

The construction of a sense of self following early sexual experiences

A narrative inquiry

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Abstract

The aim of this research project was to develop a fuller understanding of the process of constructing a sense of self following early sexual experiences with an adult. Twenty-two men and women, aged twenty-five to seventy years old, were interviewed about their early sexual experiences using narrative inquiry methodology. All had had an early sexual experience at the age of fifteen or under with someone over the age of eighteen.

Participants told four differing narratives about these experiences. One group of participants described how they had chosen to maintain narratives of silence for many years about their early sexual experiences. They believed that they had not been adversely affected by events in childhood, although they volunteered for the study because they were beginning to question this assumption. A second group of participants told narratives of ongoing suffering. Some of these participants were still in the process of recovering memories from their childhoods. A third group told narratives of transformation, describing how they had faced and overcome adversity in such a way that they had been changed as a result. The fourth group told narratives of transcendence. Although profoundly affected by their childhood experiences, they refused to be defined in this way since they believed that they had moved beyond these experiences.

These four narratives have been examined in the light of the literature relating to childhood sexual abuse, early sexual experiences, and the social construction of gender, as well as victim and survivor discourses. Recommendations are made for therapists, educators, health professionals, and social policy professionals about ways that early childhood sexual experiences can be understood.

Certificate of originality

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature



A black rectangular box redacts the signature. A handwritten mark, possibly a flourish or the letter 'o', is visible below the box.

Publications arising from this thesis

Hunter, S. V. (2004). *The dominant discourse in the field of childhood sexual abuse: Alternative ways of working with resiliency among adult survivors*. Paper presented at the 9th Rural Mental Health Conference, Armidale, Australia.

Hunter, S. V. (2006). *The impact of early sexual experiences on the sense of self and spirit: Therapeutic implications*. Paper presented at the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia Conference: Essence and Spirit, Melbourne, Australia.

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