Understanding the Sexual Selves of Middle Eastern-American Women (A Study in Progress)
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Abstract

The aim of the present study (currently in process) is to explore the experiences of Middle Eastern-American women, with particular attention to the development of their sexual self-concepts within the contexts of culture, family, and immigration. Given the lack of research on this population and subject matter, narrative inquiry from a feminist point of view has been selected as the methodology for this research topic. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited for research about people whose experience is not well understood, or whose 'voices' have not been heard. In recent decades, the research of feminists regarding issues of women has come to have a critical impact on the way in which research is conducted. The findings provide new realities from women and a greater balance of viewpoints not seen prior to the last twenty years of the twentieth century. Olesen (1977 pp.1-2) indicates that feminist qualitative research is diversified but above the noise of disagreement and debate, there is agreement that feminist inquiry has a commitment to active change in the world. Ultimately, it is hoped that the knowledge gained from the narratives in the present study will provide an increased understanding to counsellors and medical personnel who encounter Middle Eastern-American women in their practices.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the researcher's process to date, and on the methodological issues regarding the collection of narratives from Middle Eastern-American women about their sexual selves. The study emphasises the psychological borders and boundaries crossed in the process of migration. This process is central to the life experiences of women who have migrated from their country of origin. The crossing of borders through migration may provide women the space and permission to cross other kinds of boundaries and transform their sexuality and their concepts of sexual roles. New awareness may occur after migration, as part of the acculturation process or it may be the motivating force behind migration. For most women, however, issues of sexuality may not be part of the conscious decision to migrate.

Huang and Akhtar (2005 pp.179-188) stated that immigration can at times offer an escape from existing cultural traditions, such as arranged marriages. In various Middle-Eastern countries, women avoid arranged marriages by emigrating to Western countries without having an awareness of the impact of immigration on their intra-psychic well-being and behaviour (Akhtar 1992; Escoll 1992; Mahler et al. 1975 pp.59-87). For example, in a study by Agarwal (1991), several women in India reported that immigration to the United States

helped them increase their self-independence and liberation; however, the same women expressed that regardless of immigration, the old-world gender roles remained the same as in the home country.

A number of cultural factors, rituals, and traditions can help to keep gender roles firmly fixed. Many traditions have developed, at least in part, with the intent to conceal and repress sexual expression (Huang & Akhtar 2005 pp.179-188). A good example of hiding sexuality in society is the female *burkas* – a gown that covers the entire body – worn by some women of Middle Eastern countries. The *burkas* symbolises society's masking of physical sexual expression. This limitation contradicts ideals of open sexual expression in Western culture. Both Middle Eastern and Western cultures represent a cultural obsession and fixation as regards to control of the sensual dimension of the female body. Middle Eastern culture does it by focusing on chastity and the Western culture by valuing sexual openness. Another category of opposite extremes is contained in the language. (Huang & Akhtar 2005 pp.179-188).

Language is another contributing factor to sexual expression. For example, Urdu, a language spoken in India and Pakistan, does not have an acceptable standard word for female genitals or the act of sex. Hence, there is minimal possibility to engage in a conversation about sexuality even in a professional setting. These language barriers create binds that hinder women from communicating about their sexuality from perspectives different from what their cultures dictate. As a result, women who emigrate from their countries continue with their fixed belief system of sexuality. Learning a new language and emigrating to a less sexually restricted country may awaken a hidden sense of sexuality among women. The new awareness and new form of expression, may reflect on the female gender role and become a new challenge for the immigrant family (Huang & Akhtar 2005 pp.179-188).

This paper begins with a brief overview of some of the relevant literature and is followed by a more detailed description of methodologies used and ethical issues. It also includes foregrounding the researcher's position and experiences in relation to the research topic.

Literature Review

A number of topics about Middle Eastern women have been addressed in the literature, including the importance of religion to identity (e.g. Naff 1980 pp.8-37) and how women are perceived by their culture (Abudabbeh 1996; Abudabbeh & Nydell 1993; Erickson & Al-Timimi 2001 pp.261-284). In addition, many authors have asserted that in the western world at large, there is a failure to understand the diverse ethnic mix of Middle Easterners, the presence of the many religions and the many regions involved, and have asserted that there is a need to better understand the culture of this region (Geertz 1971; Naff 1983; Tibi 1990 pp.8-43). Shahidian (2003 pp.161-217) explored Middle Eastern women in the context of patriarchal factors and a controlled society prior to immigration to a western culture. Other authors have looked at the

variation and differences in lifestyles among Middle Eastern countries (Engineer 1992; Mernissi 1991; Stowasser 1994 pp.206-211). The topic of Middle Eastern women's rights has been discussed by Middle Eastern feminists such as Boutta & Merabtine (1994 pp.183-201) as well as other authors (Afkhami 1995; Badawi 1980; Javad 1998; Mernissi 1991 pp.85-102). Although many scholars have addressed a variety of subjects about Middle-Eastern women, the subject of their sexuality has not been a focal research consideration, and few have examined the issue for immigrant women in the United States.

