sexually dysfunctional. A more logical conclusion to be drawn from the data might be that it is the culture, one that fails to investigate the issues and to educate its citizenry that is dysfunctional. Rather than claiming this high percentage of sexual problems is a treatable ‘medical condition,’ it could be recognized as a ‘social condition,’ leading to much-needed research and education of both women and men. (p. 25)

More qualitative research, including feminist and critical research, is required to critique existing research, in which women's voices are largely absent, and to expand scientific inquiry and understanding related to sexuality in order to rewrite existing sexual scripts. This research study intends to supplement existing research by exploring the voices of nine, female home sex toy party guests. Using a poststructural feminist analytical lens, this research study will also highlight language, power, and pedagogy to examine transgressive and transformative learning opportunities in the home sex toy party context.

## InterText

### *The Day I Became a Feminist*

*This Sunday was different. After the handshakes and the 'peace be with you's,' my sister and I eagerly anticipated the final song so that we could be on our way home. We could almost taste the hot chocolate and marshmallows that awaited us only a few blocks away.*

*But this Sunday was different.*

*Instead of the final song, the priest called up a woman from the congregation to speak about a very important issue, or so he said. I must've sighed audibly because my grandmother shot me a sharp glance and my mother held my arm a little too tightly, as the lady took her place at the podium, making it nearly impossible to squirm.*

*"Ahem." There was slight ring of feedback from the microphone, so she took a small step back and started again. "Good morning," her voiced echoed through the large church. All eyes were on her, silently anticipating this important talk: "Abortion is murder."*

*I was twelve. I don't really remember what I thought in that moment, except that I wasn't thinking about hot chocolate anymore. In what felt like seconds and an eternity all at once, my mother looked down at my sister and I and began to gather up our winter gear. As she reached and scooped for the coats, mitts, scarves, and toques, the swishing and scratching of the polyester and zippers was deafening. Before I could even protest in embarrassment, she stood up solidly and grabbed us by the arms, shuffling us out of our pew past grandma. Steadily, the three of us marched down the aisle, her head held high, and all eyes turned on us. I can still hear the "click...click...click" of her high heels against the cold, tile floor as we walked away from that speech and out of the church that morning.*

*From then on, I understood.*

*The personal is political.*

## Chapter 2

### **Literature Review: Contemporary Perspectives on Sexuality Education, Sex Toys, and the Home Sex Toy Party**

#### **The Current State of Sexuality Education**

*Where do you start when you start with silence?*

**Atkinson, 2006, p. 596**

Overall, “there is support in Canada for school-based sexuality education” (Connell, 2005, p. 255). Yet “Canadians of all backgrounds are informed by Western, patriarchal notions about sexuality” (Singh, 2009, p. 9). Due to these forces, sex education remains a contentious issue. Current “sexuality education policy teaches students to avoid sexual risk by denying them full information and discussion and policymakers learn to avoid difficult conversations about sexuality in order to avoid controversy. Risk avoidance, based on minimal information and studied disengagement from challenging issues, characterizes the whole process of sexuality education” (Mayo, 2011, pp. 406-407). Schools enact this policy by decontextualizing and individualizing notions of risk in order to emphasize sexual danger and ignore “the discourse of desire” (Fine, 1988, p. 33). By delegitimizing and silencing discussions regarding pleasure and the diversity of sexual expression, “these policies have negative consequences for all students, but particularly for young women and sexual minorities” (Mayo, 2011, p. 408). Those calling for sexuality education reform advocate that “taking the institutional risk of having difficult discussions around sexuality and rights would heighten the social and political processes which are implicit in any discourse about sexuality,

as well as providing a context for discussing the kinds of bias that distort definitions of normative sexuality” (Mayo, 2011, p. 409).

In tandem with this institutional silence, particular articulations of young female sexual desire is promoted in popular venues, such as through mass media and pop-culture icons. “The articulation of the missing discourse of desire has enabled the constitution of young women as consumer citizens, and at the same time it produces them as new kinds of desiring subjects of, and desirable objects for, (hetero)-sexual consumption” (Harris, 2005, p. 40). Additionally, as young women have come to be seen as important labour resources, “new discourses of desire that unstitch sexual activity from reproduction are therefore of increasing value in the new economy” (Harris, 2005, p. 40).

Given the ongoing tensions related to addressing sexual desire within the context of sexuality education policy, “the debate related to it has largely focused on children and adolescents, and the sexuality education that they do or do not receive in public schools, leaving sexuality education for adults a largely untouched subject” (Herbenick & Reece, 2006). The silencing of sexuality that begins in childhood reverberates into adulthood, as few venues offer sexuality education in the broader community. Older adults are particularly vulnerable to this silence as current stereotypes cast them as “helpless, depressed, and sexless” (Adams, Oye & Parker, 2003, p. 406).

Current forms of sexuality education for adults are generally the purview of non-profit organizations, with a focus on health promotion and risk reduction initiatives. These medicalized initiatives, such as disease- or pregnancy-

prevention campaigns, are generally targeted at specific ‘at risk’ groups and not intended to educate the general population. “This is inconsistent with the calls by some to ensure that sexuality-related interventions are less focused on negative outcomes and more consistent with the manner in which individuals construct their sexual lives” (Herbenick & Reece, 2006, p. 70).

Adults who do not identify with medicalized conceptions of sexuality education and instead seek pleasure-focused information look for other venues for information to support and enhance their sexual and personal fulfillment.

“Considering that sexuality is a taboo topic in many cultures, it is perhaps not surprising that people frequently access information about sexuality in private ways. For example, they may seek to learn about sexuality through television, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet, all of which may vary in their accuracy” (Herbenick, Reece, & Hollub, 2009, p. 318). It is also important to acknowledge that individuals access information about sex and sexuality in more contested venues, such as pornography and prostitution. In addition to concerns related to accuracy, the representation of complexity, including power-knowledge relationships, also vary with each source. However, “study findings underscore the fact that, as individuals’ sexual curiosities and needs change with age, developmental life state, relationship status, and health status, they may be best served by having access to information about sexuality from varied sources” (Herbenick, Reece, & Hollub, 2009, p. 325).

“With the onset of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s and a new emphasis on the sexual health needs of diverse adult populations, health professionals began to



implement programs in a variety of locations outside of traditional settings....

There remains a need to identify new and innovative venues that may be appropriate for the delivery of such interventions” (Reece, Herbenick, & Sherwood-Puzzello, 2004, p. 173). Examples of previous venues for public health campaigns on high priority issues, such as HIV/AIDS transmission, include grassroots movements, churches, and beauty parlours. “Recently, researchers have begun to empirically study non-school venues and their potential as sites for providing adults with sex education” (Fisher et al., 2010, p. 132). However, it is important that this research captures venues offering broad conceptions of sexuality education, beyond the medicalized scope of traditional health promotion and risk reduction efforts.

As patriarchal views of sexuality have persisted across history, “female sexual expression has historically been suppressed in Western societies [and] women traditionally have gathered privately inside each other’s homes to discuss or learn about sexual and reproductive health matters” (Herbenick & Reece, 2009, p. 178). From the Women’s Institutes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the consciousness raising circles of the 1960s and 1970s, women have come together to share and discuss in order to address a fundamental lack of knowledge about their bodies and the subjugation of their pleasure. “Through such meetings, women have shared information (and in some cases, taught each other skills) related to topics such as contraception, abortion, childbirth, masturbation and orgasm, and sexuality and aging” (Herbenick & Reece, 2009, p. 178). “Most recently, in-home sex toy parties have been described as one way that

some contemporary women in the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom have come together (usually in groups of friends, co-workers, or acquaintances) to talk about sexuality, to ask questions about sexuality, and to access sexual enhancement products” (Herbenick & Reece, 2009, p. 179).

### **The Genesis of Home Sex Toy Parties**

Home parties evolved from door-to-door sales and were first introduced by Wearever Aluminum Cooking Products in the 1920s, shortly after the emergence of the electromechanical vibrator, as a practical strategy for demonstrating unfamiliar utensils. At this time, Wearever Aluminum employed an all-male sales team; however, in the 1930s legislation was introduced to prohibit uninvited solicitation and “unscrupulous masculine door-to-door sales practices” (Clarke, 1999, p. 83). The home party or hostess party was created by Wearever Aluminum as a solution to limiting legal regulation and this form of direct sales gained considerable popularity during The Great Depression due to both the affordability of in-home entertaining and the ability to employ a large-scale, casual labour force with minimal investment, skills and professional qualifications, who had previously been excluded from the workforce. “The hostess party inverted conventional sales wisdom, which posited the women as a passive receptor of newly marketed merchandise. Instead it acknowledged housewives as capable sales recruits and discerning, powerful consumers, keen to explore an expanding array of modern consumer goods” (Clarke, 1999, p. 85).

In 1950, after unsuccessful department store offerings, Tupperware transitioned to selling products exclusively through hostess parties and by the

mid-1950s “the Tupperware party (at which women gathered in the home of a volunteering ‘hostess’ for lively product demonstrations) had become a cultural hallmark of postwar America” (Clarke, 1999, p. 2). This occurred at a time when women’s role within the home was expanding from manual labour and organization to an emotional and moral force within the family. The accomplished housewife that “originated in the prewar popularization of the home as an arena of aestheticized self-provisioning, entertainment, modernity, and conviviality” (Clarke, 1999, p. 69) had been defined as the key to social and economic mobility.

Wholesale orders in 1952, the first full year of Tupperware Home Parties, totaled just over two million dollars and by 1958 Tupperware Home Parties was sold to Rexall Drugs for fifteen million dollars. “Tupperware wasn’t the first direct-sales product, but it was arguably the best” (Kealing, 2008, p. 7). Part of Tupperware’s success can be attributed to their product. “Plastic goods, in general, proved particularly popular as direct sales merchandise. Highly portable, multifarious in their uses and decorative appeal, new plastic items were fashionable, affordable, and considerably more enticing, through demonstration, than traditional household goods” (Clarke, 1999, p. 82). However, the Tupperware Party popularized in-home, direct marketing sales due to many other unique factors including intimacy, female sociality, demonstrations using visual and tactile sales techniques, and the promise of “improved lives for women” (McCaughey & French, 2001, p. 82).

Today, the popularity of home parties has exploded with a variety of companies employing this sales technique. Overall, direct sales, which include

home parties, mail order, Internet sales and television shopping networks, represent more than \$30 billion in sales in the United States alone. Home parties, in particular, make up approximately one-quarter of direct sales in the United States and the United Kingdom and Tupperware remains the most popular home party company with worldwide sales of over \$2 billion.

Through qualitative research on a variety of home shopping parties, Gainer and Fischer (1991) determined that women, comprising the vast majority of home party shoppers, viewed home parties as part of their domestic work and a cultural exercise in civility and conviviality. They observed that “women who appeared to have a more ‘modern’ conception of women’s roles engaged in this behaviour to the same extent as more ‘traditional’ women: the only difference found between seemingly traditional and seemingly modern women was in their product focus and thus the particular aspect of domestic work they emphasized” (pp. 600-601). Gainer and Fischer (1991) also noted that while home parties reinforced gender roles related to domesticity and nurturing, they were also an important site of advice, reassurance and mutual support.

With the immense popularity and profitability of The Tupperware Party and other home party companies, including Avon and Pampered Chef, it is not surprising that home sex toy parties grew out of this sales model. In the 1980s, Ann Summers, an adult retail company based in the United Kingdom, was inspired by a clothing-based home party company and began selling sex toys and lingerie via the home party model. These all-women parties “reflected changing sexual relations in which women could explore a world of erotica, with other

women, which, in the form of retail outlets, had previously been a predominantly male arena” (Clarke, 1999, p. 195). Such risqué home parties were immensely successful and, by 2003, Ann Summers reported 7500 sales representatives conducting 4,000 parties per week throughout the United Kingdom.

The popularity of these parties has spread throughout the Western World, with numerous companies offering home sex toy parties. Passion Parties, one of the largest home sex toy party organizations, recently reported that since 1994 “more than 100,000 women, Independent Consultants have joined and conduct in-home party plan presentations” (Passion Parties, 2012) across North America. Given the historical propensity of women to gather privately, the success of the home party sales model, and the recent and rapid expansion of the home sex toy party industry, serious inquiry is warranted to determine whether the home sex toy party has the potential to serve as a venue of sexuality education for adults.

### **The Home Sex Toy Party Model**

The corporate structures of adult retail companies offering home sex toy parties vary from pyramid-type schemes to cooperatives. Traditionally, home sex toy party companies contracted independent sales representatives. This meant that sales representatives were not employees of the company; instead, they purchased products from the adult retail company and sourced customers to host the home parties. In this model, the sales representatives could receive bonuses for recruiting other representatives and gifts for reaching sales targets. This pyramid-type model has been very successful; however, other adult retail companies have created alternative business models in order to retain more control over their

brand. For example, companies may employ sales representatives, which means that sales representatives may receive products and party bookings from the company in exchange for commission on party sales and standardized training sessions. Adult retail companies offering home sex toy parties may also have a storefront and/or online sales that operate separately from the home sex toy party arm of the company.

Regardless of the corporate structure of home sex toy party company, the model of the sex toy party remains fairly constant. An interested party host will arrange a date and time for the party, either through the sales representative or through the adult retail company, and invite guests, usually friends, coworkers, or family members, to attend. The sales representative will arrive at the home of the party host at the appointed time and set up two separate areas: a public space for the demonstration portion of the party and a private space for ordering products afterwards. The host will set up the event much like any other party, with food, drinks, usually alcoholic, and possibly decorations. The home sex toy party usually begins with icebreaker games lead by the sales representative to help guests feel comfortable and to encourage a festive atmosphere. Products will then be shown, discussed, and sometimes passed around for guests to touch. The demonstration portion of the sex toy party is usually one or two hours long, depending on the number of products shown, the number of guests at the party, and how lively and talkative the crowd becomes. Usually stories are shared and there is lots of laughter, especially if the guests are able to ‘try out’ the products by turning them on, smelling them, tasting them, etc. Once the demonstration is

over, the sales representative will transition to the 'order room' and guests will enter individually to place orders. The party host is usually the last person to place an order. Generally the host will receive a bonus gift or credits towards their purchase based on the total party sales. Sometimes the host receives extra incentives if guests schedule future parties of their own. Depending on the company and the amount of stock they bring to the party, guests may leave with their purchases that night or they may have to wait a few weeks for their orders to be mailed or delivered. The whole event takes approximately two to three hours from start to finish.

### **Sex Toy Use**

*Sex is the most popular leisure activity in the world.*

**Griffiths, as cited in Malina & Schmidt, 1997, p. 352**

Researchers at the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University have published the largest body of research on focused on the adult retail industry. As a first step in their research program, they employed cross-sectional surveys to determine the prevalence and correlates of vibrator use in nationally representative samples of men and women, as well as sub-analysis on particular populations (e.g. women in relationships, gay and bisexually identified men, etc.). Overall, they determined that approximately half of Americans (i.e., 52.5% of women and 44.8% of men) had previously used a vibrator during sexual activity at some point in their lives.

In these studies, they also found that sex toy use correlated with certain benefits. Herbenick and associates (2009) determined that, in women, vibrator use

positively correlated with increased sexual function on a number of Female Sexual Function Index subscales, including desire, arousal, lubrication, orgasm, and pain. Vibrator use also positively correlated with attending a gynecologic exam and conducting genital self-exams in the past year. “Findings from this study are significant in that they demonstrate, for the first time among a scientific and nationally representative sample of women in the United States, that vibrator use is: (i) common among diverse groups of women; (ii) associated with health promoting behaviours; (iii) associated with positive sexual function; and (iv) rarely related to negative side effects” (Herbenick et al., 2009, p. 1863). In men, vibrator use was positively correlated with increased erectile function using the International Index of Erectile Function. Vibrator users were also more likely to engage in sexual health related behaviours, such as testicular self-exams. While the prevalence and correlates of vibrator use in men and women was surprising, “it is not surprising that vibrator use appears to be more prevalent among women than men, particularly given the extent to which they are more frequently marketed to women through diverse and often women-focused venues (e.g., in-home sex toy parties) and often recommended as an adjunct to treatment for female sexual dysfunction” (Reece et al., 2009, p. 1872).

### **Sexual Health Promotion and Sexuality Education in the Adult Retail**

#### **Industry**

In the next phase of their research program, Herbenick, Reece and Sherwood-Puzzello (2004) investigated adult retail stores as a venue for sexual health promotion and sex education. They surveyed employees of 187 adult retail



stores across the United States, using an 89-item questionnaire that covered the following topics: demographics; education and training in human sexuality; knowledge about pregnancy; correct use of safer sex products; STD and HIV transmission; hygiene of sexual enhancement products; confidence and comfort with answering customer questions; history of employment in the adult retail industry; and experiences with sexual health information seeking by customers. The data gathered demonstrated that “by asking questions and purchasing products related to or supportive of sexual health, customers routinely provide adult store employees with the opportunity to serve in an educational capacity. Many adult store employees also reported that they frequently assumed some role as a sexual health resource” (Herbenick, Reece & Sherwood-Puzzello, 2004, p. 177).

Herbenick and Reece (2006) extended this research by conducting secondary analysis on this data set to investigate the frequency, content and characteristics of ‘teachable moments’ in adult retail stores. The most common questions reported by store employees were pleasure-based, including questions about selecting products to maximize stimulation, pleasure, and sensation.

Based on the types of questions reported by the study participants, it is apparent that consumers of adult retail stores are asking questions that provide a unique opportunity for the dissemination of sexuality education to adults. On the surface, these questions may appear to be simple requests for information related to a particular product that a store may sell.

However, by reconceptualizing these questions and the potential responses

to them by store employees, professionals in the sexuality education and sexual health fields may realize that there is a unique opportunity for engaging with this industry to enhance the availability of accurate information available to sexually active or sexually interested adults.

(Herbenick & Reece, 2006, p. 70)

Over the course of three additional publications, these researchers conducted online surveys with female in-home sex toy party facilitators working for a large U.S. company. The first study by Herbenick, Reece and Hollub (2009), employed a 118-item survey instrument that was comprised of a variety of questions, including questions related to: demographics; personal visits and purchases from adult retail venues; employment as an in-home sex toy party facilitator; characteristics of the most recent sex toy party they facilitated; and, sexuality questions asked and topics discussed at the most recent sex toy party. A total of 1197 completed surveys were included in this study and several key findings were noted. The survey respondents were a diverse group of women who conducted in-home sex toy parties for other diverse groups of women. During the in-home sex toy parties, facilitators were frequently asked questions related to sexuality, particularly questions about sexual function. “The data suggest that some women who attend in-home sex toy parties may perceive facilitators as resources for information about sex. Certainly the facilitators are being asked a range of questions that women may have, but may rarely bring up to their own healthcare providers, such as questions related to lubrication, vulvovaginal pain or desire.” (Herbenick, Reece & Hollub, 2009, p. 325).

Secondary analysis was conducted by Fisher and associates (2010), using the same survey data; questions and discussion topics reported by the in-home party facilitators were coded into themes and compared to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) guidelines to illuminate educational content and opportunities. Nine themes were identified, including: product-related questions (not including lubricants), sexual function questions, orgasm questions, questions about artificial lubricants, sex behavior questions, general sexuality questions, job-related questions, and medically related questions. These themes were highly congruent with key topics in the SIECUS guidelines, which illustrates not only a need for sexuality education, but also opportunities for facilitators to insert educational messages into the in-home sex toy party context.

The SIECUS guideline for personal skills includes a communication component. Communication skills may be the most salient piece of sexuality education for in-home sex-toy parties. The opportunity to practice asking questions and discussing sexuality-related topics, both for consultants and consumers, is evident in that nearly all consultants surveyed reported questions asked of them at the parties they facilitated. The chance to discuss sex in a safe, non-judgmental environment may allow consumers and consultants to improve communication skills that can be carried into their personal relationships. (Fisher et al., 2010, p. 142)

Herbenick and Reece (2009) used the same survey data to determine the extent in-home sex toy parties and the party facilitators act as health promotion

resources and to determine the relationship between the sexuality education background of the party facilitators and their ‘askability’ during the in-home sex toy party.

The data suggest that in-home party facilitators are commonly asked questions related to sexual health. These question types are similar to those asked of sex educators (e.g., questions related to learning which lubricants can be used with condoms, how to prevent pregnancy or HIV/STI), nurses or doctors (e.g., questions related to sexuality and pregnancy, child- birth, menopause or hysterectomy), and sex counselors or therapists (e.g., how to communicate with a partner about sexual desires and needs). (Herbenick & Reece, 2009, p. 189)

Based on the findings of these studies, it appears that the in-home sex toy party venue has the potential to challenge the traditional, ineffective, medicalized model of adult sexuality education and include important information about sexuality, sexual functioning, sexual communication, and pleasure.

### **Sex Toys as ‘Empowering Consumption’?**

The current research literature regarding the prevalence and correlates of vibrator use, as well as opportunities for sexual health promotion and sexuality education in the context of adult retail stores and in-home sex toy parties is encouraging and creates space for further investigation. However, the ways in which products are marketed and sold in the home party context should also be examined. McCaughey and French (2001) attended five home sex toy parties to explore the significance of sex toys marketed in this context through covert

participant-observations. In this venue, they observed that questions, stories and critiques are shared in ways that legitimize, normalize and encourage female sexual expression; “clearly party guests ended up with a new awareness about sex, their bodies, and the power of non-medicalized, woman-to-woman communication” (McCaughey & French, 2001, p. 89). However, in addition to these positive messages, sex toys were often presented in a heterosexist light as the answer to male inadequacy.

McCaughey and French (2001) separated in-home sex toy parties from feminist oriented sex shops, stating:

Sex-toy parties, then, can be a ‘safe space,’ particularly for women who are not ready for a traditional feminist consciousness- raising group.

Further, they can propel women into more conversations and practices, which themselves may reverberate into the many social settings in which women find themselves. Thus sex-toy parties have a radical potential of expanding women’s critical consciousness of sexual culture. (p. 89)

In spite of this, McCaughey and French (2001) cautioned that without sex toy parties founded on feminist principles, feminist rhetoric may be co-opted as a marketing strategy to encourage women to seek “empowerment in the push to get them to buy ever more plastic items, even while those items are not necessities and cause women to focus on their own individual lifestyles rather than their place in a sexist social order” (Clarke, as cited in McCaughey & French, 2001, pp. 81-82). McCaughey and French concluded:

Even while we are critical of the commodification of women's orgasms, and the way in which sex toys are sold to women without a real critique of heterosexist patriarchal sexuality, we must still acknowledge that women interpret the commodification all around them. Women's pleasure, and the orgasm project that sex toys enable and encourage, may not inevitably provide a large-scale cultural critique, due to their intimate nature, the stubbornly ingrained heterosexist dynamic, and the commodification of lifestyles that the orgasm project and sex-toy purchases are imbedded within, but they are a possible route to an increased sense of female entitlement and an expansion of narrowly heterosexist pleasures. (pp. 94-95)

Using an ethnographic approach and in-depth interviews with sex toy party guests, Debra Curtis (2004) examined commodity consumption, desire, and sexual practice within the home sex toy party. Her research called attention to the contradictory effects of the 'market' in this context; on one hand, hegemony can be reproduced through marketing scripts and the manufacturing of desire through symbolic associations to the sex toys and the sociality of home sex toy parties. On the other hand, Curtis (2004) emphasized that there is the possibility of liberation as sex toys inspire the production of new forms of sexuality for the participants. She explained, "The groups assembled at sex-toy parties, albeit in relation to larger economic and cultural conditions, manufacture desires that recognize and legitimate alternative repertoires of sexual acts promised by the commodities" (Curtis, 2004, p. 103). Here "[t]he link between imagination, consumption, and

sexual subjectivity is about the creation of new possibilities” (Curtis, 2004, p. 110). Curtis (2004) goes on to add that it is important to acknowledge the complexity of market forces in the sex-toy party context: “By arguing this, I am not conflating consumer choice with sexual freedom; I am merely asserting that when we stress the liabilities of consumer culture by focusing exclusively on the ways that pleasure is deferred and satisfaction is unattainable, we miss the moments that contradict this – moments when consumer satisfaction and even bliss is achieved” (p. 114).

Dawn Heinecken (2009) examined the promotional materials of home sex toy party companies and illuminated discourses of feminist empowerment and liberated resistance operating within the home sex toy party as both a sales tactic and as a means to attract a female workforce. Like researchers before her, she argued that the home sex toy party industry is “part of a recent, expanding effort to market and make fashionable women’s consumption of sexual commodities” (p. 23). As well, Heinecken (2009) illustrated discourses of empowerment, transformation and liberation used to describe the role of the in-home sex toy party facilitator. “A key identity offered to the potential distributor is that of expert educator. Distributors are expected to inform and advise their customers about the workings of their bodies, and told to teach them about sexual and relational health” (Heinecken, 2009, pp. 29-30). In light of the historical suppression of female sexuality and the politicization of sex education, home sex toy parties offer opportunities to advance feminist values by focusing on pleasure and education. However, as Heinecken (2009) argued,

[T]he ability of individual women to achieve better orgasms, feel more romantic with the husbands, or even be able to afford to send their kids to a better school does not mean that larger feminist goals have been achieved on a wide-scale social and cultural level. While these companies do bring attention to the important issue of women's access to knowledge about their bodies, as well as their right to sexual pleasure, such attention should not be accepted uncritically. The forms of sexual agency most often represented by NMOs [network marketing organizations] are extremely limited, contained within a (white) heterosexual framework that remains rigidly patriarchal and that does little to disrupt inequalities in existing sexual, family, social, or economic systems. (Heineken, 2009, pp. 39-40)

In addition to these debates exploring the tension between feminist values and consumer culture, home sex toy parties are also seen to influence and normalize particular conceptions of sexuality and sexual expression. Through participant observation of 17 home sex toy parties complemented by interviews with employees of two sex toy party companies, Baumann (1991) examined the ways in which sex toy party participants, both guests and the employee, negotiated respectability during the home sex toy party. Baumann observed that the techniques employed in the home sex toy party context do not necessarily comply with the domestic discourse dominant in other home parties, like the Tupperware Party, because issues of morality and respectability are more prominent. Baumann found that sales representatives employ a number of



strategies, such as humour, embarrassment, personal testimonials, privacy, and heterosexual bias, which serve to downplay serious interest in the products and reinforce socially acceptable forms of sexual expression. The party guests also help to construct notions of acceptability within this context: “Definitions of deviance and respectability are situationally specific, and their determination is a crucial activity at every gathering” (Baumann, 1991, p. 385). By explicit approval or disapproval of products and commentary, or simply by removing themselves from the conversation, party guests clearly communicate their ideas of socially acceptable sexual expression.

Merl Storr (2003) examined Anne Summers, a successful British home sex toy party company, in order to illustrate the power struggle over heterosexual femininity in this context. Over a period of five months, Storr engaged in overt participant-observations of sex toy parties, conducting semi-structured interviews with company employees. Through her research, Storr (2003) identified the Anne Summers home sex toy party as a heteronormative social site in which “the dominance of heterosexuality is maintained... and masculinity and femininity are differentially constructed such that the latter is subordinated to the former ” (p. 219-220). Storr described:

In that the different types of ‘games’ being played in Ann Summers, from power games to orgasm bingo, women can have a lot of fun. The problem is that they can have their fun only on the condition that they are willing and able to follow the rules – which, after all, is not a bad metaphor for women’s pleasure in heterosexuality more generally. Only when those

rules have been overturned will gender equality and sexual liberation have become anything more than a post-feminist fantasy. (Storr, 2003, p. 222)

### **Sex Toys under Siege: Stigma and Regulation in the Adult Retail Industry**

As the history of sexuality has demonstrated, private masturbation or sexual enhancement products were not historically criminalized, although at various points in history they were subject to sociocultural conditions that dictated proper moral conduct. However, as Herald (2004) explained,

The law historically not only treats women as second-class citizens, but also granted males dominion over female bodies and sexuality. For example, one might claim a fundamental right to one's own decisional and bodily autonomy in refusing sexual intercourse, even within a marriage. Yet the history and tradition of male ownership of the female body, as exemplified in the marital rape exemption, would rebuff this claim. (p. 13)

It is not surprising then that legal regulation has targeted and still targets sex toys.

The early twentieth-century association of the vibrator with pornography brought about its temporary demise. Yet, removing it from respectable roles and relegating it to seedy sex shops also sheltered it from explicit sanction. Ironically, the vibrator's late-twentieth-century revival, which brought it out from backrooms and basements and into national retailers and well-known boutiques, has hastened its prohibition. (Glover, 2010, p. 561)

Indeed from the 1980s to the present day, several U.S. States have legislated against the marketing, sale, and distribution of sex toys; in Canada,

regulation is limited to age restrictions for purchasing adult products. In some U.S. States, anti-vibrator legislation has been challenged, both successfully and unsuccessfully, as a result of charges laid under the obscenity statutes and individuals, both users and vendors, challenging the constitutionality of these laws. As of 2010, only three states, Alabama, Mississippi, and Virginia, had legislation criminalizing the sale of sexual devices, defined as objects designed primarily for the stimulation of human genitals, under the banner of anti-obscenity laws. Currently, there are no legal restrictions on personal vibrator use; however, all U.S. States and Canada have at least one restriction, namely that an individual must be eighteen or older to legally enter an adult retail store and purchase products. According to Lindemann (2006), an uncritical perspective on the utility of sex toys has created a “modern-day, legal emphasis on the vibrator’s use as a treatment for female sexual dysfunction and the contemporary court’s repeated attestations that the device’s worth lies in its therapeutic value bring us full-circle to an era when the device was legitimated only as a treatment” (p. 326).

In spite of legal regulation, adult retail companies located loopholes in order to sell their products, while at the same time gathered resources in order to combat anti-vibrator legislation. Linguistic loopholes were commonly used; for example, vibrators were often advertized as personal massagers. In Texas, sex toys were referred to ‘educational models’ and customers had to sign waivers indicating that their purchase was for educational purposes only in order to subvert anti-obscenity laws. Herald (2004) notes:

Texas, of course, is not the first state to be unduly concerned with its constituents' sexual expressions. Over the years, many states have devoted their limited prosecutorial resources to policing bedrooms for violations of laws forbidding fornication, adultery, and sex aids. Although many state legislatures have repealed such laws, some outlying states maintain fidelity to this type of sexual morality regulation. (p. 3)

Attempts to over-turn anti-vibrator legislation focused on crafting legal arguments to emphasize the vibrator's therapeutic value for women with female sexual dysfunction by positioning it as a medical tool. These arguments have successfully overturned anti-vibrator legislation in some States, including Louisiana and Kansas; however, the implication of these arguments is that the medical value of the vibrator supersedes recreational uses and the pursuit of pleasure. According to Herald (2004), "use of the terms 'dysfunction' and 'medical need' in litigation reinforces a view of female sexuality through a male-oriented lens" (p. 23). The argument of medical need is used because it is more likely to change laws steeped in sociocultural bias while not challenging female sexuality defined by heterosexual marriage. However, "by validating the vibrator as a remedy for the sexually dysfunctional, and de-emphasizing or outright denying the rights of sexually-healthy women to use the device, the courts succeed in both criminalizing and pathologizing female masturbation" (Lindemann, 2006, p. 327). Not only does anti-vibrator legislation and the uncritical defense strategies used to overturn these laws limit individual liberty, it

also reinforces traditional broader discourses of ‘normal’ sexual behaviour and response. Lindemann (2006) concludes:

The legally-validated insinuation that the vibrator cannot be legitimated by its ability to provide female orgasms is a blow to women’s sexual rights in this country. Unsurprisingly, various sexual aides designed predominantly for men, such as Playboy and Viagra, do not fall under the same codes. Indeed, since the majority of people who use dildos, vibrators, and other insertable sex toys are women, making them contraband is another institutionalized form of controlling female sexuality. (Lindemann, 2006, p. 337)

Despite attempts at legal regulation, the North American sex toy industry is a \$500 million per year industry (Biesanz, 2007). Yet “the North American Industry Classification System does not recognize sex toys – or any other part of the sex industry - as a category of retail” (Biesanz, 2007, pp. 205-206). Recent studies show that many sex toys contain highly toxic chemicals, which have been measured to be up to ten times more toxic than other toys, such as children’s toys and toys for pets. Despite this dangerous health risk, there is currently “no law regarding the composition of sex toys at the consumer level” (Biesanz, 2007, p. 206). Biesanz (2007) speaks to the need for government to regulate products so they are safer:

If consumers do not know about the risks involved in the products they purchase they cannot factor those risks into the decision whether to buy a product. They also cannot choose a safer alternative to a product if they do

not know that the product is dangerous. If the market system cannot protect consumers, the government should. (p. 220).

Due to health and safety concerns, it is important to bring this industry out of the shadows in order to set and enforce industry safety standards and lobby for consumer safeguards. Home sex toy parties offer an opportunity to begin to educate the public and bring issues like these to the fore. As Blackmore (2006) states, “As producers and consumers, women can make powerful claims on the market, both individually and collectively” (p. 224).

### **Sex(ist) Education and Profit**

*Commodities do not exist in and of themselves, but circulate as signs within systems of difference.*

**Baudrillard, as cited in Smith, 2007, p. 168**

Despite the potential for sexuality education within the context of the home sex toy party, there persists a tenuous relationship between education and profit. Currently, neoliberal forces have lead to the marketization of education. As “education is increasingly a servant of the economy” (Lauder et al., 2006, p. 56), individuals are encouraged to seek private interests leading to a “cultural construct that seeks to relocate problems from the social to the individual” (Lauder et al., 2006, p. 29). This discourse of individualization does little to advance social justice. “To supplant the state with the market is dangerous for women, as the market has never recognized merit or favoured women, and has no obligation to do so” (Blackmore, 2006, p. 214).

However, by recognizing that “the apparatus of sexuality lies at the heart of the workings of power in modernity” (Atkinson, 2006, p. 598), the for-profit

model of home sex toy parties may create a unique space for education that has not been supported by the state. This idea, however, should not be accepted uncritically.

The fact that facilitators have a vested interest in selling sexual products warrants further study. An interest in acquiring repeat customers or building a professional reputation may encourage facilitators to balance information about sexual enhancement products and whether or not they make a sale, in order to be truly helpful to customers. Having a business interest in customers' satisfaction may also prompt facilitators to follow-up with phone calls to ask how a product or suggestion has worked, which may result in more time, attention or follow up than is often provided by clinicians. Alternatively, the desire to sell products and make a profit may bias the types of information provided in response to customers' questions. (Herbenick, Reece & Hollub, 2009, p. 324).

In their study of sexuality education in adult retail stores, Herbenick and Reece (2006) offer encouragement:

[T]he mutual goals of profit and education did not have to be in conflict with one another. On the contrary, while profit and education may appear to be entirely different goals, consumer-employee interactions offer the potential for education and profit to co-exist, and even support one another. Given the business nature of the adult retail industry, realizing that education and profit not only could exist, but must co-exist, is crucial

should we proceed to develop interventions that would meet the needs of each entity. (p. 73)

Heinecken (2009) relates, “Especially in an era of abstinence-only education, the insistence on female pleasure and the educational mission promoted by adult novelty organizations actively advance a political and feminist agenda” (p. 23). As feminist-oriented adult retail stores like Toy Box (Loe, 1999), and feminist home sex toy party companies secure their place in the market, sexuality education for profit has the potential to reconceptualized. “The pro-sex [sex-positive] movement is sustained by places where feminist theory and practice have a dialectical relationship with the marketplace and that reach and introduce more and more people to sex-positive values everyday” (Loe, 1999, p. 728). This points to positive change for both the adult retail industry and for society at large. “The discourse surrounding sex toys must go beyond self-help, which may not happen until women at sex-toy parties and more conscientiously feminist dealers demand and/or offer products and rhetorics that destabilize the gender essentialism behind the phallocentric, heterosexist model of who’s going to have an orgasm, how and when” (McCaughey & French, 2001, p. 94). This suggests the need for sex-toy parties to have political and pedagogical elements that locate these parties as transgressive and transformative sites where participants learn language and perspectives that assist their sexual liberatory practices.



## InterText

### Confessions

*It always feels like a confessional. Not that I have ever been in one. I was baptized Catholic at age eleven when all of my friends had already received the sacrament that would lead them into the confessional. Thank God I never did.*

*Whether it is an explanation in a bar, a lecture hall or on the virtual airwaves, I always hesitate before answering questions about my thesis. I usually start slowly to soften the blow. "I...um...I study alternative places of sexuality education for adults." The recipient's eyebrow almost always arcs upwards at the mention of sex... and then the other brow shoots up, sky-high, when I end with 'adults'. That look of surprise and embarrassment - that I might be talking about them - always makes me smile a little.*

*Everyone has questions and curiosities when it comes to sex.*

*We usually dance around a little more, talking about sex education in schools... for kids... and the implications of silence. Because eventually kids become adults and then what? At this point, I will toss in the sex toy party angle. "You know, like a Tupperware party? But with sex toys!" I say. Sly smiles and pink cheeks give them away.*

*And when the embarrassment of knowing subsides, the questions inevitably turn to me. "How did you come up with this idea? What on earth made you want to research this?" And then I confess... "I facilitated sex toy parties for a few years on the side, just for fun, when I was teaching. And I always thought there was something there. Something I couldn't really put my finger on. And when I went back to grad school a professor told me: 'research what you know, and if you can, research what you love.' And I chose sex toy parties." Wait for it. Wait for it. Whew. That went over well. No Hail Mary's for me today.*

*Then - at first shockingly, now just amusingly - more confessions tumble out. "I've been to a sex toy party, it was really fun! I go to toy parties all the time, I love them! I own a vibe - a sleeve - or ten!" Sometimes sheepish, sometimes excited, but always with that burst of forced breath that drops the words on the floor, heavy as lead. "Awesome! Me too!" I reply with enthusiasm. No Hail Mary's for them today either.*

## Chapter 3

### Research Methodology and Methods Employed

The purpose of this research study was to determine if the adult retail industry and in particular, home sex toy party companies, are positioned to be responsive to the sexuality education experiences, interests, and needs of customers through home sex toy parties. Previous research has established that these popular parties are safe spaces in which participant-facilitator interactions provide informal sexual health and sexuality education. Further investigation is required to determine the nature of these interactions, contexts in which they are framed, their impact on participants' conceptions of sexuality, and their ability to break through restrictions placed on sex education within our current, medicalized model.

### Epistemology and Theoretical Framework

*My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.*

**Foucault, 1983, p. 231**

This research study is framed through a poststructural feminist epistemology. This study acknowledges "feminism is a highly contested term, as is poststructuralism, so it is impossible to produce a comfortable synthesis from those vertiginous locations" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 477). However, despite the contested nature of these theoretical frames, together poststructuralists and feminists "reject both the notion that knowledge is a product of the opposition of subjects and objects and that there is only one way in which knowledge can be constituted" (Hekman, 1990, p. 9). Additionally, "poststructuralism's interest in

language, and particularly in the constitution of language as discourse, resonates with feminist understandings of how language shapes women's lives" (Strega, 2005, p. 212). Thus, poststructural feminism seeks to "posit a model of an individual (subject) who is embroiled at all times in a maelstrom of 'regimes of truth' and who must negotiate her way through them continuously" (Pritchard Hughes, 1995, p. 221).

Unlike postmodernism, poststructural feminist thought extends further than deconstruction and critique of structures that shape lived experience; it is "founded on the notion of intervention and resistance and the desire to transform that which is oppressive" (Pritchard Hughes, 1995, p. 222). St. Pierre (2000) speaks to the utility of poststructural feminist discourse for educators interested in teaching to transgress and transform language, ways of knowing, and ways of acting in the world:

The feminist poststructural critique of epistemology is one of ongoing questioning, a skepticism about the relation of women to power, truth, and knowledge – a permanent political critique that has no end. This critique has been particularly useful for educators who work to produce different knowledge in different ways and to trouble what counts as truth. (p. 500)

Poststructural feminist analysis aims to uncover mechanisms that position women in relation to power and the ways in which women operate within and through power. In order to do this, poststructural feminist analysis focuses on the following key concepts: language, discourse, subjectivity, power, and knowledge.

According to Richardson and St. Pierre (2005), “poststructuralism links language, subjectivity, social organization, and power. The centerpiece is language” (p.961).

Guided by poststructural feminist theory, the following key assumptions guided this research study in order to frame women’s experiences of home sex toy parties, including my own, within the historical and contemporary culture of sexuality: 1) ‘Truth’ and objectivity are illusions; 2) power is “circulated and dispersed through society” (Strega, 2005, p. 225); 3) “[t]he individual ‘subject’ is not acted upon by power but is positioned in power” (Strega, 2005, p. 225); 4) knowledge is never distinguished or neutral, but both produced by and productive of power; 5) knowledge is socially constructed; 6) the world is “a series of stories or texts that sustain the integration of power and oppression” (Olesen, 2000, p. 225); 7) gender should be examined as an “organizing principle, which profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our daily lives to correct both the invisibility and distortion of the female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (Lather, 1991, p. 71); 8) “any individual woman’s politicized voice will be partial, multiple, and contradictory (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 312); and 9) researchers cannot be separated from research and “our positionalities as researchers must be noticed, questioned, and taken up” (Strega, 2005, p. 230). These assumptions were chosen to highlight the productive nature of power through language and discourse; the socially constructed and partial nature of knowledge; and the politicized voices of women in sexuality research.

### **Research Methodology**

*Writing is a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis.*

**Richardson, 2000, p. 923**

Broadly defined, “narrative is the way we remember the past, turn life into language, and disclose to ourselves and others the truth of our experiences” (Ellis, 2004, p. 126). According to Chase (2005), during the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, feminists critiqued the androcentric nature of the social sciences and social science research. At this time, “feminist challenges to conventional research relationships and research methods” (p. 655) started to redefine what counted as research, and women’s personal narratives became “essential primary documents for feminist research” (p. 654). As the postmodern shift took hold of the social sciences in the 1980s, narrative became an accepted within mainstream research. “The linguistic turn and the postmodern critique of interpretivism open up the concept of writing and enable us to use it as a method of inquiry, a condition of possibility for producing different knowledge and producing knowledge differently” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 969). This positioned narrative inquiry as significant because narrative “embodies – and gives us insight into – what is possible and intelligible within a specific social context” (Chase, 2005, p. 667).

Autoethnography is a burgeoning narrative research methodology in which the researcher studies him or herself in relation to others (i.e., research participants) and culture. Specifically, it is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno).” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 1). Autoethnography focuses on the research process and the

products of this process in order to position “research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 1).

Autoethnographic methodology emerged from traditional ethnography during the postmodern shift in social sciences research. Using poststructural and feminist perspectives, “scholars turned to autoethnography because they were seeking a positive response to critiques of canonical ideas about what research is and how research should be done. In particular, they wanted to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 2). The goal of autoethnographic research is to connect the personal to the social and cultural. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) relate, “Autoethnography expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research; this approach also helps us understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived to be, influence interpretations of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic” (p. 3).

Autoethnographic texts can be expressed through a variety of genres or literary conventions; however, they must “showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness. These features appear as relational and institutional stories affected by history and social structure, which themselves are dialectically revealed through actions, feelings, thoughts

and language” (Ellis, 2004, p. 38). “When researchers write autoethnographies, they seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 5). In this way, autoethnography blurs the boundaries between science and art, academic writing and fiction, in order to challenge what counts as knowledge.

This research study employed reflexive/narrative autoethnography, a sub-genre of autoethnography that “focuses on a culture or subculture and authors use their life story in that culture to look more deeply at self-other interactions” (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). In this style of autoethnography, “the ethnographers’ experiences are incorporated into the ethnographic description and analysis of others... They use the ‘self’ to learn about the other, and they use their experiences in other worlds to reflect critically on their own” (Ellis, 2004, p. 48). In this reflexive/narrative autoethnographic research study, I examined the research participants and myself in relation to the culture and context of home sex toy parties through bioethnographies and autoethnographic notes.