Sex and its related topics are in themselves sensitive topics because most cultures have various forms of sexual taboo and individuals often view sex as a private matter. The acculturation process for immigrant women from traditional societies transitioning to socially open societies provides a whole new range of possibilities in terms of gender roles and sexual behaviour (Espin 1984, 1987b, pp. 489-503; Espin et al. 1990b; Goodenow & Espin 1993 pp.347-364). Upon entering a new cultural society, attitude formation is expected and can be a survival-enriching process. However, it can also result in intra- and interpersonal tension where new beliefs are at odds with old norms (Hojat et al. 2000 pp.419-434).

In exploring the female sexual self from varying, but related viewpoints, many scholars have looked at developmental factors to gain an insight into the nature of the female sexual self. Cross and Madson (1997 pp.5-37) looked at self as a critical governing force of the individual and assert that the self is the control center or powerful regulator of the various aspects of human behaviour. It directs information processing and an individual's self-views. This self is also the 'source of human agency and volition' (Cross & Madson 1997 pp.5-37). In addition, minimal attention has been given to cognitive representations of sexuality (Simon & Gagnon 1987; Whalen & Roth 1987 pp.363-383). According to social cognition research, individuals have the potential to connect with a variety of sexually related domains which include behaviour, as well as cognitive representations of the sexual self.

Markus and Wurf (1987 pp.299-337), in a study about 'self,' suggest that one's view of oneself is the result of interpretation, lifetime experiences, motivational factors, consequences, and adjustment to interpersonal process: it is not the current behaviour of the individual. This finding has highlighted the concept of the 'self' and the need for its conceptualisation in research. Carver and Scheier (1981), and Epstein (1980 pp.253-275), suggest that the 'self' has a variety of facets, including the sexual self-schema. Sexual self-schema provides one with a picture of a clear sexual intra-personal domain as well as interpersonal relationships. As a result, the sexual self-schema represents past experiences, manifests itself in current experiences, and influences sexual behaviour (Markus 1977 pp.63-78).

The self is comprised of many cognitive schemas of which the sexual self-schema is one. A cognitive schema is 'an intellectual or perceptual pattern used as a reference for future experiences' (Corsini 1999 p.182).

Sexual self-schema is one of the many, but central, facets of 'self', having a role in the sexual interpersonal sphere as well as in interpersonal relationships. It is defined as 'cognitive generalisations about sexual aspects of one-self,' and can be traced to past experience (Cyranowski & Andersen 1994 pp.1079-1100).

Looking at the literature thus far reviewed and the areas that scholars have considered in evaluating female sexuality, it is important to the current research to examine the available methodologies. The purpose of this examination is to determine which of the methodologies is more suitable as they relate to Middle Eastern American women in order to facilitate full exploration of their meaning and understanding of their sexual selves.

Methodological Issues

Connelly & Clandinin (1994 pp.413-427), who were interested in the exploration of the concept of self as it relates to female sexuality, examined methodological approaches of other scholars. In that examination, they referred to the categorisation by Byrne and Schulte (1990 pp.93-117) of three research traditions. These traditions did not include the concepts of self, belief and the meaning underlying the sexuality of women unready to speak openly about their sexuality. Byrne and Schulte (1990 pp.93-117) have grouped sexual differences among individuals into three research traditions. The first example of these traditions includes differences in evaluative reactions to sexual cues along a negative to positive dimension of affect and evaluation (Byrne 1983; Fisher et al. 1988 pp. 123-151). The second example of these traditions, as Byrne and Schulte (1990 pp.93-117) categorised it, refers to research done by Mosher (1966 pp.25-29) on the concept of guilt. The last example of these research traditions cited by Byrne and Schulte (1990 pp.93-117) is the examination of individual differences in physiological aspects of sexuality by Kelley and Byrne (1983 pp.467-490).

Hoon et al. (1976 pp.291-300) have referred to methodological problems in the existing quantitative research that include measurement errors (e.g. underreporting), and participation bias (e.g. differences in demographic characteristics, personality factors, sexual attitudes). He stated that the measurement difficulties were due to the common method of precise items to mark sexuality (i.e. How many different partners …) and the research focus mainly being on the act of sex, other than concepts of sexual identity.

While the above methods have their value, there is a need for a different methodological approach; one that can assist the exploration of that which has not been voiced by women themselves regarding their sexuality. A narrative, qualitative approach to research is the process that facilitates the framing of issues and their construction from the viewpoint of the informant. The narrative precludes the informant having to face questions such as 'when you masturbate …'(Hoon et al. 1976 pp.291-300).