### **Research Ethics**

Given the personal, and perhaps sensitive, nature of studying sexuality, education and home sex toy parties, three dimensions of ethics were identified and addressed in this research study: procedural, situational, and relational ethics. As delineated by Guillemin and Gillam (2004), procedural ethics are the traditional research ethics outlined by institutional research ethics boards, and situational ethics refer to spontaneous, ethically important instances during data collection. Ellis (2007) delineated a third ethical dimension, relational ethics, to address

researchers personal connections to their research and to respect notions of voice, authority, and representation. Ellis (2007) states, “Relational ethics recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and communities in which they live and work” (p. 4).

In this study, all three ethical dimensions were addressed in the formal ethics approval process. Procedural ethics were attended to by engaging with the University Research Ethics Board prior to conducting the research. In my application for ethics approval, I outlined a variety of procedures related to informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and protection from harm. Based on these parameters, the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board 1 approved this research study.

In order to participate in this research study, informed consent was required from all participants. Participants were provided with an information letter, previously approved by the University Research Ethics Board. This letter outlined the following: 1) rationale and description of the research project; 2) parameters of participation; 3) procedures to maintain confidentiality; 4) procedures to maintain data security during data collection and storage; 5) procedures and timeline to withdraw from the study; and 6) contact information for my supervisor, the research ethics board, and myself. After reading the information sheet participants signaled their willingness to participate in this study by signing a consent form. All participants who agreed to participate were



provided with a copy of the information letter and I retained the signed consent form. Any participant who did not agree to participate was thanked for their time.

A number of steps were also taken to address confidentiality and privacy issues. First, participants had the option of being identified in the research study using their first name or a pseudonym. Second, the transcriptionist hired for this research study was required to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to receiving the audio-recorded interviews. Third, identifying personal information was removed from the written transcripts and the transcripts were labeled with the participant's chosen moniker. Fourth, participants had the opportunity to review and edit the interview transcripts. During this process, participants were able to add, qualify, or delete information in the interview transcript. Fifth, during the research study, and for five years thereafter, data is stored in the form of password protected electronic files or as paper files contained in a locked cabinet. At the earliest opportunity, identifiers were destroyed.

Situational ethics were also addressed in the application for research ethics approval. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic (i.e., sex toy party experiences and other sexuality-related topics), I anticipated the possibility of discomfort during the interviews and a number of steps were taken to address this. First, during the informed consent process, participants were made aware of their right to refrain from answering any question, for any reason, without fear of value judgment or evaluation. Second, during the informed consent process, participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study, for any reason, until member checking of their transcript was completed. Third, I was prepared to

discuss situations of discomfort with participants during the interview and to provide participants with appropriate resources for assistance from a pre-prepared list. Fourth, participants had the opportunity to review and edit the interview transcripts; during this process, participants were able to add, qualify, or delete information in the interview transcript.

Relational ethics were also addressed in the application for research ethics approval. As a former employee of The Traveling Tickle Trunk, according to Adler and Adler (1987), I am a ‘complete-member researcher,’ which meant that it was necessary to acknowledge my evolving relationship to the company and to the study participants as part of the informed consent process, the research process and in my writing. Relational ethics required acknowledgement of “intimate others” (Ellis, 2007) (i.e., partners, parents, etc.), who become identifiable figures in autoethnographic research. It is important to include these individuals in ethical considerations of privacy and consent, alongside formal study participants. As a means of negotiating the role of ‘intimate others’ in my autoethnographic notes, I used pseudonyms wherever possible. In instances in which a pseudonym did not protect the privacy of ‘intimate others,’ I shared my writing with that individual in order to obtain their feedback and their consent to include them in my writing.

### **The Research Process**

**Recruitment of the Research Site.** As a former employee of The Traveling Tickle Trunk, I had a number of informal conversations with Brenda Kerber, the owner, about this research study at various stages of conceptualization and development. The Traveling Tickle Trunk expressed interest in participating

as the research site on a number of occasions. After receiving research ethics approval, I formally approached The Traveling Tickle Trunk to request their participation. I provided Brenda with an information letter, previously approved by the University Research Ethics Board, which outlined the following: 1) rationale for and description of the research project; 2) parameters of participation; 3) procedures to maintain confidentiality; 4) procedures to maintain data security during data collection and storage; 5) procedures and timeline to withdraw from the study; and 6) contact information for my supervisor, the research ethics board, and myself. After reading the information sheet, Brenda signaled The Traveling Tickle Trunk's willingness to participate in this study by signing the consent form. I provided her with a copy of the information letter for her records and I retained the signed consent form.

**Recruitment of Research Participants.** Using social media, I prospectively sampled Traveling Tickle Trunk customers in order to recruit female participants who had attended at least one Traveling Tickle Trunk home sex toy party. On two occasions I placed recruitment advertisements in the Traveling Tickle Trunk bi-weekly electronic newsletter and on The Traveling Tickle Trunk Facebook page. I also placed the recruitment ads on my own personal Facebook page and Twitter-feed and 'tagged' The Traveling Tickle Trunk. This process shared my advertisements with my personal network and The Traveling Tickle Trunk network. Appendix A contains screenshots of two recruitment advertisements.

In the advertisements, I outlined the basic participation criteria (i.e., females who had attended at least one Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy party) and requested that interested individuals contact me via email. Once interested individuals contacted me, I requested a short, written description about each individual with the intention of selecting participants with diverse positionalities across a range of ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, educational and employment backgrounds, and exposure to sex toy parties. My goal was to represent diverse female home sex toy party hosts and/or guests. All of the individuals who responded to my advertisements and provided a written description were contacted to schedule an interview. Some of the participants I knew prior to this research study, either as the party facilitator who had conducted their home sex toy party, as a friend, or as a family member; other participants I met for the first time through this research study.

The informed consent process took place during a face-to-face meeting prior to the interview. Participants read the information letter and signaled their willingness to participate by signing the consent form. I provided participants with a copy of the information letter for their records and I retained the signed consent form.

**Data Collection.** Since multiple qualitative methods help in comparing and authenticating data, I collected data from participants through reflexive, dyadic interviews and created bioethnographic accounts of their home sex toy party experiences; I also created personal autoethnographic notes in the form of InterTexts and layered text to create a reflexive/narrative autoethnography. These

data collection methods were chosen to illustrate “how we word the world into existence and then reword the world,” though it is “never complete, accurate, or precise” (Richardson, 2000, p. 923). Additionally, this combination of data collection methods foreground the notion that “no textual staging is ever innocent” (Richardson, 2000, p. 925).

In reflexive, dyadic interviews the “interviewer tries to tune in to the interactively produced meanings and emotional dynamics within the interview itself” (Ellis, 2004, p. 61-62). This style of interviewing is intended to be one-on-one and conversational in nature. It includes the stories, thoughts, and reflections of both the researcher and the participant; however, “the researcher’s story isn’t the focal point; instead, it enhances understanding of the topic. Including the subjective and emotional reflections of the researcher adds context and layers to the story being told about the participants” (Ellis, 2004, p. 62).

In order to prepare for this style of interviewing, I brainstormed interview topics and potential questions related to those topics. I did not use an interview guide and questions were not asked in the same language or order across interviews. Appendix B contains the interview topics and question web. The reflexive, dyadic interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim transcripts were produced. Each transcript was given to the participant to read and review; during this process, participants were able to add, qualify, or delete information in the interview transcript. Participants returned the transcripts and the edited versions were used in data analysis.

In order to incorporate my positionality in the context of my research, I recorded autoethnographic notes throughout the research process.

Autoethnographic notes differ from traditional ethnographic field notes; rather than attempt to capture facts, they are written to portray the meaning of experience. Thoughts, feelings, sensory experiences, and relationships are the focus of autoethnographic notes and this type of documentation is understood to be non-linear, retrospective and situated in order to challenge notions of objectivity and “illuminate the partial and perspectival nature of knowledges and the texts that we as researchers create” (Lincoln as cited in Kimpson, 2005, p.75). My autoethnographic notes, in the form of InterTexts and layered texts, were written on a variety of topics including my own life experiences, my thoughts, feelings, and experiences throughout the research process, and my interactions with the participants of this study.

**Data Analysis.** The combined data was analyzed through a poststructural feminist framework. I developed individual bioethnographies for each participant based on the transcripts of the reflexive, dyadic interviews, which were edited and approved by the participants, in order to explore, illustrate, and analyze their unique voices, multiple identities and the “fluid conceptions of women’s experiences, places, and spaces” (Olesen, 2005, p. 247). In order to construct the bioethnographies, I read each participant approved transcript as follow up to listening to each recorded interview numerous times. In addition to reading and listening, I made notes to identify commonalities and differences within and among interviews and selected pithy, resonating quotes and phrases. From these

elements I constructed a meaningful, cohesive narrative that represented the thoughts, ideas, and unique voice of each participant; however, the resulting bioethnographies were abstracted from the exact words of each participant and organized to convey meaning and context as they were shared in the interviews and (re)interpreted by me, the researcher, through narrative in order to represent the multiple, complex, and contradictory voices of diverse women who attend Traveling Tickle Trunk home sex toy parties.

I conducted this analysis in order to examine participants' subjectivity in relation to broader discourses. "Hegemonic or dominant discourses and subjugated or illegitimate discourses are produced by processes such as the sanctioning, including, excluding, valuing, and devaluing of certain concepts, ideas, language, and words" (Strega, 2009, p. 219). Additionally, "the gaps, silences, and ambiguities of discourses provide the possibility for resistance, for a questioning of the dominant discourse, its revision and mutation" (Hekmen, 1990, p. 189). By examining the ways in which participants were positioned in relation to power and knowledge and how these forces operated within the context of the home sex toy party, opportunities for agency were also explored. As Davies (1991) relates, "Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of self, but the capacity to recognize that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is constituted" (p. 51).

My autoethnographic notes were used to position myself, as the researcher and as a 'subject,' in relation to a variety of discourses and networks of power/knowledge, and to illustrate how these networks operate in multiple and

contradictory ways. By sharing my own narrative, I could examine the intersubjectivity between the participants and me. The juxtaposition of multiple voices also served to illustrate reflexivity, tension, and multiple realities. In this process “[d]ifference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening” (Lorde, 1984, p. 112).

**Crystalizing Data.** The ‘validity’ of the research data was framed in terms of Laurel Richardson’s (2005) concept of ‘crystallization’ for postmodern texts. This notion deconstructs traditional concepts of validity by reflecting multiple truths. “Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963).

In order to crystallize the data gathered for this research study, I conducted member checks by providing the participants with their interview transcript. Participants were able to add, qualify, or delete information in the interview transcript. Participants return the edited transcript and data analysis was conducted using this version. This process was intended to capture the unique and authentic voice of each participant. Additionally, I wrote autoethnographic notes throughout the research process: during participant recruitment; before, during, and after each interview; as I was analyzing data; as I was writing; and even as I was thinking and dreaming. These texts, in addition to autoethnographic notes about my life experiences outside of this research study, were intended to reflect



multiple truths and realities, tensions, collaboration, connection, disconnection, and diversity. In short, this process of data collection and crystallization was intended to illustrate that “what we see depends on our angle of repose” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963).

## InterText

### *Teaching Pleasure*

***Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom.***

**hooks, 1994, p. 11**

*In my exploration of poststructural feminist theory, my supervisor recommended that I read bell hooks. Through *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks, 1994) I came to see myself, in both my teaching and my research, as a 'cultural worker' attempting new pedagogical strategies to foster critical thought.*

*When I enter a home for a sex toy party, that space becomes a 'classroom' of sorts. Not in the traditional, didactic sense, but the living room becomes a space of performativity in which the positionality of each participant and the combinations of people and positionalities brings forth something new and meaningful for all.*

*Hooks (1994) relates, "Neither Freire's work [critical pedagogy] nor feminist pedagogy examined the notion of pleasure in the classroom" (p. 7). Secretly, I often struggle to represent pleasure, both during the sex toy parties and in my research of these parties. I struggle to truly give it the weight it deserves. Pleasure is so easily subsumed by biology, mechanics and health; it is difficult to legitimize a sex toy, a sexual interest or act, or even a discussion of sexuality, simply for reasons of pleasure. We all avoid looking pleasure in the eye.*

*This conditioning around sexual pleasure and around learning about sexuality is part of my motivation to do this work, in this way. As hooks (1994) describes, one of the main tenets of critical feminist pedagogy is to subvert the mind/body split so that we can all be whole in the classroom. If we want to reconceptualize sexuality in our society, we must find spaces to legitimize the primal, the visceral, and the shared human need for pleasurable touch. Classrooms emerging in informal and non-traditional contexts are important spaces to fill this void. As hooks envisions, "The classroom with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labour for freedom" (p. 207).*

## Chapter 4

### Situating the Research

#### **Research Locale: Edmonton, Alberta, Canada**

Edmonton is the capital city of the Province of Alberta, located in Western Canada. It is the second largest city in the province and the fifth largest city in Canada with a population of approximately one million people. Edmonton is referred to as the ‘Gateway to the North’ because it is the northernmost major city in North America and it provides access to northern communities in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. Due to its northern latitude, the Edmonton region experiences climatic extremes, with long, cold winters and short, sunny summers.

Economically, Edmonton is the major hub for oil sands and gas projects in northern Alberta and diamond mining projects in the Northwest Territories. Education, research, and technology also contribute to the diverse Edmonton economy. Edmonton has a thriving arts and culture scene. It is often referred to as ‘The Festival City,’ with over 80 festivals taking place throughout the year. Politically, Edmonton is a liberal pocket in an otherwise conservative province. In the 2012 provincial election, Edmonton elected six of nine left-of-centre candidates, while right-of-centre candidates won the remaining 78 seats in the Provincial Legislature (National Post, 2012).

Approximately nine home sex toy parties operate in the Edmonton area. These organizations vary in size and scope from large international companies, such as Passion Parties, to Canada-wide companies, such as Fantasia, Trinity

Romance, Hanky Panky, Pleasure Point Toys, and Party Gals, to local, Edmonton-based companies, such as The Traveling Tickle Trunk, Intimate Parties, and Secret Pleasures. After visiting their websites, it appears that the majority of these home sex toy party companies are based on an independent sales consultant model; however, very little information is provided online about the process of becoming a home sex toy party facilitator for these companies.

### **Research Site: The Traveling Tickle Trunk**

In 2000, Brenda Kerber, founder and owner of The Traveling Tickle Trunk, started working as a consultant for a now defunct home sex toy party company in Edmonton. As a Registered Social Worker, Brenda was also employed with local, non-profit organizations in the field of sexual health and she was interested in selling sex toys as an extension of her professional experience and interests. The company that employed Brenda to facilitate home sex toy parties marketed their consultants as ‘sex educators,’ which resonated with Brenda; she was also interested in learning more about sex toys and having fun while facilitating these parties.

This job was Brenda’s first experience in sales and direct marketing. “I learned a ton from them and there were some positive aspects, but there were two very negative aspects that caused me to decide to leave” (personal communication, 23 March 2012). Brenda’s first concern was the poor quality of the products that the company was selling. Understanding what the toys were made of and how they were made was not a priority within the company. Her second concern was that the company structure mislead and manipulated the party

facilitators. The company used incentives, like free trips and other prizes, to encourage product sales and to recruit new facilitators, but sales commissions were very low.

After leaving this company, Brenda made inquiries to other home sex toy party companies because she really enjoyed selling toys. However, “all I could see was the same products and the same structure. I wanted more control, mostly over product selection” (personal communication, 23 March 2012). Brenda had learned about product manufacturing from her first experience as a home sex toy party facilitator and she started making contacts with suppliers with the intention of starting her own business. “I never actually intended to start a big company or even do it full-time, I just wanted to sell toys” (personal communication, 23 March 2012).

As a result of her research and contacts, Brenda opened The Traveling Tickle Trunk in February 2003. The company, operated out of Brenda’s home, started out by conducting home sex toy parties. After approximately three years, Brenda began to think about expanding her company by hiring staff. Originally, she planned to operate the same way as other party companies; however, she quickly realized that this would be difficult. Brenda wanted to hire staff that were students and/or professionals (e.g., teachers, social workers, etc.), but she also knew that it required thousands of dollars to purchase a ‘party kit’ with enough products for people to take home their purchases after the party. Brenda recognized that in order to conduct the kind of party she envisioned with the kind of staff she envisioned, she would have to remove any financial burden and

provide a good commission on product sales. Additionally, Brenda wanted to build a company that focused on product knowledge. Under the industry-standard, independent consultant model, the parent company has no contact with the customer – all business is conducted through the consultant. This model would give Brenda and The Traveling Tickle Trunk very little control over how parties were conducted, what information was being provided to customers, and if this was consistent with The Traveling Tickle Trunk's mission and values. Brenda did not want her business reputation, which she had built up over the previous three years, damaged by inconsistent messaging or misinformation and she wanted to provide more training and support than what she had experienced as an home sex toy party consultant.

With this in mind, Brenda set out to adopt a different model for her home sex toy party company. The Traveling Tickle Trunk hired facilitators to conduct parties much like any other job. Interested individuals would submit resumes and if their experience and interests fit with the company, Brenda would interview them. After a successful interview, there would be a mandatory training process that involved learning about the company, products and customer service, as well as practice facilitating parties, while Brenda observed. "I will only hire people who demonstrate to me that they are serious, responsible, and professional.... More times than not, it falls apart before we get to the end of the training process" (personal communication, 23 March 2012).

Under this new model, The Traveling Tickle Trunk is the epicenter of all company activity. In addition to training facilitators, the company is responsible

for marketing the parties, booking parties, assigning parties based on staff schedules and availability, maintaining product stock, preparing, providing, and re-stocking the party kits, and dealing with any customer problems or concerns. This structure means that the facilitator does not pay for expenses other than transportation, they are paid a consistent commission, and they do not compete with each other for business. In order to foster a strong team, there are no competitions or giveaways; instead, there are regular team training sessions and fair processes for allocating parties.

This model has been very successful for The Traveling Tickle Trunk. In 2006, the company expanded to include Internet sales and in February 2009, The Traveling Tickle Trunk opened a retail store. The company currently employs two full-time staff (including the owner), one part-time staff, and four party facilitators who are employed on a casual basis to facilitate parties and run events. In addition to product sales, The Traveling Tickle Trunk offers workshops, guest speakers, and other resources through their website, blog, Facebook page and Twitter-feed. The company also supports a number of local causes including The Edmonton Pride Festival and the HIV/AIDS Walk for Life. The Traveling Tickle Trunk currently has a 5-star rating and is considered ‘Best of Yelp’ in the Adult category on [www.yelp.ca](http://www.yelp.ca), a worldwide, online database intended to connect people to local businesses in their city. Additionally, in May 2011 the readers of a local, weekly paper, *See Magazine*, voted The Traveling Tickle Trunk the ‘Best Sex Shop in Edmonton.’

**Research Context: The Traveling Tickle Trunk Home Sex Toy Party**

The home sex toy parties are booked and arranged by The Traveling Tickle Trunk store staff. Individuals interested in hosting a party may contact The Traveling Tickle Trunk through the website, via email, over the telephone, or in person. The parties are free to host, but there are a few rules: 1) Party attendees must be over eighteen years of age (no children unless they are infants); and 2) the minimum number of guests is seven (including the host) and the maximum suggested number is 20 people. Hosts receive incentives for having a party; for example, they receive a percentage of the party sales towards their own purchase and a lifetime discount.

The Traveling Tickle Trunk has processes for allocating parties to the party facilitators. Once they are assigned a party, the party facilitator is provided with basic information about the party and the party host. The facilitator contacts the host to confirm the date and time and ask for any additional information. The Traveling Tickle Trunk also provides a 'party kit' containing order forms, an iPad, debit/credit machine, demonstration products, and products for purchase.

At the time of the party, the facilitator arrives in their Traveling Tickle Trunk 'uniform' – a bright pink or green t-shirt with the Traveling Tickle Trunk logo. After the facilitator brings the party kit inside, the first step is to set up the demonstration area, usually in the living room or kitchen. The next step is to locate and set up a separate ordering space, usually in a bedroom, home office, or basement. Usually, the facilitator also takes some time to mingle with the party guests before starting the party.



When the guests have arrived, the party begins with introductions and an icebreaker game. First, the facilitator introduces him or herself, The Traveling Tickle Trunk, and how he or she became involved in facilitating home sex toy parties. Next, the party guests go around the room introducing themselves through an icebreaker game. This typically livens up the crowd by getting them talking to each other and laughing. To maintain this festive atmosphere, questions, comments, and dialogue are encouraged throughout the entire presentation and guests are always free to move around and to have food and refreshments.

The presentation portion of the sex toy party is divided into two sections. During the first section, the facilitator shows, talks about, and passes around products, such as candles, lotions, oils, games, and books. There is a break between sections so that guests can look at the products that piqued their interest, talk to each other and the facilitator about something they have seen and/or heard, and replenish their snacks and refreshments. During the second section the facilitator provides information about the materials and substances contained in lubricants and sex toys. Then, the lubricants and sex toys are shown, discussed, and passed around. All products are open for guests to touch, smell, and taste; the toys have working batteries so that guests can see how they work and feel the vibration.

At the end of the presentation, the facilitator transitions to the separate ordering space. Each guest has the opportunity to enter the ordering space, either alone or with others, to ask questions, look at products, and/or purchase products. The host enters the ordering room last so that their incentives can be tallied and

applied to their purchase. Party guests pay for their products at the party and take their purchase home that night, unless certain items are popular with the group and sell out. In that case, products will be set aside for store pick-up or delivered in labeled bags to the party host. Once all guests have had an opportunity to visit the ordering space, the facilitator packs up the party kit and leaves the guests to continue to party.

Usually, the facilitator returns the party kit to The Traveling Tickle Trunk directly after the party. It is the company's role to manage the finances, keep track of the orders, and re-stock the party kits. The facilitator is paid commission based on total party sales.

**Researcher: Lauren Albrecht**

I began working with The Traveling Tickle Trunk as a home sex toy party facilitator in January 2007. At the time I was twenty-three years old and I was a busy woman. I had a boyfriend, I was living alone in a rental apartment downtown, and I was working two jobs. I graduated from University with a Bachelor of Education degree in 2005; however, full-time teaching positions were scarce and I was not interested in working as a teacher in the school system after my experiences as a student teacher. I had been under-employed since graduation, working part-time or contract positions as a Recreation Instructor, an English-as-a-Second-Language Instructor, and an Employment Counselor. I was searching for my passion, for a good career, and also looking for a fun way to make some extra money in the evenings or on weekends.

The previous summer I had attended a sex toy party at a friend's house and it was a great experience. The environment and the conversations were fun, exciting, and challenging and after that night, I felt like I would enjoy facilitating home sex toy parties. I hoped that my outgoing and perky personality, in addition to my public speaking and teaching experience, would make me an excellent candidate for this position.

I began to pursue this option by looking into the home sex toy party industry in Edmonton. I talked to friends who had hosted parties, I searched online, and I also pulled out a dusty binder of notes from the Human Sexuality course I had taken at the University of Alberta in 2003. In that course, we had a presentation from a sex toy retailer and it was one of my favorite classes. It was the first time I had ever seen a sex toy and I remember it vividly. Throughout this research process, the same company kept popping up, so I contacted Brenda at The Traveling Tickle Trunk to see if she was hiring.

After a few email exchanges, we met at a coffee shop on Whyte Avenue. I remember being nervous because I didn't really know what to expect. Would it be like any other job interview? Of course it was and it wasn't all at the same time. I dressed professionally, I brought my resume, I did some research beforehand, but we also talked about intimate and sexual matters frankly and without embarrassment. After this meeting, I was brought into the fold, but I definitely wasn't 'hired' yet. In order to be an official party facilitator with The Traveling Tickle Trunk, I attended a two-day training session, observed two parties, and conducted a 'practice party' with my friends as Brenda supervised. I was thankful

for the training and the practice because the idea of presenting a party in front of a room full of strangers – in their house – both frightened and excited me. But as I presented more parties I improved in skill and confidence - although I will fully admit that math was never my strong suit and over the years there was the occasional accounting error.

I presented parties for The Traveling Tickle Trunk for nearly four years. During this time I presented approximately 100 parties all over Edmonton and the surrounding area. I ventured into neighbourhoods I had never been to before and met people from all walks of life. During this period of work with The Traveling Tickle Trunk, I took a break to travel for nine months and I slowed down my party presentation schedule significantly when I started graduate school. I stopped doing the parties when I bought a house in the suburbs and balancing work and graduate school became more difficult; however, I always remained connected to The Traveling Tickle Trunk by helping at events, like the Pride Festival and participating in Tickle Trunk teams, like in the HIV/AIDS Walk for Life team. I also continued to attend training sessions, and most recently I presented some of my research to The Traveling Tickle Trunk staff.

To say I am connected to The Traveling Tickle Trunk would be an understatement. I am invested in the continued growth and success of this company. I believe in their mission and their business model and I hope my research can contribute to their knowledge and their understanding about their home sex toy party business, their customers, and the interesting dynamics that occur between the two. I believe that critique is important to learning and growth;

thus, I do not shy away from asking tough questions or exploring negative experiences. I believe that The Tickle Trunk is interested in the diverse perspectives of their customers and as such I intended to hear their voices and share their stories, as well as my own, in an honest, respectful, perspectival, partial, and situated fashion.

## InterText

### **Men Need Sex Toys Too**

*As I was coming home on the bus tonight, I had the distinct pleasure of tuning into the weekly Savage Love podcast. Mr. Savage's opening 'rant' this week was all about the sex toy double standard and by this he was referring to the phenomenon of female sex toy use being defined as adventurous and cool (think: Sex and the City), while male sex toy use is often seen as pathetic and desperate (think: What is wrong with this guy!? Can't he find someone to have sex with him?). I, for one, would like to say 'Here! Here!' to Dan for bringing this conversation to the fore, so that we can quash this annoying double standard once and for all, right here, right now.*

*Having worked as an home sex toy party facilitator for four or so years, I can tell you firsthand that this is truly the impression of male sex toy use. I often hear toy party guests saying "guys don't NEED sex toys" and to tell you the truth, I want to march my husband right into their living room so that he can extoll the virtues of sex toys and blow their minds. But instead I smile and work in a funny little anecdote about my good ol' hubby, who worked in the oil and gas industry, and one day sold a 'sleeve' (Google it!) to an overworked, under-rested co-worker going through a bad break-up. This story usually creates a few nervous laughs and sideways glances. But then I tell them how once word got out around his jobsite, this one sleeve snowballed into a cottage industry of sleeve-lube combo packs being sold out of the back of our Subaru station wagon. Then the smiles break out, the laughs become heartier and they promptly buy one for their partner.*

*I've been researching and writing about the educational value of home sex toy parties for two years now and I have not yet come across any literature that talks about men attending these parties - in fact, many party companies do not even allow men to attend and in some States having men present is actually illegal! I think, at best, this is really unfortunate and shortsighted (simple economics really), and at worst, it is damaging, silencing, and reproducing harmful notions of acceptable sexual expression.*

*While I love getting together with a group of women who want to talk about sex (and sex toys) and partaking in some consciousness-raising, I truly feel that there is great value in bringing men into these conversations. I rarely have the pleasure of conducting these parties with men in the room, but when I do, I find that the conversation digs deeper at all sorts of issues, whether it be a great anatomy conversation or a whole unpacking session of gender norms and stereotypes. We simply cannot address questions of sexuality that ultimately point to greater social issues as effectively with only one gender in the room.*

*So essentially I am saying that men need to join in on The Great Sex Toy Conversation. And in order to do so, they need to be given the freedom to attend, to talk, to experiment. And if you want me to do a party for you just to get the ball rolling, let me know - but I promise, once you go there, there is no going back... And I am really excited about that.*

## **Chapter 5**

### **Research Findings**

#### **Participants**

Twelve women responded to my recruitment advertisements. Of these women, nine women provided a short biography, successfully arranged an interview time, and provided informed consent; these women became research participants. Together, these participants represented a diverse group of home sex toy party guests; however, I was unsuccessful in recruiting older women as well as women from a range of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

The nine participants included in this study were Caucasian women. They ranged in age from twenty to thirty-five years old; the mean age of the participants was twenty-nine years. Participants identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual, bisexual and queer. Most participants were in long-term, monogamous relationships; however, two participants were in polyamorous relationships of varying lengths, and one participant was single. The majority of participants identified as 'not religious;' however, some indicated that they were 'spiritual' and another identified as Wiccan. The majority of participants were university educated and three were working towards or had completed a graduate degree. The participants were employed in diverse sectors including retail, childcare, counseling, and healthcare; three of the participants were full-time students.

The participants' exposure to Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy parties ranged from attending one party to attending approximately fourteen parties, with



the mean number of parties attended being three. Approximately two-thirds of the parties discussed in the interviews were women-only events and one-third were co-ed parties. Brenda, the owner of The Traveling Tickle Trunk, and myself, facilitated most of the parties discussed; however, other Tickle Trunk staff facilitated some of the parties as well.

### **Home Sex Toy Party Narratives**

The following nine narratives were constructed from the reflexive, dyadic interviews with each participant. The participants' narratives are written on the left side of the page. Autoethnographic notes are inserted in between participant narratives or layered beside the narratives on the right side of the page.

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#### *Autoethnographic notes*

#### ***Interviews are like Sex Toy Parties***

*"Hi! I'm Lauren." I always start that way.*

*Interviews are nerve-wracking. No matter how prepared I am I always feel like a fraud. Like I just put on one of my mother's suits to play make believe. I check and re-check my notes, my recorder, my makeup, my hair. Wanting to make a good impression. Wanting to be professional, yet approachable, knowledgeable, but not prescriptive. I am always early. Excited to meet someone new, have a new conversation, but nervous about the uncertainty of how things will play out. Will they be nice? Will they be interested? Will they talk openly? I use my short stature, baby-face, and perky nature to my advantage – hoping to destabilize ideas of 'the expert' and the formality of 'the interview.' I take a deep breath, double check the time, and look around the room...*

*Parties are nerve-wracking. No matter how prepared I am I always feel like a fraud. Like I just put on one of my mother's suits to play make believe. I check and re-check the address, the party kit, my makeup, my hair. Wanting to make a good impression. Wanting to be professional, yet approachable, knowledgeable, but not prescriptive. I am always early. Excited to go somewhere new, talk to a different crowd, but nervous about the uncertainty of how things will play out. Will they be nice? Will they be interested? Will they buy toys? I use my short stature, baby-face, and perky nature to my advantage – hoping to destabilize ideas of 'the expert' and the formality of 'the presentation.' I take a deep breath, double-check the address, and ring the doorbell...*

*"Hi! I'm Lauren." I always start that way.*

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### Rachel's Story

As a Floor Coordinator in my university residence, I had the coolest job. We did so many awesome things that year, but the sex toy party we had at the end of the year, to mark the end of sexual health promotion month, really stands out for me. The year before, my role on the floor was to hand out condoms and lubricants and after that I really felt a responsibility to connect students to resources that they may not have had at home. For the most part, the other residents perceived sexual health to be as important as physical health or mental health, so hosting a sex toy party on our floor was an easy sell.

I had heard about The Traveling Tickle Trunk through friends. They said it was a great company and I knew that they had a reputation for being professional and inclusive. We needed a gay-friendly company because there were gay residents on our floor and it was important that everyone could come to the party and have fun.

About 30 people came to the sex toy party; two-thirds of the guests were female and the other third were male. We were a very close floor. We were really comfortable with each other and there was an atmosphere of openness, which was great. Thinking back on it, I remember some of the residents who came from rural Alberta buying 'the rabbit' and I remember a bunch of us trying out the nipple nibbler in the bathroom. It was awesome that everyone felt so comfortable. I remember that lube was a particularly hot topic. The basket of 'bad' toys got people excited about lubricants because no one knew that it was bad to use a silicone lubricant with a silicone toy and it would just get all gummy and gross. It was great idea to show us what would actually happen to your toys by bringing the 'bad toy' box.

Generally, I think everybody has curiosities about sex, especially people who didn't have much sex education when they are growing up. Things like, "Where is the g-spot?" or "I can't orgasm through intercourse, is there something wrong with me?"

### Autoethnographic notes

*A tall, steaming cup of tea sat in between us; a perfect foil to a bitingly cold and grey January day. This type of day is in total contrast to her personality – warm, approachable, wide-eyed and honest. This was my first interview and I was nervous.*

*Already, my access card failed to work on the elevator, so we could not go up to my office, where we had planned to have the interview.*

*Sigh, "okay, time for plan B," I thought to myself, and we sought*

Everybody has these insecurities and they just want to know “Is this normal? Am I normal?” I remember that the party facilitator did a lot of education around the g-spot and toys that were good for the g-spot. When she talked about the bullet, I remember she said that most women can’t orgasm through intercourse alone and it automatically opened a door to ask more questions about that. She really normalized that different people need different things.

I definitely think our co-ed party was different than other co-ed parties. We worked hard all year to create an inclusive environment. It was not acceptable to put people down for their sexual orientation or for their form of sexual expression. Saying “that’s gay” was not tolerated. But because we had done this groundwork, the guys at the party were so into it. They asked so many questions about pleasure and sexual concerns. It was so neat that the open environment that we worked hard to create really encouraged this excitement and I was so surprised how mature and respectful everyone was about the comments and questions. There were no jokes or teasing.

It really surprised me that The Traveling Tickle Trunk delivered what they said they would. The facilitator was not uncomfortable and awkward, which put everyone at ease. She was very open, which encouraged openness from us. She encouraged, and respectfully answered, questions. It didn’t feel like a dirty, shameful sex toy party; it was actually educational, which gave the information more weight and we took it seriously.

There were tons of things that I learned in the party. Aside from the whole issue of using silicone lubes with silicone toys, I learned about toy materials and the diversity of products out there. There were also way more products other than sex toys, such as lubes, books, games, candles, and massage oils, and I was surprised to find quality toys that were nice to look at. I especially liked that there were books, so you could learn about things privately, at your own pace, after the party. To this day I still remember the

*out a quiet nook in the main hallway. It only took a few minutes to locate a nice spot, with a coffee table, chairs and a couch, get settled, and press record.*

*The traffic near our comfy spot wasn’t ideal. People walked back and forth, causing us to speak low as we*

*wrestled with discomfort. This feeling was amplified because the building was so quiet, in spite of the*

*traffic. At times I felt that our conversation echoed through the cavernous hallways and I noticed that her voice*

basket weaving technique from one of the books. And, unexpectedly, I learned about pornography. Before the party, I thought all pornography was bad and I was surprised to learn that there was porn out there that could be respectful to women and men.

In terms of sex, I learned so much about anatomy. This surprised me because it can be a non-sexual topic, yet we didn't really talk about it in school. It was really awesome to hear that not every woman can orgasm through intercourse and there is nothing wrong if you can't. I learned that there is so much more out there than just one action or one 'hot button' spot; there are many, many ways to experience pleasure. It was really important for me to have the reassurance that what works for one person or what is portrayed in the media doesn't necessarily work for everyone.

The party facilitator definitely facilitates learning during the party by offering information without anyone having to ask for it. It is offered so openly, which really hooks people. I think this is the key to creating a welcoming environment and one person's question might be another person's question or it might spur other questions or ideas. Also the way the information is presented during the party is engaging and interesting. For me, it was important that the facilitator was the same gender as me. I also liked that she dressed like us; she kind of met us where we were at, but with The Traveling Tickle Trunk logo, she was identifiable as the person to go to. It is just so rare to find a resource for sexual health information that I think if you can make people feel comfortable, they will just ask and ask and ask, which is actually what I ended up doing at the party.

There were a few uncomfortable moments during the party. Things became a bit censored when circumcision was brought up because we had an openly Jewish resident on our floor. Because he was Jewish, we all knew that he was circumcised and when the topic came up it became the 'pink elephant' in the room. It seemed kind of unfair that we knew so much about his penis and no one really wanted to pursue the topic because we wanted to be sensitive to

*became very quiet when people walked by.*

*Perhaps it was the silence or perhaps it was the subject matter*

*that made us so aware of our surroundings. A*

*few minutes into the interview, an older man*

*sat down at the table*

*next to us and after a*

*few moments, we*

*trailed off, stopped the*

*recording and relocated*

*to another sitting area –*

*this time further away*

*from the stairwell and*

*doors.*

*We had met before this*

*interview, which helped*

*to ease the first*

*interview jitters. We*

his beliefs. We didn't want to offend him by bringing up other perspectives or opinions.

Things were also awkward when anal play came up. It's not that it was a taboo topic, but there was just less discussion about it. There was less enthusiasm, less willingness to acknowledge that it could be pleasurable and no one wanted to linger on it. One of the residents, a small town girl, was incredibly open and mature about it and asked a lot of questions. Everyone was kind of shocked that she was into it, but the fact that she talked about it so openly, when everyone else was clearly embarrassed and uncomfortable, really broke the ice. The education component also really helped to ease the tension. Having the facilitator talk about needing a base on anal toys and how to use anal beads make it so much less uncomfortable. The fact that she was talking and no one else had to talk was great, but she was also very matter-of-fact with her explanations, which made it seem really normal and okay. She provided a great mix of health and safety information along with pleasure-focused information, which made the topic feel less shameful.

For me, there were some other personal questions that I wasn't comfortable asking in a group setting. Things about personal pain I was experiencing and concerns about my own anatomy. As a leader in the group, I wanted to maintain boundaries and not get too specific about my own situation. I found that it was a lot easier for me to ask general questions rather than divulge too much about myself. It was really tough for me to say, "This is what is going on with me..." I'm not sure how everyone else felt because no one said anything to me later, but I have a feeling that others held back too.

At the end of the party presentation, we used my room as the private ordering space. It was nice to have that additional space because then no one knew what others ordered, even though we all told each other afterwards anyways. There were some things that I ordered though that I didn't share. I didn't want anyone to know that I bought 'the rabbit,' but I was totally fine sharing with everyone that I bought lube,

*didn't know each other well, but I felt an instant connection to her when we met at a party the previous summer. Throughout the school year we met for coffees and lunches a few times and they were a lovely opportunity to catch up on all our shared interests. I wanted to get to know her more.*

*I felt excited and confident as we walked back to my car, but when the buzz of starting to actually do my research wore off, I started to second guess myself. Were my questions good? Did I*

a cock ring and a bullet. I didn't want people to know that I had bought this GINORMOUS masturbation dildo; that was a little too far for me. I would imagine that people who bought more kinky items might feel the same way too.

There were even questions that I wasn't comfortable asking in private while I was ordering. At that point in my life, I'd only been with one sexual partner and I really thought there was something wrong with me. I wasn't comfortable with myself and I felt ashamed. I had lingering doubts based on what my parents told me – that if I masturbated I wouldn't be able to have children - and I thought that the pain I was experiencing might be related to that. It wasn't that the party facilitator did something wrong or made me feel uncomfortable – I just wasn't ready. Perhaps if the facilitator had brought up the topic and gave me an opening I might have talked about it, but I wasn't able to bring it up myself.

I definitely don't think people expect to learn at sex toy parties, but they want to. Even after all of the toys have been displayed, there are questions and discussions that continue well into the ordering. I think what would make me want to have another party is the education aspect. I didn't expect that for my money, but as a customer I definitely felt like I was getting a lot of bang for my buck. I left the party with a better idea about how to use the products, more knowledge about myself, and a feeling of empowerment. I was armed with knowledge about what made a good product and what didn't and I really valued that. I also didn't feel like giving us this knowledge was propaganda. The facilitator had evidence about why certain materials were bad and why other materials were good. It didn't feel like she was pressuring us to buy her stuff.

If I had a sit down, just one-on-one, with the party facilitator, I don't think it would have had the same effect. It was important to be around peers and friends and to hear them voice things that I was experiencing too. Hearing them share their questions and insecurities really normalized how I was feeling. This influenced the way I began to talk about sex after

*talk too much? Was she trying to 'please' me?*

*Did knowing her and her perspective before the interview taint the interview in some way?*

*As I was struggling with issues of objectivity and relationships, I decided to write my thoughts*

*down and then listen to the interview and write some more. This process was cathartic because it alleviated my fears that the interview was*

*terrible – and that I was terrible. In fact, it renewed my confidence*

*that I asked the questions I wanted to ask in a way that*

the party, knowing that I could be open and that reactions to my openness would be positive. I am also glad that it was a group setting because when I was embarrassed and I laughed, I wasn't laughing on my own. In a one-on-one situation, I would have felt like I had to apologize if I laughed, but in a party I could have fun and be silly. And that also makes it easier to learn and to retain information. Also, the people who knew more about certain things could share their knowledge and those who didn't could learn from them without exposing how much they did or didn't know.

Thinking about it now, I left that sex toy party knowing what to look for in a sex toy and feeling empowered to go into a sex shop. I walked away from the party with the idea that sometimes it is okay for just me to get off or that my partner and I can masturbate together or we can experience sexual pleasure without intercourse – this was monumental for me. It helped me to accept myself. The big take home message for me was that different things work for different people and that's perfectly okay. Now, I work in the sexual health field and I think that attending the sex toy party helped to speed up the process of getting me into this profession. It made me curious and it encouraged me look into my options sooner than I probably would have otherwise.

*allowed her to answer  
them the way she  
wanted to – which is all  
we can really ask for  
anyway. It also allowed  
me to reflect on how I  
positioned myself in the  
interview. It made me  
think about how I would  
conduct an interview  
with a stranger – as  
that was a hurdle I  
would need jump in the  
next few weeks.*

### Sarah's Story

I live in a house with a bunch of roommates and every month we host a potluck. When we decided to host a sex toy party, we made it into a 'dildos and donuts' themed potluck. Hosting a sex toy party seemed like a fun and sex-positive thing to do and an exciting way to create space within our group of friends. It was also a great way to celebrate a friend's 'going away' and another friend's birthday and I think, in the end, about 15 or 20 people of all genders attended the party.

I came to know The Traveling Tickle Trunk one day when I walked by the store. I was attracted to the pink and green bubbles on the windows, so I decided to go in. The store has such an open and inviting atmosphere and the book selection really blows my mind. For me, it is just a wonderful place.

After that introduction, I developed a professional relationship with The Traveling Tickle Trunk, so naturally, I thought of them first when we wanted to host the party. Another important factor for us was that it was free to host the sex toy. I'm not sure if we would have hosted one if we had to make a financial commitment.

For the actual sex toy party, we tried to create a playful and fun atmosphere in the house, with drinks and food. We also suggested that people could feed each other, which gave our party a safe and consensually sexy vibe.

Personally, I have a pretty good handle on anatomy and sexuality, so there was nothing I wanted to necessarily learn during the party. Discussions about anal play and men's toys created a lot of interest because they were unfamiliar to some of the guests. I remember that there was a heated discussion about the shaving products because most of the guests don't generally shave. Those products were shuffled around the room and returned to the facilitator very quickly. We had also requested floggers for our party, so when they came out of the 'trunk' everyone got really excited. After that, a fun flogging party broke

### Autoethnographic notes

*Breathless, I arrive at the front door in the dark. I am fifteen minutes early. I am frazzled because we changed the interview location, I was unfamiliar with the street, I had to catch a bus to get there, it was now dark, and I was way too early. Thank goodness it is warm.*

*This was the first interview I had arranged during my recruitment, but it was the third interview that I actually conducted. We had never met before, so my nerves were probably related to this uncharted territory.*

*There were lots of other people in the house, mostly clustered around a big, beautiful wooden table that nearly filled the dining room. There*



out in the living room. It was wild.