There is a need to identify a meaningful representation of Middle Eastern-American women's sexual selves. There is a need to clarify the different intra- and interpersonal processes governing self-view and how these women give meaning to their sexual selves. Fundamentally, there is a need to understand women's personal opinions of their sexuality. Narrative as methodology, can facilitate a safer environment for Middle Eastern-American women to explore, to tell their stories, and to voice their concern about their sexual selves, beliefs, and understanding.

Narrative and Narrative Analysis

'Narrative' with 'Narrative Analysis', as methodology, are research tools and an effective approach to the systematic study of personal experiences and meaning – how active subjects have constructed events (Reissman 1993). 'Narrative inquiry' is the means through which access is gained to personal experiences of a storyteller who share their life story in a particular framework as experienced. The narrative structure of this articulation of their life is called a 'story'. The researcher utilises any one or a combination of frameworks to analyse the story, interpret its meaning, and to understand the phenomenon being researched (Kramp 1995; Reissman 1993). Much of narrative analysis serves to give voice to feelings and experiences.

Polkinghorne (1988 pp.13-14) wrote, 'narrative is the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite . . .a meaning structure that organises events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole.' According to Rorty (1979 pp.152-169), 'narrative knowing' is the response to the question, 'What is the meaning of experience?' It is grounded in a contextualism that is based on a concern for the human condition. Put even more simply, narrative knowing is the extent of the storyteller's understanding of experience and events as expressed in the story told (Didion 1961; Greene 1991; Turner & Bruner 1986; Bruner 1991; Polkinghorne 1988 pp.150-207). Narrative inquiry begins with careful articulation of what it is the researcher wishes to know, and progresses through several steps including listening and re-listening to the participants' stories, to an analysis and interpretation of them, and ultimately to a final formulation, construction and presentation of the findings (McEwan & Egan 1995; Bruner 1996).

Data collection

Curasi (2001 pp.361-375), indicates that obtaining good quality data is important to all research. However, given the sensitive nature of the topic at hand and the population being studied, this potentially presents a real challenge. Data quality depends on who is being interviewed, how willing participants are to discuss their feelings and experiences, and the kind of interviewing skills used (Meho & Tibbo 2003 pp.570-587).

For the current research, the researcher is conducting and collecting individual narratives from Middle Eastern-American women about the experience of sexuality and the formation of the sexually related self. These narratives, obtained through individual interviews, are an exploration of the Middle Eastern-American women's understanding of sexuality and internalisation of their sexual experience.

The interview explores the informant's experience of herself as a woman, and in particular her sexual behaviour and view of sexual roles. The interviewer pays close attention to the informant's sexual self-view. The interview includes an exploration of how generational differences are associated with acculturation and how differential access to the host culture may circumscribe sexual behavioural. And throughout the interview, variations in the informant's comfort or discomfort when addressing sexuality are noted.

Recruitment of informants

A significant amount of time and consultation was involved in determining how to recruit the participants for the study. An early consideration was to advertise in local Persian and Middle Eastern media, however, this was rejected in light of the potential for breaches of privacy and the possible negative consequences of making such a taboo subject so very public. Ultimately, because it seemed that potential participants would feel safer being referred for the study by their medical or mental health providers, the researcher approached a number of providers. The demographic sought are women who are among the first generation immigrants to the U.S., are 18 years or older, and are residing in the U.S. The health care professionals have been given the Informant Information Sheet, which they pass on to prospective participants. Informants make the initial contact with the researcher via phone after reviewing the information sheet and are interested in volunteering for this research.

After the initial contact is made, and the woman's eligibility is confirmed and the interview is scheduled. The interviews take place at a pre-determined location identified by the informants as their preferred venue. Prior to the interview, a consent form is signed by the informant including consent for the tape recording of the interviews. Those informants who are identified by snowballing, (i.e. informants referred by the initial sample), have been approached by the researcher via phone in the same manner as the initial sample to discuss their participation in the study. To those indicating an interest, the Informants' Information Sheet is sent. The remaining procedures for recruitment into the study stay the same.

The interview is comprised of a series of open-ended questions supplemented by prompts to elicit information on socio-cultural and sexual experiences which have shaped the informants' view of their sexual selves. A recursive method of interviewing has been adopted to allow for a conversational form of interview. The length of each interview session generally lasts between 60-90 minutes. The number of interview sessions may

extend to two depending upon the participant's story, sexual beliefs, and level of comfort for sexual expression.