Our facilitator was really great about talking, giggling, playing with the toys, and making silly faces and noises, which put everyone at ease. She was very inclusive in terms of how she described the products, which created a very open and comfortable atmosphere. In my opinion, there are a few key factors that sex toy party facilitators should have. I think it is essential to be knowledgeable, open and comfortable talking about a range of topics. A sense of humor is also really nice because it creates a more low-key, non-judgmental space - like if our bodies make noises it is not a big deal, we should be able to laugh about it.

I don't think I really learned anything new during the sex toy party, but I think my friends did. The party facilitator was really good at explaining anatomy, especially when it came to the prostate and the g-spot, and I think a lot of people learned a lot about those areas. Also it was surprising to see the plethora of toys available for all genders and the facilitator showed us ways that the toys could be used differently, for example how to use them in same-sex interactions or for other genders than they were intended for.

I don't think that attending a sex toy party has really changed any of my ideas about sexuality, but I don't think that is a bad thing. I think I was just already there. I have completed a number of human sexuality courses and I have always had an interest in sexuality. I think my passion for this goes back to eighth grade. I went to a French immersion public school and my teacher chose sex education as the one topic that we were going to do in English because we all knew the English slang. The first day of sex education she gave us overhead sheets and split us into, unfortunately binary gender groups, and had us write down all the slang that we could think of for our genitals. Then she put them up on the overhead and we talked and laughed about all the words. After that she was like "okay, now that we have that out of the way, we are going to talk about the real words." The next class she came in with a shoebox full of different

*was momentary  
confusion that I might be  
a potential new  
roommate, but that was  
cleared up without  
revealing too much  
information and we  
headed downstairs to an  
empty room for the  
interview.*

*Sitting cross-legged on  
the floor, with the  
information letter,  
consent form, and topic  
map spread out before  
me, we began. I'm not  
sure what it was, but I  
did not at any point feel  
fully in control of myself.  
I felt myself rush to fill  
silence; I heard bursts of  
nervous laughter escape  
from my lips and all of  
my  
statements trickled  
upwards with a  
questioning inflection.  
The interview was over  
much quicker than I had  
anticipated and we  
quickly headed upstairs.*

contraceptives and we just played with them. She just made it okay to touch these things and talk about them. It was disarming and awesome and I learned a lot; even now, I kind of hang onto this experience.

I do think learning from The Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy party is kind of inevitable because if you're dealing with quality toys and you're dealing with a company that cares about the health of its clients, then you can't really sell the toys without educating people about them. You can't charge \$120 for a vibrator without telling people why it's worth that much and is very educational because it isn't information that is readily available to most people.

Generally, I think people go to sex toy parties because they think it will be fun and titillating and exciting. I don't think a lot of people go into it with the idea of being educated necessarily. Like they think they're going to be sold to and so they might put up their defenses... Maybe they say "I'm not going to buy the, anything" or "I'm only going to buy this much." And you may or may not change that. But I don't think the idea is that they are going to learn about g-spot anatomy and that's going to be wonderful and make their life better. And yet it happens, which is really cool.

*As I left the house, I  
found myself walking  
and wondering what I  
did wrong... Why was my  
behaviour so nervous  
and unsure? How could I  
have asked questions to  
draw out more? Why was  
I compelled to insert  
myself into the silence?*

*I felt my thoughts and  
critiques churning as  
my boots crunched over  
the snow. Tonight I  
would listen to the tape  
and deconstruct the  
interview. But in the  
back of my mind, I knew  
that the source of my  
angst would not be found  
on the tape... I wanted to  
ace this thesis. I wanted  
to continue my trajectory  
as a great student. Yet, I  
was afraid. What if I  
can't?*

### Nancy's Story

Six years ago, I had just moved to town. I really hit it off with a woman that I had met at an event and she was having a sex toy party, so she invited me. I wanted to make friends in my new city, so I decided to go. The whole thing felt a bit awkward because I didn't know anyone, I didn't know where I was driving, and I was afraid to have a glass of wine to take the edge off. The party was a fun idea, but it was very reserved; people were just passing the toys around and no one was really talking. I didn't talk or ask anything during the party either. I was the quiet girl in the room because I was worried what people would think of me. In the end, I made a token purchase – nipple nibblers I think – and I went home. In the end, a sex toy party was definitely not the best way to meet people.

Thinking back on it, I am surprised that it was so awkward to talk during the party, but I think it was because the party was so focused on the toys. My style of entertaining would be to have everyone come over before the party to have a drink or two and to mingle and chat first. This way everyone would get to know each other a little bit and feel more comfortable before the sex toys were passed around.

A year or two after the first party, I co-hosted another one at my house with the host from the first party – we are still really good friends. This time, we definitely had more wine available. We each invited our group of girlfriends - this time I had friends to invite! There were about twelve people there, which was a good number because I didn't feel like I had to do all of the talking and there were no awkward silences. Still, half of the guests were very quiet and the other half were more talkative and fun. There were a few military wives in the crowd and I remember how awkward and silent they were throughout the party. We all knew that their husbands were overseas and perhaps they wanted some toys for that reason, but they never mentioned it. It is hard to share your experiences when you know others aren't sharing theirs.

### *Autoethnographic notes*

*Nestled in my basement*

*in our Sunday*

*Lululemons and a plate*

*of freshly baked cookies,*

*we started the interview.*

*Nancy arrived promptly*

*and we spent time*

*chatting before going*

*through the consent*

*process and starting the*

*recorder. The house was*

*silent, but it was a lovely*

*comfortable silence that*

*you can only share with*

*friends. We had become*

*friends about a year*

*earlier and I was really*

*happy that she was*

*interested in*

*participating in this*

*study. It is always great*

*when you can share*

I remember that the facilitator from that party put some of the products in the bathroom for people to try. It was a great idea and there were certainly a lot of bathroom trips that night! No one really said anything when they went in, but they would come out of the bathroom looking very warm and glowing and we all knew! There was lots of food and drinks that night and when the whips were being passed around we decided to use them to rank the toys. It was a lot of fun.

About a year ago, I co-hosted another party with a different friend and you were the facilitator! This time, it was a co-ed party with a variety of sexual orientations represented. I also knew everyone there – though I knew some people better than others and we all definitely knew each other better by the end of the night! This party felt like the advanced group, except when it came to the men.

At first I was nervous about the co-ed party because it wasn't something I was familiar with, but in the end, it was a good experience. In comparison, I found the women-only parties to be more reserved and more judgmental. I think it really helped that in the co-ed party we discussed the whole gamut of sexual expression, so the conversation wasn't always so personal and pointed. The diversity of sexual interests made it easy to be open and just throw it out there.

The party was accidentally co-hosted by your hubby, which I think really helped the men to feel comfortable. I think it was definitely more nerve-wracking for the men, but they kind of just rolled with it. I think it is part of male culture to not really talk about these things in depth, but after a little while, they got into it. Having product endorsements from another male was really unique and important. I think that when you hear, or in this case see, enthusiasm from a guy who has actually used the toy, it makes it more acceptable and you are more likely to purchase it. And it was really cool for me to learn that sex toys aren't all about me – there are some that are just about him.

*experiences with friends  
and I was excited to hear  
her opinions about sex  
toy parties, especially  
since I had facilitated  
one for friends. A group  
of new friends was  
interested in knowing  
what my thesis research  
was about and in  
addition to having a fun  
evening out, I suspect  
they were interested in  
seeing me 'in action' as a  
sex toy party facilitator! I  
remember that there was  
a lot of laughter and  
drinking and hilarity  
ensued – which is not  
unusual in sex toy party  
land. It also reconnected  
me to the roots of this  
project and  
reinvigorated my*

I think that a combination of factors made this party feel so open. It was co-ed, there were multiple sexualities, including couples, and we were a close group of friends. But because of this, there was an 'elephant in the room' – you knew who people were having sex with. In some ways, the party forced us to acknowledge that and it opened the door to new conversations between our friends. If you know that your friends are having sex, is it really a big deal if you talk about it? Once we acknowledged and accepted this, there was a lot of discussion and the party continued long after the ordering was done.

I spent way more money at this party than I had at the previous two parties because my partner was there. We made decisions about what we wanted to buy and to do together. I think that it changed my buying patterns because I wasn't hesitating and he could provide with feedback in the moment.

Prior to the toy parties, I had been into stores, but I had never bought anything for myself. Back in my hometown, my girlfriends used to buy sex toys for each other for birthdays and other occasions, so that is how I ended up with sex toys. But the sex toy parties were the first time that I ever bought a toy for myself.

I didn't come to any of the parties with the idea of learning anything. At the first party, it wasn't even about the sex toys! I wanted to meet people and make friends. The second party was a way to celebrate having girlfriends that I could invite to a party and the third one was to have you do the party for us. I think in some way some of the people who came to the third party, justified coming because you were facilitating it. They knew you were studying sex toy parties and this was a way to contribute to your work, even though that was a stretch. I think that it made it more legitimate in their eyes.

I learned a lot when you showed us the flaccid degrading penis toy. In my degree I studied human anatomy, so that part of the conversation was familiar to me, but in the sex toy parties I learned about things like sex toy hygiene, different types of

*enthusiasm to move forward in my related academic pursuits.*

*Facilitating this party was a really great experience for me because friends were now connected to what I was studying and researching, but also, unexpectedly, it opened the door for us to talk very intimately about sex and relationships.*

*Needless to say, I was excited to talk more about this experience and get her take on the whole event. And the fact that she had attended three diverse Traveling Tickle Trunk parties was going to make this a very*

lubes, and how to take care of your toys. I learned about things that I had honestly never even thought about.

In all three parties, I found that the different product flavours are usually a hot topic. But I think that this is mostly because it is an easy conversation - and rather non-sexual conversation – to have. It is almost like small talk to test the waters.

I also found that in the women-only parties anything regarding bums starts out as a taboo topic. Then once the conversation goes down that road, there are usually a lot of jokes, but that is still a way of talking about it.

Talking about anything kinky or anything attached to rough play is generally a taboo topic. In one of the parties we used whips as a ranking device, which, thinking back on it, sent the message that this was not something to take seriously as a pleasure-producing device. I think that anything related to pain becomes an ‘off topic.’ Even at the last party, we tied someone up with the bed restraints, but it almost had to be something comical and extreme in order to even talk about it. If someone was interested in learning more about it, I don’t think they can really go there because it is either a totally silent topic or it is made into a laughable extreme. If you think about how this stuff is portrayed in the media, it is always violent. People don’t talk about it unless it is a problem, which doesn’t lend itself to having a conversation. I am not sure how you would introduce kink in the party setting. Maybe just having products available at parties and thinking about how they are packaged can send the message to the guests that the company is open to these conversations. It is important to challenge some of those stereotypes and I think that a party is a great way to introduce people to kinky items.

The major difference between all three parties was the dynamic between the people in attendance. You need people who will just put it out there to get the ball rolling. And they don’t have to say anything personal. All they need to do is to make a reference to

*rich interview.*

*Because of our personal, pre-existing friendship, I found it easier AND more difficult to elicit responses during the interview. It felt like some statements just popped out and she shared a lot of ideas that I hadn’t previously thought about or heard from other participants. I also felt from her a very strong pull away from the idea of that sex toy parties are an ‘educational space,’ yet she shared a lot of learning that happened for her and others in this context. I think, for her, it was just really important*

Sex and The City, or to the Rabbit, or throw out a fun fact, like why sex toys are shaped like animals, and as the group warms up there is a comfort zone, which can lead to more personal conversations.

The dynamic with the facilitator also has a big influence on the party. It was nice when the facilitator became a guest at the party, instead of starting into the presentation right away. If they take the time to mingle a little bit first, they can get a feel for the room and really emphasize the party aspect of the sex toy party, instead of coming in as a sex expert to help us. It also makes it less formal. We all know why we are there and what we will be talking about, but it is great to get a sense of what people want to get out of it first.

The private ordering space is a great opportunity to ask specific questions, so that you can get the most for your money. In the public space you have to mediate what the group wants to talk about – maybe they are sick of this topic or there are strong opinions about a certain toy, which can stop you from asking questions in the moment, even if everyone is totally comfortable. However, if the ordering room is really far removed from the party, it can feel like a walk of shame or like you are going to the principal's office. It feels so much better and more open if you just duck around the corner to buy your toys. For me it was a positive situation when the order room was out in the open because I wasn't removed from the party or the group dynamic, but it was still private - no one else was there with me or knew exactly what I was saying or buying.

After attending the Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy parties, I think the topic of sex toys is more open and acceptable in my relationship, both inside and outside of the bedroom. I also think that the parties brought my friends closer together. Now, after the party, it would be really hard to offend them, even if we weren't talking about sex. After the third party in particular, there was a window of time that you could openly talk about sex. After the third party in particular, there was a window of time that you could openly talk about what happened, what you bought,

*to stress that first and foremost a sex toy party is a party. I appreciated this honesty. Even though there were a few moments of awkward laughter or hesitation to share something, I felt that our discussion was comfortable and that I was confident in my questions and she was confident in her responses.*

*After nearly an hour, I could see that we were both getting tired, so we wound the interview down. It felt good to have learned more about her during the interview. Things I never would have known otherwise.*

how it is working for you, and so on. That has faded over time, but there is a new level of trust and a shared experience that has created an intimacy that we didn't have before.

As I look back on the parties, I notice that when I was younger I felt less comfortable and less sure of myself. As I get older and now that I have been with the same partner for many years, I realize that sex and talking about sex is healthy and important. At the sex toy parties you realize that there are ways you can have even better sex, so why not? And by acknowledging that, it allows you to have different conversations with your partner about the kinds of sex you want to have and to talk about things like masturbation. The fact that we were there together helped us to take the conversation about sex toys out of the bedroom. We can now have conversations before sex or even completely outside of sex. The party brought these conversations into our daily life.

*And I hope that this  
experience has enhanced  
our friendship in the  
same way that it  
enhanced this study.*



### Stephanie's Story

I would say that all three Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy parties I have attended were learning experiences. I was young. I had never been to anything like that before and I didn't know what to expect. The first two were learning experiences for you, as a facilitator. I attended your very first parties when you were in training. You organized them with your friends and friends of friends and hosted them at your apartment, so that Brenda could observe your presentation and determine if you and The Tickle Trunk were a good fit. These parties were a good introduction for me because I had no idea about sex toys, so we were all just figuring this stuff out together. For those first parties, I would define my role as an observer. I was tagging along out of curiosity and to support you.

Those first parties were co-ed and it was mostly couples that attended. I was single, so I felt like the odd one out. I found that the focus was more on what people could do with their partners and I think that there were more questions because people had a purpose in mind.

The third party was different because I co-hosted it with my roommate at our apartment and we invited our girlfriends. For this party, I couldn't just sit back and observe and take it all in. I had to participate and get things going so that the party would be lively and fun.

This party was women-only and it was more about personal sexuality. We decided to host the party for something fun to do on a Saturday night, so there was less of a defined focus and in my opinion, people asked less informed questions. I did feel like there was more judgment at the women-only party. It seemed that people had judgment about sexual behaviours, about what is normal, and about what is okay and acceptable. I think people were worried about what their friends would think of them too.

I remember that everyone really liked the nipple nibblers. I thought this was a bit of a cop-out because

### *Autoethnographic notes*

*We are family. And as such, she has always supported me. She supported me as a sex toy party facilitator and now, in offering to be interviewed, she was supporting me in my research. It is so great to have family members that have your back – and it also creates interesting research challenges.*

*As an 'intimate other,' I wanted to be careful not to unwittingly expose too much of her life. Yet, as an active research participant, I wanted to honour and share the*

it is such a safe and easy topic. I didn't think that the attention on that product was genuine. Based on the conversations I had with friends later, it seemed that people had more serious interests and questions that they didn't bring up in the party.

I remember that anything related to bums was a bit of a taboo topic. One guest at the party was really vocal and very negative, which shut down any conversation and limited people who might want to talk more about it.

On of my roommate's friends really stands out in my memory because she was so loud. Her and a couple of others laughed a lot at the toys and at different questions that were being asked. They asked a lot of uninformed or maybe just obvious questions and they made others uncomfortable. I have always had a group of friends that were honest and there was always a safe space to talk about things, so this was a big contrast. I think it had a lot to do with cultural differences. My roommate and her friends were Russian and Ukrainian and they had all moved here as teens or adults. I think that how they reacted in the party had to do with their beliefs or their cultural influences around sex. I know this sounds bad, but because they looked like me, I didn't really think that they would have such different ideas about sex. It was a good learning experience for me about cultural differences.

I would say that all three parties were positive experiences, but there was definitely a lot of learning at each one. I didn't really come to any of the parties with specific interests or questions in mind; it was more like this could be something fun to do, so I was surprised how easy it was for me to ask questions. I never felt uncomfortable.

The only things I know about sex toys I learned from these parties. They were an introduction to new products, such as male toys and couple toys, and there was much more diversity than I had ever imagined. I had also never thought about the consequences of toys – that you were putting them in your body and that the materials could be toxic or

*story she shared with me.*

*It is such a fine balance.*

*Can I achieve it? Have I*

*achieved it?*

*I was cognizant that the*

*consent process needed*

*to be explicit - as it was*

*with the other*

*participants. I felt a*

*funny kind of tension*

*that trust meant not*

*needing to review the*

*details required by*

*research ethics. I was*

*struck that each*

*participant that I had a*

*previous relationship*

*with was reticent to keep*

*a copy of the information*

*sheet. It seemed as*

*though this small, almost*

*unnoticeable act,*

*signaled that I had*

*entered into their*

harmful. If you think about it in terms of organic food, why not think about it in terms of toys? Attending Traveling Tickle Trunk parties has definitely made me more discerning of sex toys; now, I make sure that I know what I am getting, what is in it, and that it is a good product.

Going to the sex toy parties also had effects on my friendships. Your friends' sexuality isn't a part of them you get to know very easily, but the sex toy parties helped me to learn these things about my friends. I learned about their sexual questions and interests and hang-ups and I had to share my own. This helped me to learn more about our boundaries – what is okay to talk about with different people and what is not. It was interesting to see where people draw the line because it was usually different from where I draw the line and that changed how we communicated about a lot of topics. It has also enabled me to have these conversations with new friends. It sort of informs how I choose new friends now. If they are okay with these conversations or if we have similar boundaries, then clearly we can get along, but if they are uncomfortable maybe we aren't compatible.

I think that there is an alignment of values between The Traveling Tickle Trunk and me, so I think the parties reinforced my values and beliefs about sex and sexuality. It is always nice to have these things reinforced by someone with a successful business. It is also nice to know that this business reinforces the idea that talking about sex is okay and that the conversation can be open with the people in your life.

There are certain qualities about The Traveling Tickle Trunk that I really appreciate too. In terms of their products, nothing is offensively packaged and it is all presented in a female friendly way. Nothing feels scary or dirty. Also, all of the information given during the party makes it a learning experience, so the parties are educational as opposed to being vulgar. The staff are not vulgar or inappropriate either; they are very professional.

The Tickle Trunk also holds workshops and is

*intimate lives, where  
words and actions mean  
more than paper. It was  
a weighty feeling to hold  
that kind of trust, but a  
feeling that I would  
never trade.*

*There was only a slight  
nervousness at the  
beginning of the  
interview. Maybe she was  
uncertain of what I  
would ask and how deep  
I would dig, or maybe the  
recorder on the coffee  
table made it a little too  
official. I too was afraid  
that this would create  
change. To ease the  
nerves, I sat on the floor,  
while she sat on the  
couch, hoping that the  
body positioning - one*

involved in lots of community events, like the Pride Parade. Through the Tickle Trunk, I was introduced to sexually marginalized groups. I had honestly never thought about it before, but because the company is inclusive and does not discriminate against others, I was able to learn about others with different interests and lifestyles. Providing this type of information also adds credibility to the company and you know that the information they provide is unbiased and non-judgmental.

In addition to being inclusive, I think that it is really important for party facilitators to be non-judgmental and to have awesome product knowledge. I like it when the facilitator is someone I can relate to – meaning that they are the same gender and around my age. I don't know how I would react if the facilitator was a man. I would probably be fine with a gay man, but why? And again, would I actually buy or would I just go for fun?

My early sex education experiences were really negative. I went to a Catholic school and I didn't participate in health classes for all of junior high and high school because I was not pro-life. There were many issues that came along with this, but the lack of unbiased information made me really mad and resentful. I wish I had other options. Now, I ask a lot of questions and I am constantly trying to figure everything out. I don't feel shame, but I am just constantly questioning. I prefer hearing about personal experiences. In order to learn, I want to ask or to try for myself. Really, I think that I just want to have the conversation – I don't want to type it or to read it... I want my learning experiences to be interactive.

I would go to any Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy party that I was invited to, but I would not go to a sex toy party given by another company. I am a loyal customer because I trust the information The Traveling Tickle Trunk gives me, I agree with their philosophy, and it is a local business – I like to see where my money is going. It is also important to me that they have a storefront. If there ever was a problem, I like that there is somewhere that I can go

*higher, one lower - would set the tone.*

*Throughout the interview she was so good at taking the reins*

*and diverting the conversation to an area*

*she wanted to address. I was so appreciative of this openness and*

*directness and I was*

*keenly aware that no*

*other participant did*

*this. I also felt that I was*

*able to dig deeper – to*

*ask 'why' more often and*

*to leave more of those*

*potent silences. And*

*there was an unspoken*

*agreement that there*

*were no 'right answers,' I*

*was just interested in her*

*story.*

for person-to-person interaction. And I like the alternative too, that if there was something I wanted that I couldn't get at a party, I know where I can go and get it.

I feel really comfortable going into The Traveling Tickle Trunk store when I know what I want, but not to just go and look around. It is really quiet in there and with the staff standing behind the counter, I feel like I am being watched. I feel a bit stupid that I don't really know what everything does. It is not the easiest thing in the world to walk in and talk about your sexual likes and dislikes.

I enjoyed the parties more than the store because they are so interactive and they go with the flow. You are in someone's home, there is lots of food and drinks, and products are being passed around and talked about. There are lots of people around and lots of distractions. It is less personal. It is not a static wall of products that you are supposed to approach and ask intelligent questions about. You can be silly and it is more of an experience. It is not me leading the sale, it is the facilitator leading the sale. And once the subject has been broached in the party, I can take it where I want it to go.

*As the interview wound  
down, I could sense that  
she was tired. Once the  
recorder was off, we  
shifted quickly and  
effortlessly to just  
hanging out. There were  
a few questions about  
her interview in  
comparison to the others  
and then, just like that,  
glass of wine in hand, we  
sat down to a home-  
cooked meal – like  
nothing had really  
happened and yet so  
much had.*

### Heather's Story

In 2006, The Traveling Tickle Trunk presented a sex toy party/education session at my workplace with all of my co-workers. We work in sexual and reproductive health, so this was a fun professional development opportunity to help us to enhance our ability to educate people to have healthy sex lives. All of my co-workers were different ages and had varied sexual orientations, but it is an all-female workplace.

A few years prior I had attended 2 sex toy parties that were facilitated by my aunt who works for a large, Canada-wide sex toy party company. The first party I hosted just for fun and the second one was a cast party for a local production of the Vagina Monologues that I was involved in. These were both fun, entertaining experiences.

What really stood out for me was that all three sex toy parties were really sex positive. If I had to choose, I would say that The Traveling Tickle Trunk party was the 'awesom-est' of the three because the facilitator approached the party from a feminist standpoint. The Traveling Tickle Trunk approach to sex positivity included healthy images, good quality products, and a focus on safety. I thought that the facilitator was very thoughtful and conscientious about these larger issues and not just focused on selling toys. I really like the The Traveling Tickle Trunk approach because they are knowledgeable and insightful about the messages that are out there - and then they offer different messages, like critiquing gender stereotypes. It was really great how the facilitator inserted these counter-messages in a fun, positive way and allowed for discussion.

I didn't come to the sex toy party with any particular topics in mind to address. I remember that we talked about what sex toys are made of and we discussed safe and unsafe materials. I had never even thought about it before. We also talked about how to use sex toys safely, how to clean them, and different kinds of lubes. We talked a lot about images and packaging of sex toys and our facilitator was very conscientious about sharing healthy images with us. I remember

### Autoethnographic notes

*"Hi Heather. Can you hear me?" After a false start and a microphone glitch, we were able to get the video call up and running. For the first minute or so we tripped a little over each other's words, but we soon got the hang of the time delay and the interview went surprisingly smoothly. It really helped that Heather was so prompt and pleasant. She seemed very comfortable with research and research terminology and that made the consent process and the interview very easy, despite our geographical separation.*

*There was a major issue lurking in the background though. In between this interview and the last, I learned that there were technical problems with 4 of my previous interviews. And not just a small glitch... I was still reeling*

that we had a debate about sharing sex toys. We talked about using a condom on the toy, as well as how to clean and sterilize the toys before someone else uses it. This part of the party got a lot more serious because we wanted to be sure we understood, so that we would give out proper information to our clients later.

What I really enjoyed was that the party facilitator let people have their reactions to the toys. She gave you space to feel and to discuss and it didn't feel like she was just trying to sell the products. It was really great to hear personal experiences – either from the facilitator or from people at other parties. This really helped to normalize sex toy use. The sex toys themselves were also really surprising. I had no idea that they came in so many different shapes, sizes, and colours.

I think the reason why I learned so much at the party was that it was an informal, group setting that was fun and interactive. I could see and touch the products and ask questions. There was space to laugh and room for people to share experiences and integrate new knowledge into their past experience. It was very tactile, which is an important mode of learning for me. Because of these things, I feel that sex toy parties are more equal than more traditional education settings. Also, talking about sex is such a taboo, that people are often excited just to have an opportunity to talk about anatomy and how to enjoy our bodies. It was these positive, life-enhancing messages that I took away from this experience.

I spent 15 years as a fundamentalist Christian and it was a journey for me to learn about and express my own sexuality. Attending sex toy parties widened my perspective of sexuality and gave me positive messages about pleasure and sexual expression. The parties also gave me a venue to talk about sex and sexuality with other people, which was very refreshing and positive and I appreciated it. I bought my first vibrator at a sex toy party and I don't think I ever would have felt comfortable going into an adult store. But the sex toy party exceeded all of my expectations. It was a really fun, unique and

*from that discovery when I logged onto the video-chat program for our scheduled meeting. I tried to push down the anxiety that had been bubbling up in my chest and as I dialed, I took deep breaths in between the rings.*

*I was flustered. I could feel it. So I relied on my notes a little more than before. Perhaps because of the stress and anxiety I was feeling in my body – I was really trying to push it out of my mind – I was less chatty than usual and I could hear my familiar upwards inflection of uncertainty as we spoke. I took a few more breaths and tried to locate my confidence. I knew it was there. I just had to dig deep to find it.*

*Her answers were shorter than the others, but she was eloquent and pithy and I kept thinking about how interesting her life*

enriching experience. I am glad I was able to experience it.

*was. When I was arranging the online interview, I was worried that we could be easily distracted or awkward because we weren't meeting in person, but this couldn't be further from the truth.*

*As the interview wound down and we signed off, I felt a strange mix of emotions wash over me. I felt relief that I had double recorded this interview (just in case), devastation that I might have lost the others' stories (what am I going to do?!?), embarrassment that I would have to admit a mistake (everyone is going to know!), and fear that I would fail this part of my program (then what??). A dramatic mix of feelings churning up inside of me.*



**Lost Interviews**

*Scheduling is the worst part of interviewing, especially in winter. It's hard to get people to come out after dark in freezing cold February. Yet, to my surprise, participants stepped forward, willing to be interviewed, and I began the scheduling dance. Monday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Four interviews in three days. The life of a grad student... Have recorder, will travel. I even get to do a video-chat interview!*

*Tuesday night I wake up suddenly. Heart pounding. I look around to get my bearings. The room comes into focus. Moonlight glows through the window, reflecting off the snowy ground. My husband is sleeping soundly next to me. The dream has already escaped my memory, but I can feel fear sneaking into my consciousness. As I slept, my brain was busy working. Making sense of all the balls I am juggling – the writing, the interviews, the re-writing... In my waking hours I have been struggling to work through tension and anxiety about my performance as a novice researcher. Some call this reflexivity, but it just feels like worry. I sit up in bed and take a sip of water from the mug on the nightstand. "How can I make this better?" I think to myself. "Is this just performance anxiety? Or have my dreams revealed something that I've missed?" I lie back down, take a deep breath, roll onto my side, and try to empty my mind. Soon sleep finds me again.*

*Play. Nothing – just static. Stop. Panic level rising. Play. Wait. Only static and snippets of words. Nothing makes sense. Nothing is audible. Now fear begins to well up inside me. There is no time to investigate; the next interview is in a few minutes. "Think, think Lauren," I say to myself. A quick Internet search and download means that I can double-record my Skype interview. Thank god. Ring. Rrrrring. "Hi! I'm Lauren." I always start that way - but this time the enthusiasm is forced as I try not to be distracted by the uncertainty and fear that my interview recordings are ruined.*

*With a heavy heart, I am trying to sort through this mess. Trying to find a resolution that everyone can be happy with. The audio is ruined in four of the interviews. The blame lies with a faulty microphone, but it also lies with me. I could have caught this sooner if I had only gone slower. Too caught up in the scheduling dance and too enthusiastic to keep the ball rolling, too focused on just getting it done. After diligently listening to the first three interviews, I did not stop to listen after each one thereafter. Had I only gone home and pressed play, I might have minimized the collateral damage to one and not four. Valuable, but costly lessons I am learning. Take your time. Be thoughtful. Measured. Intentional. Think through every possible scenario before moving your pawn. I moved too fast – caught up in the excitement. It never pays to cut corners. I should have known better.*

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*Autoethnographic notes continued....*

*The dreaded type, type, type, delete, delete, delete. How do I tell my supervisor that I messed up? I am so embarrassed. How do I explain to the participants what happened? I am humiliated. I try to proceed using the lessons I have just learned. Take your time. Be thoughtful. Measured. Intentional. Think through every possible scenario before moving my pawn. I have listened to all the interviews that were successfully recorded, I have read through my thoughts and reflections, I have scoured the research ethics application and the consent form, I have even contacted the microphone company in a last ditch attempt to see if the recordings are salvageable. Nada. In an effort to combat the urge to solve everything right now, I brainstorm possible solutions from every possible angle. I just want to fix it. I hate waiting.*

*The magic of a well-timed email: "Hi Lauren, These things happen...." I breathe a sigh of relief that could go on forever. My supervisor is not angry or disappointed. And I have not failed the thesis test. Anxiety and elation roll up together and sit in the pit of my stomach. I give my self an internal pep talk: I will re-approach the participants and re-interview all who are interested. I will recruit new participants if none of the previous participants are interested in another interview. I will move forward and make it work. Admitting mistakes is not my strong suit. Just ask my husband. Or my sister. But I think it is something I will need to practice... Type, type, type, delete, delete, delete.*

*In the end, things have a way of working themselves out. I felt considerably better throwing my mistakes out into the world. And in spite of serious waves of self-doubt, all four participants responded quickly and eagerly agreed to meet again. I listened to all of the 'good' recordings for the umpteenth time and I felt even more hopeful that the second interview would be even better. If I reminded myself not to rush to fill silence. Sometimes discomfort is necessary.*

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## Sara's Story

I attended one Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy party about 3 years ago. I had never been to a party before and to be honest I had never even heard of people having sex toy parties, except for in the movies, so the whole concept was really intriguing. My friend Stephanie was the party host and I knew that you were going to facilitate it through her. I felt very comfortable with where the party was and who was there, so I just thought to myself 'why not?'

The party was very casual because it was in a familiar, homey environment that I had been to many times before. There were about 8 women at the party – some of them I knew and some I just met that night. There were also a few bottles of wine, which helped make it a relaxed atmosphere and it sets the home sex toy party apart from going to the mall or into a store. It is a nice way to kick back and have fun. After a drink and some mingling, we all sat around the living room; some of us sat on the couch and the others sat on the floor.

At the time, I didn't really know what to expect from the party. I thought it would be more like a shopping channel presentation – more focused on a 'sales pitch.' I remember being surprised by the variety of products that you had, especially the male toys. What the products were made out of and how to maintain your toys were also topics that you touched on that I wasn't expecting. I remember that there was lots of dialogue and personal testimonials for different products. I was also surprised by how comfortable I was and how uncomfortable others appeared to be. There were the 'giggle girls' who laughed a lot, but I think most of us kind of saw that as their own immaturity. They didn't stop me from asking questions or talking with the others because they were irrelevant to me, they were friends of a friend, and I didn't really care what they thought.

I didn't come to the party looking for any tangible

*Autoethnographic notes*

*"I thought I saw the recording working as we talked last time," she said, a bit confused.*

*"I know," I said sheepishly. "The app was working, but something was wrong inside the microphone, so all that actually recorded was little snippets – not even words – the whole time we talked."*

*"Ooohhhh. That sucks." She said. As a fellow grad student, it was nice to have a sympathetic ear, but I still felt really embarrassed about this whole mess.*

*"Don't feel any pressure to recreate our interview from last time," I said reassuringly. "Just say what comes to mind in the moment. We can just consider this take two."*

*This was my first*

information. I was just curious about what was out there. The sex shops I had been to in my hometown were really scummy, dirty places and it was a very shady experience to go into one, so I was excited to see what else was out there, especially from a female-friendly perspective.

I ended up learning about what the different products were made of, which had never crossed my mind before. I assumed that products sold in Canada would be safe, so I was very surprised to learn that wasn't the case.

I don't really think that people come to sex toy parties with the idea of learning anything in particular about sexual health or safety. I do think people end up with that though. Each guest has her own educational background and curiosities that informs what she wants and needs. I had very supportive parents and I was able to talk to my doctor growing up. My mom was really open about sex and I remember her bringing home armfuls of library books about sex and we would read them and discuss them. Our school sex education was very open too. Because of this, I know where to look when I want some information and how to determine reliable trustworthy sources.

I appreciated having the private ordering space. It was nice to go in and choose what I wanted to buy in private. Privacy is important so that you can decide whether or not you wanted to share what you bought. If people are forced to share they might censor themselves and not purchase what they actually want.

I think that it is really important to have a facilitator that presents well. They need to be polished in their appearance and how they present in order to be professional and legitimate. I appreciate an open attitude and a relaxed approach to a sensitive topic like this because it helps to create comfortable rapport. For me it is important that the facilitator is a woman. I also think that it is nice if they look like you or you can relate to them in some way. Intelligence is also a key factor

*interview 're-do.' I had so much nervousness and anxiety built up, but she showed up at my office with only smiles. There was zero tension and she was understanding and empathetic. We laughed after I explained and she never once made me feel like I had inconvenienced her even though I had. I appreciated her willingness to go another round with me.*

*We had met at the sex toy party and a few times in between, as she was a friend of Stephanie's. It was so cool that I was interviewing two people about the same party. It was really interesting how both Stephanie and Sara touched on the giggling women at their party, but they both had unique perspectives on what makes a good party and what stood out for them.*

*We had a very*

because you want to know that you can trust what they tell you. If I know the facilitator and trust the facilitator, then I don't really care much about the party company, but if I didn't know them, I definitely want to know more about the company to determine whether or not it was a trustworthy and legitimate business.

I think that the experience of attending the sex toy party made the sex toy industry seem more acceptable to me and I could be more open about it. It was cool to have an open conversation with a group of people that I respected. It was nice to know that other people use sex toys and that you could be open about it. Afterwards I even talked with a friend back home about the party and I encouraged her to get a toy for herself. I think that now that I am little bit older too it makes it easier to share these things, but attending the party taught me that I could have these conversations with my girlfriends and my husband more openly.

*comfortable rapport in the first interview. I know that the situation was complicated by that fact that Stephanie hosted the party that we were discussing and I had facilitated it, but I really tried to invite free and honest responses, regardless of what they were.*

*Throughout the second interview, I kept thinking "oh yeah, we talked about this last time!" Although her responses were similar in feel and content, I felt like she was more certain, more definite and more drawn out with her responses. I can't pinpoint why – maybe it was the time to think and reflect on the questions over the three weeks in between interviews or maybe now that the process was clear, there were less nerves and more confidence – for both of us.*

## Christine's Story

I have attended 1 Tickle Trunk sex toy party. It was for a television segment; first there was a cycle charting workshop that my partner and I attended, and then we transitioned to a sex toy party. The cameras didn't interfere or bother me too much. My family ended up seeing me on TV, which was funny, but they know what I get up to, so they didn't say too much and I wasn't really worried about anyone else seeing me.

The party was close to what I had expected. I had heard about sex toy parties before and I had talked to people who had been to them too, so I had a good idea what they were about. It was a co-ed party and my boyfriend and I were the youngest there by about 10 years. The party was quiet initially, but after the silly icebreaker game people became more comfortable and talkative. I thought the whole thing was fun, relaxed, and interesting.

The facilitator was interesting and knowledgeable. I liked that she shared with us her history and her background. It was great that we were able to smell, touch, and try out the products. I was familiar with most of the toys because I go into The Traveling Tickle Trunk store a lot, but the Smartballs were new to me and I thought they were really cool.

I didn't really have any specific questions or topics that I wanted to learn about at the party. I was just curious about what it would be like. I remember that there was a big discussion about massage oil. I don't think it was because the massage oil was really exciting; it was just a fairly safe topic to talk about with strangers. As the night went on I remember that the conversation became raunchier and more graphic.

I think that it is really important that the party facilitator is relaxed, willing to answer questions and willing to let you handle the toys. A good party facilitator shows care in both the product and the people. I also think that the way they dress is

*Autoethnographic notes*

*This was another 're-do' interview, yet thinking back, the parallels of both days that we spoke are uncanny. Both days were sunny and crisp with a bone-chilling arctic wind. As I hurried to get to our meeting location, my nose smarted from the wind and I was thankful for my scarf and mitts. Both days I also arrived early and I sat and watched university students move from class to class with the hustle and bustle of a busy semester. Both days she arrived very promptly and led us to a quieter location on the fourth floor, but because of the crowds we ended up in semi-public spaces with lots of foot traffic walking by. Both days I caught her on a lunch break, so she snacked as we chatted and it made my stomach rumble. And both days our pre-interview small talk*

really important. I want the facilitator to appear professional, not hyper sexualized. The facilitator shouldn't be on sale too.

Knowledge is another really important thing for a facilitator to have. You are more likely to pay attention to someone who knows what they are talking about and cares about their work. At The Tickle Trunk, it never feels like they are in it for the money. Instead, it feels like they want you to get what is best for you and if that is nothing that is okay.

The major thing I learned at the party was about the phthalates that are in some toys. The facilitator explained the process of making cheaper toys using phthalates and then showed us a really scary toy that looked almost chewed up. She explained that it looked like that because of how the material is softened and that these chemicals leach out over time, leaving the toy looking melted and chewed. That image really sticks out in my mind. After learning that, I had a minor internal freak out because people, including me, put this stuff in our bodies and don't even know it! How is that okay?! What is so hard to make toys that are safe? The lack of knowledge about this is scary. People don't even know that they should ask about something like this because nobody talks about it. Now I looked specifically for phthalate-free labels and I show all my friends what a 'bad' toy looks like and feels like.

Overall, I think that sex is a taboo subject and because of that I am a big proponent of comprehensive sex education. I believe that sex is an important part of overall health. Because some people have very little knowledge about their bodies and their sexual health, they are easily manipulated and this misinformation is harmful to people. It makes me angry that good information is hard to find. I know that there are risks associated with sex, but it doesn't have to be shrouded in myth.

As a child, my parents provided me great sexual

*was stilted and awkward, but the moment we started talking about sex and The Traveling Tickle Trunk she really lit up. And from them on we enthusiastically talked, laughed and shared.*

*The overall tone of both interviews was similar, but on our second meeting, she expressed more personal details about her life. At one point in the second interview, I casually alluded to my past role as a Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy party facilitator and it caught her by surprise. This caught me off guard - and I started questioning how I had approached the participants. I had fully intended for them to know that I was connected to The Tickle Trunk. I had advertized the study through their social media platforms and my bio is present on their staff*

health information. They started when I was 8 by giving me a book. As I read the book, I remember being really grossed out by sex and by the fact that my parents had sex to create me. As I learned more, my parents encouraged me to read more and to ask questions. When we were 13, one of my friends had 'the talk.' All her parents told her a little bit about her period and what sexual intercourse was. That didn't sit well with me, so I provided her with all the information that I knew. Her parents became very angry with me and I was banned from hanging out with her. In my mind I was trying to help her and I never understood why they wanted to keep this information from her. After that, I started noticing that kids in school had the same problem. The information we got in health class was really vague and there was lots of confusion and misconceptions. But I didn't think it was safe to speak up, so I just put my head down and kept my knowledge to myself.

When I realized that I wasn't straight, I became more curious. I was lucky because I was introduced to great companies, like Come as You Are in Toronto and The Tickle Trunk in Edmonton. I love the workshops given by The Tickle Trunk and the events they are involved in. My boyfriend and I go into the store every couple of weeks to just hang out, chat with the staff, and learn what is going on.

I am into kink and I am polyamorous and I have a lot of questions because I am trying to understand why I am into these things and why other people are into these things. I am so engrossed in my lifestyle. All my friends are part of this community and it is a huge part of my life. It is great because I feel really safe, but I have lost touch with what other people do. Sometimes I forget how 'normal' people live and I have to be careful to be more subdued in public spaces and really think about who I share the details of my life with.

Having a relationship with The Traveling Tickle Trunk has had a really positive impact on my life. The staff there got us in touch with the kink community in Edmonton and some of them are

*webpage, but yet perhaps this wasn't explicit enough. On one hand, I didn't want to provide too much information on my Tickle Trunk connection because I didn't want participants to feel pressured to skew their responses to reflect only positive comments and experiences. But on the other hand, to be true to my feminist-oriented methodology and to work at equalizing power dynamics inherent in traditional research approaches, I really struggled with this coming away from this interview.*

*What is a good balance? How did I influence my participants with what I chose to explicitly share and what I held back? Is it enough that I was forthright when I was asked directly? Perhaps in this situation, I attended to institutional and*



even part of that community too. They have so many excellent resources and what I have learned from them has helped me to become more focuses on what I want to do for a career.

*situational ethics, but I  
maybe missed the mark in  
terms of the relational  
ethics...?*

## Bronwen's Story

The first Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy party that I attended was 7 years ago. I remember that the party felt very intimate; all of the guests were women and we talked about some serious subjects, like sexual abuse. After that, I hosted 3 sex toy parties at my condo within the last 4 or 5 years. I love hosting the parties because I go all out for my girlfriends with a theme, specialty drinks and party favours. I really like to give people an excuse for a fun night out.

The last party we had was a co-ed party hosted at The Traveling Tickle Trunk store. It was a private, after-hours event that we called our 'no-baby shower.' It was our way to celebrate our choice to be childfree and The Tickle Trunk was our first choice for a venue. This party was similar to a regular sex toy party, but more like an open house, so it was less structured. Everyone had a great time and it was cool to watch some of my introverted friends explore the store. Because of the nature of the party, it was mostly couples that attended, so the conversations were less in a large group like at a regular party and more between the couples. But we set up a craft station in the back room and there were lots of group conversations going on back there. This party was really special and it was great to know how many people in our lives supported us and our choice to be childfree.

I usually try to have about ten people or so at the sex toy parties that I host – more than that is just too much. I always serve booze, but at one of the parties there were a lot of designated drivers and I noticed that it took longer for people to warm up and come out of their shells. Now I make quarter-shot drinks, so even the drivers can have one or two, guilt free. I find that having a theme is really great because I can decorate and make my living room really comfortable. The theme also gives people a reason to come – it makes it more like a party and not just about sex toys. Except for the last party, I purposely host female-only parties because I want to offer my girlfriends a space to

*Autoethnographic notes*

*I trudged down the steep hill balancing coffees and bags. It was a cold and dark winter evening, the night of our first interview. Her condo was warm and inviting and so was she. We had never met before, but I felt comfortable right away. We chatted a lot before and after the interview about many wide-ranging topics and I felt like I got to know her a little bit. I tried to talk less than previous interviews. And while I found her to be open and forthright about*

have these conversations in a non- threatening atmosphere.