Following each interview, the data is transcribed verbatim and a transcript prepared. All identifying details are removed from the transcript. Individual transcripts are being reviewed to develop a storyline for each of the participants.   In addition to providing a lay description of the aims of the project in the Information Sheet and stating explicitly that the participants retain the right to withdraw from the study at any time even after conclusion of the interview and commencement of data analysis, this information is reiterated at the beginning of each interview. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, there is a risk that informants may experience emotional distress during the interview. Informants are made aware of this risk prior to the onset of the interview and are given the option not to participate should they show or express concerns in this area. This option is extended throughout the interview itself. Lists of independent counselling services available in the informant's local area have been provided. Moreover, informants are advised that their information is confidential, and the researcher maintains this confidentiality by not using any identifying details and assigning pseudonyms to the informants at the time of transcription of interview data.

For the current research, all participants receive a form entitled 'Participant's Information Sheet' from their health providers. Participants contact the researcher via phone and express their interest and willingness to participate in this research. An appointment is set with the participants. Prior to the interview, the researcher reviews confidentiality, and mandated reporting laws by explaining further that as a Marriage and Family Therapist Intern, legal and ethical laws of the California Board of Behavioural Sciences obligate this researcher to be a mandated reporter. Prior to the interview, participants are informed that the mandated reporter must report any evidence of child abuse, such as physical abuse, neglect, sexual assault, and emotional maltreatment, to the Department of Children and Family Services, and must take appropriate action to prevent a credible risk of suicide or homicide by the participant which may include breaking confidentiality.

Many participants face communication barriers due to language limitations, personal shyness, and inabilities to thoroughly express personal emotions (Karchmer 2001; Kim et al. 2003 pp.156-170). Participants are encouraged to take their time during the interview process, which helps them reduce the level of discomfort and shyness experienced during interview as result of talking about sex. The primary language for the participants is not English. In order to provide a more comfortable setting for the interview, participants are encouraged to talk in their native language if it makes them feel more comfortable. During the past few interviews, a new experience was gained during the interview of two informants whose primary language was Farsi. It became evident that participants have an easier time talking about sex using English terminologies

than their own native language. Speaking in English about sex took away their shyness and level of discomfort even if they were limited in their skills of speaking in English.

As interviews are completed, the researcher transcribes the collected information. No identifying details are used in the transcripts. The researcher does all the transcribing in order to maintain confidentiality and safety. The researcher and her supervisors have access to the information. After tapes are transcribed, they are placed in a locked and secure filing cabinet in the office of the researcher along with all the identifiable details of participants.

Foregrounding the researcher

The researcher is familiar with the Middle Eastern region both by birth and ethnicity. She was born in southwestern Iran where there is a diverse mixture of European, American, Arab and Persian cultures. Although a native-born Middle Easterner, grounded in the culture of the region, she has lived in the United States for the past 30 years. Her experiences and observations of people have provided her with unique insight regarding Middle Eastern-American women, especially regarding topics related to sex. This research is an outgrowth of her experiences and observations as a Middle Eastern-American woman regarding the subject of female sexuality. Since the late 1990s, she has been engaged in a personal and professional search for increased knowledge and understanding of sexuality and gender related issues among immigrant Middle Eastern women residing in the United States of America. In an earlier research study, she became aware of the difficulty that Iranian-American women, residing in the United States, were having expressing themselves to their health professionals about their sexual concerns, both in medical and mental health settings. This led to the researcher's current interest in providing a channel through which these women could voice their concerns with as much comfort as the research process could provide, and have their stories understood from their own viewpoints.

As the researcher pursued the issues, it gradually became clear that the problem being looked at had two aspects: The Middle Eastern-American woman, as a patient and/or a client, was reluctant to express her concerns related to sexuality. The health care professional, was faced with the dilemma that his or her treatment plan which had benefited others in the past did not have a similar gain for the Middle Eastern-American woman.

As a counsellor providing therapy to Middle Eastern-American women in Southern California, she gained insight into the need for the current research. Having gone through acculturation process, she recognised the need to frame the research within a life course perspective that takes into account the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping sexual behaviour in the formative years in the host country and the interplay of social and cultural factors with exposure to a different social milieu in the process of immigration and acculturation. It is,

however, important to acknowledge that there may exist some conscious and unconscious bias in the research process.

As part of the her own observations as a researcher, perhaps the strongest conscious bias lies along the fact that Middle Eastern-American women are not considered on par with western women due to the nature of their unique lifestyles and cultural norms. The continuation of these considerations has shifted the focus of scholars to the needs of these women such as exploration of their sexuality. Perhaps, at the present and in a western country where expression is not so restricted, a Middle Eastern-American woman as a researcher can provide a safe environment for other women of the same background to voice their concerns, express their sexual selves and ultimately open the doors for others living in the Middle East by becoming a voice for them as well.

The few interviews undertaken so far, indicate that narrative is an effective methodology for this research, as evidenced by the willingness of the participants to share their stories. It also indicates that while many issues are associated with cultural norms, there are common themes that transcend Ethnic and religious affiliations. Further conclusion will be drawn as research makes more progress.

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