I have only ever had one party facilitator from The Traveling Tickle Trunk. I always want her to do my parties because she has such a breadth of knowledge. It would be really hard to shock or offend her, which goes a long way to creating a safe environment.

At parties, I love to watch people open up, especially when the facilitator says something that is new and exciting for them - female orgasm is a typical 'hot topic.' At every party, the anal beads get people laughing because they are unfamiliar for most people. Usually discussions about anything anal causes a few people to pull back though. Once we talked about circumcision and I could see some people remove themselves from that conversation. I don't think that people are necessarily offended by these topics; I just think that their reaction is more related to their own boundaries and ideas of intimacy.

I also know that more is going on in the ordering room than what I usually get to see in my living room. I am very extroverted and I'm comfortable sharing details about my sex life, but not everyone is. I think that it is great to have a private space for one-on-one conversations in case people are too shy or if something serious is going on for them. Even at the store party, the facilitator was available for private discussions and I saw some people taking advantage the opportunity to speak with her.

I think I always learn from the parties, but I don't think I come to the parties with that intention. The whole process is more fluid than that. I have learned a lot through experience, especially as I become older and wiser and I have been in a long-term trusting relationship. But I also think that it would be really hard not to learn something from the sex toy parties.

It is important to me that The Traveling Tickle

*her life judging by her expressions, there was a small element of concern or questioning for her own responses.*

*The one thing though that really stood out was her fierce loyalty to The Tickle Trunk.*

*About three weeks later, I trudged down the steep hill, again balancing coffees and bags. This second interview was more difficult to schedule because she was really busy, so I appreciated her extra time. It was lighter out – finally, the days were becoming a tiny bit longer. When we*

Trunk is a local business that is owned and operated by a woman. I appreciate how hard she has worked to create a female-friendly atmosphere that is classy, approachable and non-judgmental. I also like that The Tickle Trunk is involved in the community and that her business is inclusive and non-discriminatory.

One of the things I love about The Traveling Tickle Trunk is that it is a multi-faceted company. They have more going on than sales and parties. They distribute a newsletter, they have a Facebook page, they host workshops and so on. And all of these things are for everyone – men, women, gay straight - you name it, Because they are so inclusive, it never feels like The Tickle Trunk has an ulterior motive; it truly feels like education is an important part of the business. And I am sure that it is profitable and that it helps build their business, but it doesn't feel like it is a sell job. I never second guess or feel confused by their motives when they are teaching me something.

Growing up, I had very little sex education. My school only talked about sex in terms prevention – prevention of abuse or assault, prevention of pregnancy or disease. We didn't even learn about condoms until the twelfth grade and by that time one of my friend's had already died from AIDS-related pneumonia. As a teen, it just constantly felt like information was getting to me way too late in my life.

The only sex education my parents gave me was 'don't come home pregnant.' When I was 14, I took myself to a doctor to get birth control, so I wouldn't get pregnant. At 16, my mom read my diary and discovered many things about my life, including that I was sexually active. After that, the situation got so bad at home that I moved out. It might seem like being on my own at 16 gave me freedom, but sometimes I think that if 15 year old me had access to some of the information I have now, 16 year old me would not have had to suffer so many setbacks. And I think that is probably true for a lot of people. I believe that there is real danger in not getting

*sat down again in her cozy living room, I explained the technological issues with our first interview and she was very understanding. I re-confirmed her consent and reassured her that I remembered what we talked about during the first interview, but that I was going to ask the same questions again so that her story could be transcribed.*

*Again, I think her responses the second time around were richer with confidence and details. Even though the content didn't change,*

good information when you need it and I think that The Traveling Tickle offers information that can truly help people.

I will keep having sex toy parties because they are educational, they open new conversations and they are super fun. I just think that there is huge value in just putting these things out there. Even if people don't buy anything or ask any questions, they go home with new thoughts and ideas about sex and sexuality. And I truly believe that human beings are happier if we are sexually gratified.

*she offered more. While it was an embarrassing situation, in the end, I was happy to have these second chances.*

### Stacy's Story

The first Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy party I attended was for my stagette. I had no idea what my friends had arranged – I only specified no strippers – and I was surprised that it was a sex toy party. Now, I have just celebrated my seventh wedding anniversary and I think I have had about two parties per year since my stagette. Each time I host a party, it is mostly the same crowd, but there are always a couple of party 'virgins' added to the mix. Each party is also a bit different depending on the dynamic of the crowd, but once we met The Tickle Trunk, there was no going back.

I am an open book and I am not shy and people know that if they accept my invitation to come to a party; they have to be open too, otherwise they shouldn't come. I will invite all my friends and it is up to them to decide whether the parties are for them or not. And sometimes people surprise me and they show up when I didn't expect them to and that is great.

All of the parties I have hosted were women-only, except the last one. One woman brought her boyfriend, so it was all women plus him. Everyone at the party was totally fine having him there, but he seemed really uncomfortable. After a while, and a few drinks, he warmed up a little and asked few questions. We've tried to have co-ed parties in the past, where everyone could bring their boyfriend or their husband, but the men would filter themselves out before the night of the party. I am not sure if we could ever make it actually happen. My husband is usually home during the parties, but he doesn't participate. He is the 'fly on the wall' so to speak and spends the night playing video games in the other room.

The parties are really a chance to have a girl's night out. We are all moms and we just need to get out once in a while and have some fun and a couple of drinks. This is the perfect excuse. It is a reason to get out of the house and have some 'me' time. And since the parties are at my house and not a

### Autoethnographic notes

*Stacy was one of the gracious participants who agreed to meet with me twice. Both times we met at a coffee shop near her house and chatted over lattes and mochas. Although the coffee shop wasn't an ideal location in terms of privacy and noise, we were strangers, so it was a nice, neutral setting. Through the process of arranging both interviews, I also learned that Stacy is an incredibly busy woman and I wanted to make this process easy and painless for her.*

restaurant or a bar, guests can bring their little babies that are inseparable from Mom and when someone is pregnant they can come and have fun and be comfortable too.

The same person facilitated all of our sex toy parties. We are comfortable with her and we know that she knows us. I would always choose her first and if she was busy on the date we wanted, I would try to rearrange the party. I really like her because she knows her stuff and she makes everyone feel comfortable by being open and ready to explain anything. She is confident and she never acts surprised by comments or questions. She knows when to joke around and she can read the crowd. She is considerate of others' experiences and meets them where they are at.

Not much is held back in the parties. People are familiar and comfortable with parties and with our party facilitator, so they are open and there is a lot of talking and sharing. We are kind of educated now after all of these parties, so there are less questions now than at the beginning. That is why it is good to have a few new people come because sometimes they ask questions that we have never thought about.

I have come to a few of the parties with particular questions or topics in mind and I have always had the opportunity to ask them in the group setting or in private afterwards. I have asked personal questions for my husband or myself and I have even asked questions for friends that are too shy or uncomfortable.

We always get excited about new stuff in the facilitators 'basket of fun.' The last couple of parties, everyone has really loved the Lelo toys. We zoned in on these toys because they were new and beautiful. Most of us have kids and it isn't obvious that the Lelo toys are sex toys, so if the kids accidentally found it, we can just tell them to put it down and there are no questions from them because these toys don't look dirty or sexual.

*Both meetings we  
happily chatted and I  
found her to be very  
forthcoming with her  
responses. Since she had  
hosted so many parties,  
it was difficult to get  
into any specifics – I can  
imagine that the parties  
all blend together after  
more than 10!*

*At times during our first  
meeting I noticed some  
discomfort when people  
sat near us. She  
stammered and blushed  
a little bit, so I tried to  
keep my language  
general – parties  
instead of sex toy  
parties, toys instead of*

The facilitator stopped bringing anal toys to our parties because it made one of the guests in particular really uncomfortable. I think she stopped bringing those toys because of her discomfort and the fact that they were never purchased. Really those toys were never anything but a joke, so she just replaced them with different toys.

When we were new to the parties, I learned a lot of things at each party. There are so many topics discussed at parties. Sometimes we talk about sex and sometimes we talk about communication with partners. Now, I would say I learn something every time, whether it is about the products or a friend. I have gained a lot of insight into my friends and coworkers and they definitely learn a lot about me. I think after the parties, we know each other more and we learn each other's boundaries. And really the party is a perfect situation to learn these things because people can choose to participate in different conversations or not and there is less pressure than if it was a one-on-one conversation.

I think the reason that we learn so much is because it is in your own home and we always have food and drinks. It is a comfortable place to be and even though we might giggle or laugh, it is not in judgment and everyone knows that.

Before the sex toy parties, I was always curious about sex and sex toys, but I would never ask anything. And now, after all these parties, I am an open book. It has really changed things between my husband and me because I am no longer shy about trying new things. We have been married seven years and we have two kids and I can honestly say that I am completely happy with my sex life. This has a lot to do with the parties opening my eyes about a few things and letting me have some new experiences. My husband, on the other hand, was never against any products for me, but he was really hesitant to check out any male toys. Over time, being that 'fly on the wall,' he has become more inquisitive and experimental. I think we have both evolved.

*sex toys – and I tried to  
present a demeanor  
that was unaffected, or  
at least not*

*embarrassed about our  
conversation. The  
discomfort was  
temporary and when it  
wore off, she became  
comfortable and  
assertive again.*

*After I drove away, I felt  
a sense of relief that the  
last interview was done  
and I could let go of my  
anxiety about botched  
recordings and  
scheduling and  
everything that comes  
with conducting  
interviews. I also had a  
small sense of hope that*



I think it is really great to have the parties so often because we get to talk about our life changes and share them with each other. During these parties we learn how to deal with pregnancies or sex after kids. And I have come to realize that it is okay, I am not the only one who has had to deal with these things.

The Traveling Tickle Trunk has really gone above and beyond my expectations for a sex toy party. The facilitator's knowledge gives me confidence in my purchases and I can trust what she tells me. This trust had been built over time watching the company grow and evolve. I love the newsletters and even though I have never had a chance to attend one of her workshops, I think it is so cool that you can get specific information from her on a topic that you can trust.

*perhaps I didn't screw  
everything up by  
needing to interview  
people twice. Perhaps,  
in the end, it helped me  
to have deeper and  
more meaningful  
conversations with the  
participants I didn't  
know because we could  
build some trust over  
time. Perhaps.*

## InterText

### *Conference Heckler*

*We were the last presentation on the last day of the conference. The worst slot. Little did I know that it could in fact get worse.*

*He came into the room and I could tell he was a Professor right away.*

*"What is this session about?" he asked.*

*"Sex toys and disability," the presenter responded.*

*"Is it just for women?" he asked.*

*"No, anyone can join," said the presenter with a welcoming smile.*

*"Well why are there so many women here then? In this whole conference? They could work on getting more men. But one thing I can tell you is that the women here are far better looking than average."*

*The smile faded, and her cheeks flushed. "Sorry Sir, but I can't explain the diversity of the room to you. Please take a seat if you plan on staying for the presentation." Her voice was stern and commanding.*

*Of course, the Professor took the seat next to me, I thought with an internal eye roll.*

*As he sat next to me, he turned and asked, "So what have you learned at the conference so far?"*

*The moderator stood up and introduced the speakers. Imagine my surprise when I realize that the Professor was presenting right before me. In the same room. "My only hope is that he leaves early," I thought. No such luck.*

*Strangely, as I set up the computer, while the crowd chatted to each other, my nerves faded away. I was excited to share my research with sexuality experts of all disciplines. And I was especially excited for Brenda to situate this research in the context of her business conducting sex toy parties because it is so rare to see your work meaningfully contextualized and potentially implemented so soon.*

*The presentation went swimmingly. I found a certain confidence that had been hidden away. It leaped out of my mouth as soon as I started to talk about my thesis process that has engulfed the last three years of my life. Brenda too seemed to relish the opportunity to share her thoughts and ideas with peers.*

*Then it happened. As the formal presentation ended, hands shot up with questions, including the Professor's. We attended to everyone else first, worried about what might come out of his mouth, but we could avoid his hand no longer.*

*"Yes," I said to him.*

*"Well first I would like to say good job, I agree with your recommendations," he said, looking straight at Brenda. Then his gaze shifted to me. "Unfortunately, I don't think we can take much from this," he stated matter-of-factly. "You used to work there. You are biased. You should have had someone else conduct the interviews. How can we know that what you are saying is true?"*

*I could feel the anger and humiliation well up inside me, but I did not want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me upset.*

*"As I mentioned earlier, this was a qualitative study conducted through a poststructural feminist framework. It is not meant to be generalizable in the same sense as a quantitative study. I tried to illustrate the diverse women that attend Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy parties and share some of their thoughts and ideas about their sex toy party experience with this particular company. Just as not all companies are the same, not all women are the same either; however, with the time restraints of the presentation, I could only share with you a small portion of my preliminary findings."*

*Whew. Deep breath. I think I handled that well.*

*"But you don't have enough participants," he retorted. "Nine participants makes for a very small study. You will never get this published."*

*Ouch. That smarted. "Well which is it?" I wanted to say. "Am I biased or is my sample size the issue?" Of course, I held back and instead what came out of my mouth was, "Thank you for your comments. I am confident with my study design, which was thoroughly vetted and discussed with my supervisor. He has an excellent publication record and I am looking forward to having his support and guidance when I am ready to publish. Additionally, I was pleased with the number of participants that agreed to participate in this qualitative study" Deep breath out. And then I just had to dig it in. "I seem to recall seeing one of your publications recently," I said with a sweet smile. "I recall that it was an excellent study about dildos as a possible tool for men after prostate cancer treatment. It was very innovative and I enjoyed reading the perspective of your single participant."*

*I stopped there, my hands shaking a little bit. I looked around the room with that sinking feeling that I had taken it too far. Instead of the polite and professional presenter, had I become the monster presenter whose work cannot be challenged? The nods echoing all around the room reassured me that the crowd was with me; however, those twangs of regret were difficult to shake in spite of reassurances from audience members, colleagues, and Brenda.*

*A month or so later, I received an email. The conference had compiled feedback from all of the sessions and here it was in my inbox. "Great work," it said. "You were one of the few presenters who didn't receive a mark below a 4 on our five-point scale and you had the highest average score."*

*"Omigod. That is fantastic!" I thought.*

*Comments from audience members were also included. They ranged from "Great work—it made me interested in this industry," to "I was curious to see how this young woman would get others to open up about what is often considered a taboo topic. It was clear after hearing these women speak that they convey so much respect for their participants and honour the stories they are told," to "there were aggressive questions from audience - what an articulate and strong young woman to handle such rude questions so well!" I sat at the computer, a bit dumbfounded, as a gigantic grin spread across my face. I wonder what the Professor would say about this.*

## Chapter 6

### Research Synthesis

#### Discourse(s) of the Traveling Tickle Trunk Sex Toy Party

*We are not only dealing with discourses of silence here, then but also with discourses of desire.*

**Atkinson, 2006, p. 598**

“‘Sex’ and ‘sexual pleasure’ are very much ‘social constructions’ in that certain attitudes, behaviours, and activities are considered taboo. Societal norms exert a great deal of control over what is ‘acceptable’ sexuality” (Rye & Meaney, 2007, p. 44). Thus, “sexuality can be thought of as an institution defined by shared social meaning that is constructed around the simple stimulation of genitals; sex, in this sense, is what we make it” (Rye & Meaney, 2007, p. 29). It is clear from the stories of the research participants that home sex toy parties are rife with complex interactions between the guests, host, facilitator, and even the company providing the parties, which are steeped in past experiences, current expectations, personal feelings and boundaries, relational boundaries, and social acceptability and stigma. Circulating within this context are powerful discourses contingent on the positionalities of party guests and the historical, cultural, and social particularities of the home sex toy party context. Three discourses in particular resonated across and throughout participants’ narratives which frame this discussion: the home sex toy party as a learning experience; ‘choosing your own adventure’ in the home sex toy party; and, the inclusive environment of the home sex toy party. These discourses help to situate home sex toy parties as

exploratory, social learning sites with political and pedagogical elements for the women who attend.

**The Home Sex Toy Party as a Learning Experience.** As described in the participants' narratives, the home sex toy parties discussed in this study offered many learning opportunities. The majority of participants indicated that they did not attend the party with the intention of learning; curiosity and the desire to have fun with friends were the main motivators to attend. Yet participants described many facets of personal and social learning that occurred within this context. Participants highlighted product-related learning, such as the diversity of products available, sex toy materials, sex toy hygiene, and sex toy safety. Participants also described learning about anatomy, specifically in relation to the g-spot and the prostate, as well as learning about specific sex acts, including masturbation and female orgasm, among others.

In addition to concrete knowledge about products, sex, and anatomy, participants talked about engaging in broader discussions, which led to learning about and normalizing diverse sexual interests, needs, and expressions. Through sharing and discussion, participants engaged in interpersonal, sociocultural learning. Some participants gained an increased understanding of their own and others boundaries and learned new communication strategies for friends and partners. Participants also learned to transgress taboo topics, specifically anal sex and circumcision, and critically question and evaluate their own and others beliefs, as they learned in new and sometimes transformative ways.

In the home sex toy party context, the party facilitator provides specific product-related information; however, the interests of the group, indicated by questions and group discussion, largely dictates the topics explored during the home sex toy party. By sharing narratives, a dialogic perspective takes shape, in which participants shift from objects to subjects, as all participants of the home sex toy party reflect and interpret their own and others experiences. The contextual nature of the narratives shared during home sex toy parties, “encourages exploration of the ways in which development patterns, situated within the individual life course, are influenced by cultural meaning systems” (Rossiter, 1999a, p. 66). This has the potential to help participants move from a narrow perspective to a more inclusive perspective; it can also provide impetus for critical reflection by recognizing the limitations of individual and cultural meaning systems and lead to a critique of how sexuality is constituted. “The act of telling one’s story externalizes it so that one becomes more aware of the themes and topics that dominate one’s life. Once that awareness takes place, a person can question whether or not to continue along the same lines” (Hermans, as cited in Rossiter, 1999b, p. 83).

**‘Choosing your Own Adventure’ in the Home Sex Toy Party.** Unlike traditional educational settings, the home sex toy party environment empowers participants to create their own experience by engaging in aspects of the party in varying degrees. Based on the subjectivity of party guests, meaning their individual positionalities alongside the needs and interests they are ready and willing to explore, they can choose to fully engage in conversations by interacting

and sharing stories, partially engage by actively listening, perhaps without sharing, partially disengage by leaving briefly to use the washroom, or obtain refills of food and drinks, or fully disengage by leaving the party area entirely. As illustrated in the participant narratives, the level of engagement is in constant flux throughout the home sex toy party and between different sex toy parties due to the dynamics of the group, the prior knowledge and experience of the individual, and the cultural, historical, social, and personal understandings they bring bear.

Given the sensitive nature of the content of the home sex toy party, the participants expressed the importance of both a public presentation space and a private ordering space in order to facilitate a safe and comfortable environment and encourage the engagement of party guests. As illustrated in the participants' narratives, some found the public space an excellent opportunity to share details of their personal lives, non-personal information, such as second-hand stories or pop-culture references, or to simply listen. This informal, semi-self-directed, group engagement provides the opportunity for guests to integrate new knowledge into their past experience and to engage with the information shared within this context by asking questions, contributing additional information, or presenting alternative viewpoints.

The private presentation space offered guests a separate environment to engage with the party facilitator one-on-one. In this space, guests could privately ask specific questions about the products they were interested in, personal issues they were encountering in their own life, or general sexuality-related interests. Participants consistently commented that the inclusion of public and private



settings within the home sex toy party empowered them to actively choose what and how much to share publicly. In this sense, the home sex toy party must recognize that for party guests “matters of context, relationship, and disposition contour the learning terrain and frame its inclusionary and transformative characteristics” (Grace, 2002, p. 132).

**The Home Sex Toy Party as an Inclusive Environment.** Previous research on home sex toy parties found that the parties reproduced stereotypical notions of sexuality. However, based on the participant narratives in this study, it is clear that the inclusive nature of The Traveling Tickle Trunk home sex toy parties offered alternative visions of sexuality. Home sex toy party facilitators, trained by the company, had unique opportunities to share positive messages regarding diverse sexual interests, needs, and responses in order to challenge prevalent, narrowly conceived, medicalized, heterosexist conceptions of sexuality.

One of the unique, inclusive aspects of The Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy parties was the lack of restriction in terms of who could attend as party guests. Legally the only restriction is that home sex toy party guests must be eighteen years or older and Traveling Tickle Trunk policies state that home sex toy parties are open to men and women of all sexualities. It was interesting, and unique in the research literature, to discuss with participants their thoughts and feelings on women-only and co-ed home sex toy parties. Some participants felt very strongly about maintaining a women-only environment, while other guests enjoyed the ability to interact with men and women in this context. Women-only parties were described as safe and comfortable, yet, at the same time, they were seen as

potentially judgmental spaces. Co-ed parties were often comprised of couples, which, participants stated, generated specific, purposeful questions. However, the discussion and dialogue seemed to take place more often between partners in this context, which allowed them to discuss and choose their purchases together, but created an atmosphere of containment or modesty about publicly sharing personal information.

While participants tended to have gendered notions of home sex toy parties, they also indicated that diverse party guests enhanced the party experience. Participants indicated that guests of diverse ages, backgrounds, sexualities, and sexual interests asked different questions, which contributed to rich discussions. For some participants, publicly sharing facets of diversity created trust among party guests and a sense of a shared, intimate experience.

The Traveling Tickle Trunk home sex toy parties also illustrated inclusion through language. Facilitators challenged heterosexist bias by employing broad terminology. Facilitators also inserted alternative messages, or counter-narratives, into product descriptions by illustrating non-traditional uses for products, such as how men or couples could use products traditionally marketed to women. Some products shown during the home sex toy party, such as anal toys, or certain topics, such as circumcision, were laden with controversy, bias or stigma. In these circumstances, facilitators attempted to share information and normalize diversity in order to challenge assumptions and meta-narratives. Through the participant narratives, it was clear that for facilitators, “[d]ifference must not merely be

tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.” (Lorde, 1984, p.112).

### **Feminist Pedagogy and Home Sex Toy Parties**

*Agency is never freedom from discursive constitution of the self, but the capacity to recognize that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted.*

**Davies, 1991, p. 51**

It appears that the unique environment of the home sex toy party is a delicate balance between a festive, party setting with food, drinks, and laughter, and an intimate, transgressive educational space in which those present are able to share knowledge and experience on subjects that are largely silent in other social settings. This group dynamic has the potential to become “an educational environment which enables students to critically engage with the discourses, practices and ideologies which structure their lives and to investigate ways in which these can be resisted and transformed” (Hughes, 1995, p. 224). In this poststructural feminist pedagogy, “multiple identities, multiple subjectivities, multiple differences and multiple meanings are explored in this emergent counter discourse that contests the politics of patriarchal control in institutions and other socio-cultural sites” (Grace & Gouthro, 2000, p. 20) such as the home sex toy party.

One of the ways in which the home sex toy party has the potential to embody poststructural feminist pedagogy is through the shift in the balance of power between facilitator and guests. Rather than being positioned as ‘the expert’ intending to give a lecture, the home sex toy party facilitator can insert themselves

into the party context with an open mind, a relaxed attitude, and confidence to share knowledge, answer questions, and learn from others. According to the research participants, this attitude was conveyed in the facilitators' appearance, demeanor, and presentation skills. By engaging in the sex toy party as both a teacher and a learner, facilitators can create a safe environment, foster trust, and normalize and legitimize guests' experiences. Only once an open and accepting dynamic has been established can the facilitator offer counter-narratives to challenge assumptions, beliefs, and contradictions to create a "possibility of constructing new subject positions from which to resist hegemony" (Lather, 1991, p. 40).

In the end, the majority of participants shared that attending home sex toy parties had a positive impact on their lives, which was expressed both personally and interpersonally. Some participants felt that home sex toy parties brought about changes in their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs on a variety of topics, including exposure to and understanding of the diverse nature of sexual interests, needs, and experiences. Some participants also reported new decisions or actions, such as researching products before purchasing or making career decisions, related to these changes. Participants also spoke of improved communication with partners, increased intimacy within their friendships, and increased understanding of compatible and incompatible relationships. As evidenced in the participant narratives, through the "interweaving of thinking, doing and feeling" (Fiddler & Marienau, 2008, p. 75) in the home sex toy party context, participants have the

potential to develop critical consciousness, which can result in personal and social transformations.

Shared experiences and the opportunity to share narratives within the home sex toy party also inspires sociocultural learning. Although the home sex toy party is not a traditional community, guests are often connected as family, friends, and co-workers. Guests also share base biological expressions as sexual beings. In this sense, they share a collective identity. The ability to gather and to share within the home sex toy party reinforces this collective identity; however, it is the uniqueness of guests that can ignite impassioned conversation and debate. It is diversity that synthesizes the learning and critical reflection that take place within this context to become something larger and more powerful than simply purchasing a toy.

Home sex toy party companies and home sex toy party facilitators engaging in poststructural feminist pedagogy have a responsibility to acknowledge that “we are inscribed in what we struggle against” (Lather, 1991, p. 20). Engaging in self-reflexivity “enables us to look closely at our own practice in terms of how we contribute to dominance in spite of our liberatory intentions” (Lather, 1991, p. 15). Through ongoing reflection, training, and discussion, the home sex toy party facilitators and the companies that hire them, can examine themselves, the party guests, and the knowledge produced within the home sex toy party environment to be responsive to the needs of their customers and their business through “mutual, dialogic production of a multi-voice, multi-centered discourse” (Lather, 1991, p. 112).

## **Balancing Empowerment and Commodification in Home Sex Toy Parties**

*Where there is consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency.*

**Appadurai, 1996, p.7**

The intimacy fostered within the home sex toy party creates “greater potential for both personal empowerment and capitalist exploitation of consumers” (McCaughey & French, 2001, p. 82). Marketing strategies in sex retailing often ignore the complexity of historical, cultural, social, and personal contexts and “there is an emphasis on the individual as the creator of her own significance, status and experience, and on the need to make these culturally visible and meaningful through the manipulation of appropriate consumer goods” (Attwood, 2005, p. 401).

The ability of individual women to achieve better orgasms, feel more romantic with the husbands, or even be able to afford to send their kids to a better school does not mean that larger feminist goals have been achieved on a wide-scale social and cultural level. While these companies do bring attention to the important issue of women’s access to knowledge about their bodies, as well as their right to sexual pleasure, such attention should not be accepted uncritically. The forms of sexual agency most often represented by NMOs [i.e. network marketing organizations] are extremely limited, contained within a (white) heterosexual framework that remains rigidly patriarchal and that does little to disrupt inequalities in existing sexual, family, social, or economic systems. (Heineken, 2009, p.39-40).

Home sex toy party companies, such as The Traveling Tickle Trunk, can offer an alternative vision of sex retailing. By employing poststructural feminist pedagogy in their work, home sex toy party companies and facilitators can offer counter-narratives, which create opportunities to transgress meta-narratives through sharing narratives and engaging in critical reflection, which has the potential to result in personal and social transformation. As illustrated in this research study, participants engaged in valuable and unexpected learning opportunities in this context that left a lasting impact on their lives. This opportunity to engage in sexuality education with women was possible because of the non-traditional, pleasure-based nature of the home sex toy party experience and the unique positioning of this for-profit venture as a fun night with friends. However, consumer choice cannot be conflated with sexual freedom; yet “when we stress the liabilities of consumer culture by focusing exclusively on the ways that pleasure is deferred and satisfaction is unattainable, we miss the moments that contradict this – moments when consumer satisfaction and even bliss is achieved” (Curtis, 2004, p. 114).

### **Study Limitations and Future Research**

No research project is without its limitations. My interpretation of reflexive/narrative autoethnography involved incorporating the researcher as the researched by transforming reflexive, dyadic interviews into bioethnographies in order to highlight the diverse and unique voices of women who attended home sex toy parties. By employing autoethnography in this way, the participants’ voices cannot be separated from my own. I believe that this foregrounds the notion that

researchers are intimately embedded in their research; however, it does not fully achieve the equalization of power dynamics that feminist research methodologies strive for. Future research should consider having participants construct their own narratives after the reflexive, dyadic interview in order to maintain and share their unique voices.

It is also important to acknowledge the sampling bias inherent in prospective sampling via The Traveling Tickle Trunk social media platforms. Little previous research has explicitly explored the experiences of home sex toy party guests due to the difficulty of accessing this population. Using my personal and professional connections with The Traveling Tickle Trunk, I was fortunate to be able to access this population and include their voices in the research literature; however, the participants of this study do not represent all home sex toy party guests. By self-selecting to participate, the participants of this study were motivated to share their Traveling Tickle Trunk home sex toy party experiences. As a qualitative research study, these findings are not intended to be generalizable to wider populations, but are meant to add to the literature by illustrating the experiences of nine women who attended Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy parties.

I was also unable to recruit older participants and participants from diverse ethnicities/cultural backgrounds. This may be because older women and non-Caucasian women do not attend Traveling Tickle Trunk sex toy parties as frequently as younger, Caucasian women. This under-representation may also be due to the method of recruitment (i.e., via social media), which is typically accessed by younger individuals. It could also be related to the sensitive nature of



the research topic, which may be associated with silence and stigma in older women or women from other ethnic or cultural backgrounds. The lack of representation in these areas means that the experiences of older women and non-Caucasian women are not reflected in this study. While findings from this qualitative study are not intended to be generalized to wider populations, I believe that they highlight the experiences of current and potential home sex toy party participants; however, it is important to understand that these findings may not resonate with everyone. Future research could purposively seek out participants from under-represented demographics, such as older women, women of diverse cultural/ethnic backgrounds, and sexual minorities, through targeted advertizing.

Current research literature suggests that sex toy parties are female-only events; however, it is important to highlight that a number of study participants spoke about their experiences of co-ed home sex toy parties. While this may be a uniquely Canadian phenomenon due to the absence of regulation, future research could examine the male experience of the home sex toy party.

Finally, it is important to note that this research study represents a snapshot in time. The perspectives of The Traveling Tickle Trunk and the research participants, as well as my own thoughts and feelings are always in flux, affected by everything that has come before and contingent on the current environment in which we live. They are not meant to represent everyone, always. These stories represent a moment in time; a moment that we reinterpreted every time we look back. Ongoing research is necessary to capture the evolution of

home sex toy parties and to explore the ways in which these parties function within our ever-changing world.

## **Conclusion**

*We must make the intelligible appear against a background of emptiness and deny its necessity. We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces*

**Foucault, 1981/1997, pp. 139-140**

Throughout the history of sexuality research, women's voices have been largely marginalized due to patriarchal and medicalized conceptions of female sexuality. This research study was intended to share strong female voices, including the nine research participants, The Traveling Tickle Trunk, and myself, in order to highlight the pleasure-based, non-medicalized, educational context of the home sex toy party in the sexuality research literature. It is my hope that "[l]ooking at the world from a specific, perspectival, and limited vantage point can tell, teach, and put people in motion" (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 276). Through the narratives that make up this research study, other home sex toy party companies have the opportunity to consider the perspectives of their potential customers and to examine the business practices of a single company in order to learn from and build upon elements that address the needs of both their company and their customers.

This study highlights that the home sex toy party is a non-traditional and uniquely situated venue of sexuality education for women. Given the "deafening silence of sexualities in education" (Atkinson, 2006, p. 596), transgressive organizations must step in to fill the void. As for-profit ventures, home sex toy

parties have the unique ability to offer a largely ignored, but transformative discourse of sexuality – sex as pleasure. Yet the interaction between education in this context and market forces must be monitored to ensure that it is not exploitative. Through education, home sex toy parties can engage their community in important conversations about sex and sexuality, which in turn may raise consumer expectations, foster social critique, and inspire personal and social transformation. “Pleasure is yet another commodity in late capitalism, but it’s also worth having nonetheless. Pleasure is politically complex, which makes us hopeful that it could serve as a vehicle toward the critiques begun in the second wave of the feminist movement” (McCaughey & French, 2001, p. 94-95).

## InterText

### *Celebrating the 'uns'*

*On this rainy day, I revisited a chapter that I initially read nearly two years ago in one of my first graduate courses. The contents of the chapter (and I must admit - the book) had become hazy and the details long lost, but, delightfully, in (re)opening the book I (re)discovered the wonderful notion of celebrating the "uns." This book, *Challenging the Professionalization of Adult Education*, describes the life and work of John Ohliger, a 'radical' adult educator who made substantial contributions to our field; and in this particular chapter, Lee Karlovic describes Ohliger's fascination and focus on the "uns" - which Ohliger himself described as "unabashed, unafraid, uncensorable, unconventional, uninhibited, unorthodox, unpretentious, unstinting, unsung, untiring, and finally, definitely unique!" (Ohliger, 2000, p. 2).*

*I, too, want to be a part of this celebration of the "uns." I am so fascinated by the unlikely and unconventional places of learning - such as my favourite place - the home sex toy party. I like to think of unlikely places as spaces of cultural resistance, in which popular culture can be used "to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure" (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5). Sure, sex toy parties are a venue to sell sex toys, but in my experience, they are also a venue to resist powerful and entrenched sex-negative rhetoric - such as viewing female sexuality as difficult and problematic, difference as pathological, and sex toys as deviant. It is my belief that this particular consumer space actually creates an opportunity to (re)visit and (re)write our beliefs about sexuality in new and different ways. From where I stand, sex toy parties can be pleasure-based, sex-positive, self-directed learning at its best! With a facilitator as your guide and your friends as your sounding board, you can explore ideas and seek information that is meaningful to you on topics that are rarely openly and honestly discussed.*

*So, to quote John Ohliger, "here's to 'the uns!'" (Ohliger, 2000, p. 2). This thesis journey was full of the unlikely, the unconventional, the unexpected and the previously unseen. I can only hope that the future holds more of the same.*

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Advertisement



## Tickle Trunk News

**Happy New Year everyone! We are marking the New Year by cleaning out the old stuff. Get great deals on overstock and discontinued items - only until Friday, January 6th.**

### 2012 Workshops are Here!

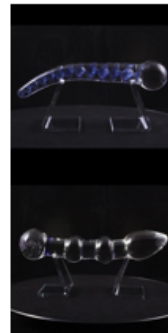
*We've got a great line-up of workshops starting up soon.*

January 15 - Rope 101  
 January 18 - Penis Pleasing 101  
 January 22 - Consensual Non-Monogamy  
 February 1 - Female Orgasm 101  
 February 11 - Safe and Happy Anal Play

*Register on-line or call us at the store*

### New Toys in the Trunk

*We have some beautiful new toys from lovestyles class. These are top quality borosilicate toys crafted by hand.*



*Piccante is slim and sleek - great for anal play, g-spot play and those who prefer a small toy.*

[Click here for more info.](#)

*Forte is a large toy with lots of weight and texture.*

[Click here for more info.](#)

There may finally be hope in the search for a vaccine for HIV. Read about it in Brenda's [column](#) in VUE Weekly.

Yet another reason to be sceptical of things you find on the net, Brenda examines one of the worst sex products ever. Check it out on her [blog](#).

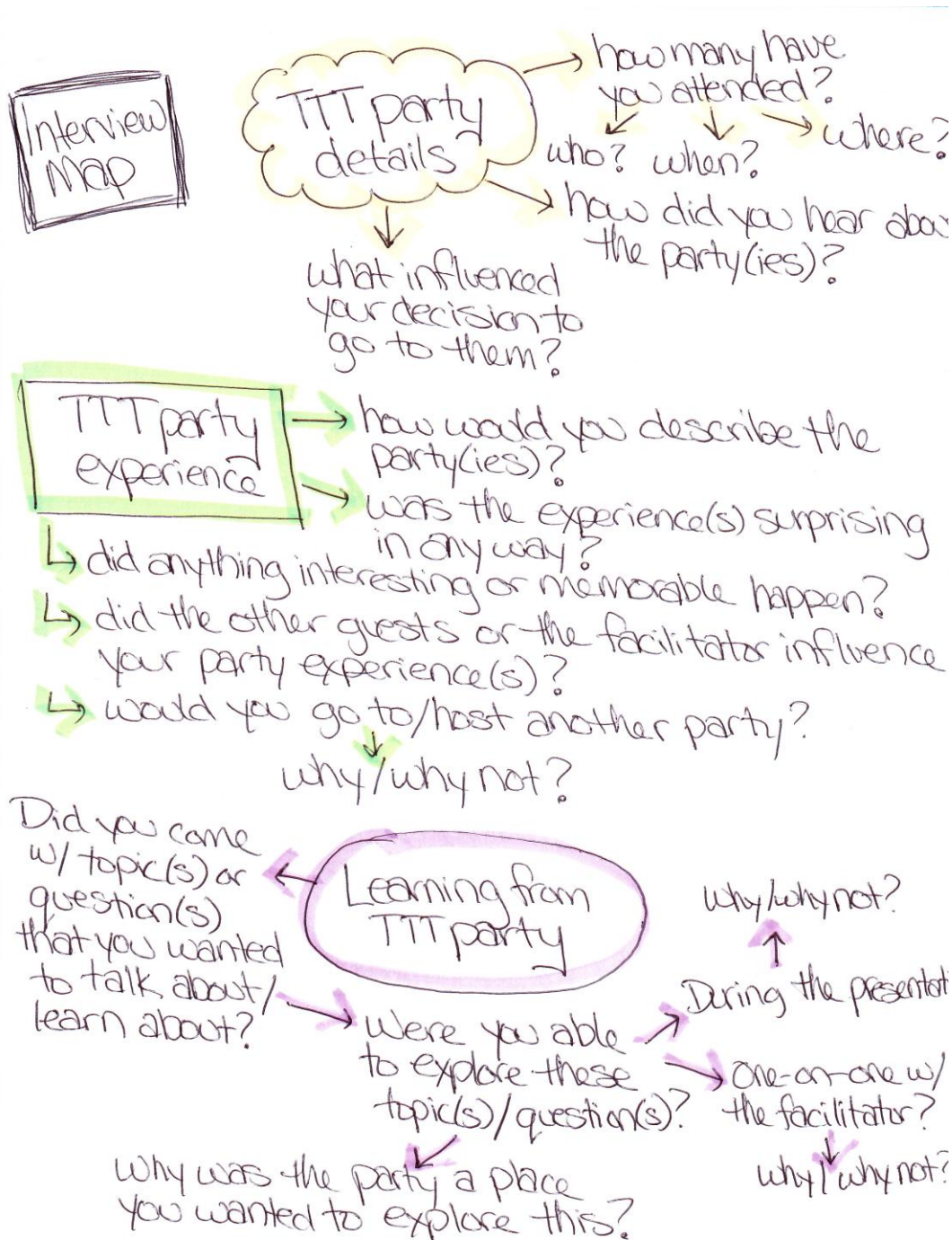
### We Want to Hear from You About Your TTT Experience!

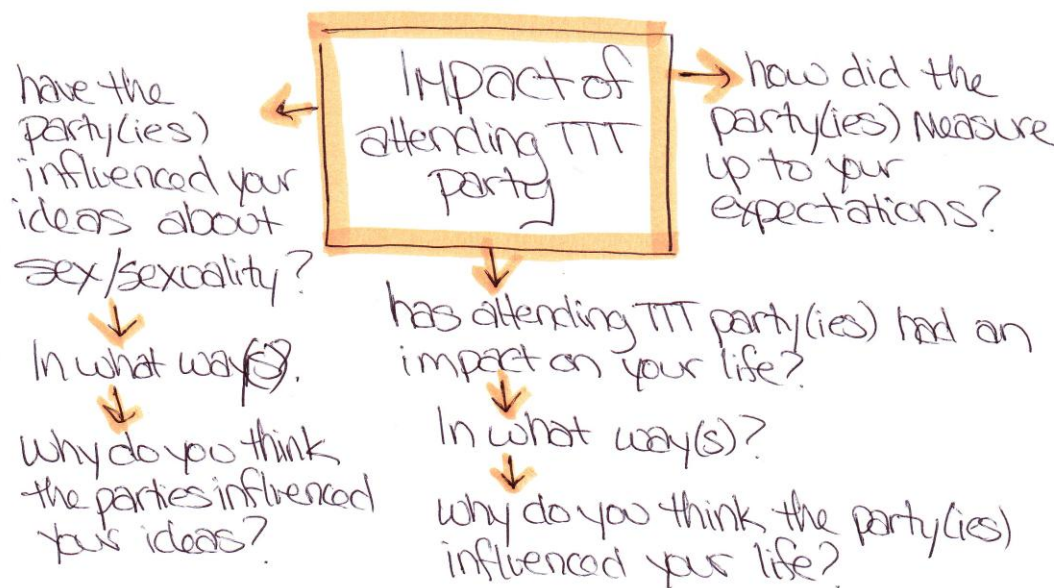
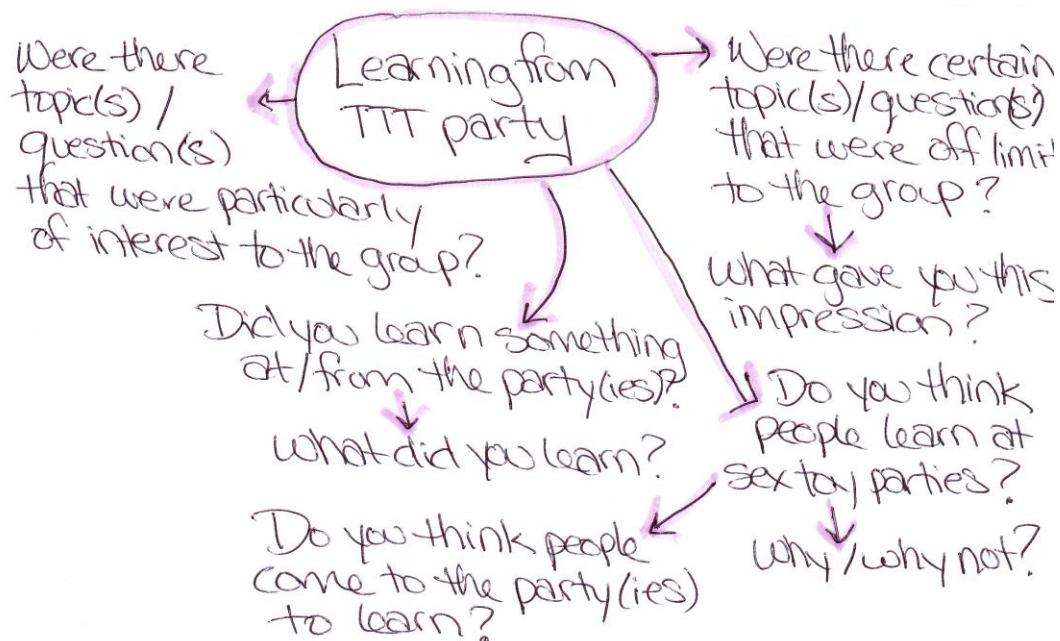
I am a graduate student seeking to interview women who have attended one or more sex toy parties given by the Traveling Tickle Trunk as part of my Master's thesis research. I am a great listener who is eager to know more about why you attended the sex toy parties; your experiences during the sex toy parties; and, what, if anything changed about your view of sex toy parties, sex toys, and sexuality after attending the parties. This research project has been approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board 1 and will adhere to all ethical requirements, including privacy and confidentiality of participants.

Please contact Lauren via email at [laurena@ualberta.ca](mailto:laurena@ualberta.ca) to participate in this exciting project.

## Appendix B

### Interview Topics & Question Map





Is there anything else you would like to say/add that we didn't touch on?