

Sexual Experiences of Women during Childbirth

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ABSTRACT

Birth in Western society is considered a painful experience and a necessary evil. The notion of having a pleasurable, sexual, and orgasmic birth experience is inconceivable for most people in our culture. In this qualitative and exploratory research, eleven women who reported sexual experiences during childbirth were interviewed and their stories were analyzed using the phenomenological approach. Two major scenarios are derived from these women's experiences. One is the "Unexpected Birthgasm", where women experienced orgasms without arousal or sexual stimulation while pushing or delivering their babies. The other is the "Passionate Birth" experience, where women purposefully incorporated their sexuality during their birth experience. Themes such as preparation for a pleasurable childbirth, the need to feel safe, the need for privacy and intimacy, the partner's role, positive body image, open mind-set about sexuality, and the desire to incorporate it in childbirth are discussed. High sexual desire before childbirth and the ability to derive arousal and pleasure from vaginal stimulation were observed. Perception of pain and how sexual stimulation reduced pain perception are discussed. Childbirth is proposed as an integral part of women's sexual cycles, and an expanded definition of female orgasm is proposed to include orgasms during childbirth.

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INTRODUCTION

When I tell people about my dissertation on sexual childbirth I am often met with an open jaw and an expression of amazement – “You can’t be serious... birth is very painful,” “I can’t even imagine how women can experience orgasms or sexual pleasure during birth.” Or “I don’t know what you are talking about – it definitely didn’t happen to me.”

During my certification process as a childbirth educator in 2002 I watched many movies of women giving birth. What struck me most was the realization of how sexual and primal those women were – they were wild; vocalizing in a way that made me look closer to make sure that I was not watching an intimate lovemaking scene. Their movements and the glow on their faces made me understand something new – this wasn’t the painful, scary childbirth of which everyone is afraid.

When I pursued my graduate degree in sexology three years later, I was disappointed to find that childbirth was not included as one of the phases in women’s sexuality. It seems that women’s sexuality during childbirth is mostly ignored within the fields of sexology and childbirth education. This is surprising considering that when giving birth, female sexual organs are stimulated, and sex hormones are activated.

Not only is the relationship between childbirth and sexuality ignored, birth is perceived mainly as a painful experience, and a necessary evil to go through if one wants a baby (Goer, 1999). This study aims to explore the sexuality of childbirth and identify what factors contribute towards women experiencing sexual pleasure while other women experience mostly fear and pain.

Chapter 1

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In our society there is little acknowledgment that childbirth can be sexual and ecstatic. Thinking about childbirth as a positive, sexual, and ecstatic experience contradicts our cultural belief that giving birth is traumatic and painful (Buckley, 2005, p. 14). The mythical condemnation given to Eve as a result of her sin, “in pain you give birth,” reminds us that in the Western Judeo-Christian culture women are supposed to suffer during childbirth. As a result sexuality, temptation, shame, and birth have been bound negatively together for centuries.

Western culture does not acknowledge the possibility of pleasure, sexual arousal, and ecstasy during childbirth. As a result, I found very few scientific articles that address childbirth as a sexual phenomenon. Popular pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering magazines give sexuality during childbirth some sensational attention through headlines such as *Tear Prevention the Orgasmic Way* (Alzugaray, 2003) or *Ecstatic Birth: The Hormonal Blueprint of Labor* (Buckley, 2002). While this information coexists with the more predominant feelings of shame and the overall sex negativity regarding birth in the United States, it is not enough to change the overall picture of birthing as a primarily painful process.

Like so many natural human activities, childbirth is greatly defined and affected by one’s culture, as are feelings and behaviors during labor. Researcher Niles Newton (1964) wrote: “Records of some primitive cultures indicate that sometimes labor may involve no pain at all” (p. 262). Newton also pointed to a correlation between levels of

sexual shame and painful labors; in societies with high levels of sexual shame, women experienced more painful childbirth.

Understanding Women's Orgasm

While exploring women's sexual arousal and orgasmic experiences during childbirth it is important to define the term "orgasm." The scientific understanding of a woman's orgasm is still unfolding. Masters and Johnson (1966) explored orgasm in a laboratory setting and began to shed light on the physiological aspects of orgasm. During orgasm, involuntary rhythmic muscle contractions occur in the pelvic area, often with simultaneous uterine and anal contractions. Although there is agreement between sexologists on the physiological aspects of orgasm, the origin and location of the female orgasm varies with the social climate of the times. Freud (1938) stated that "mature women" were supposed to experience their orgasms from vaginal stimulation; while feminist activists and sexologists (Barbach, 1975; Dodson, 1987; Hite, 1976) argued that the origin of orgasm is clitoral, and all women should not be expected to have vaginal orgasms, especially not if it is to please their partners. The focus on clitoral orgasm was followed with the revelation of the G-Spot as a source of orgasms and pleasure (Ladas, Whipple & Perry, 1982) and the insistence by some sex activists that every woman can experience a G-Spot orgasm and learn to ejaculate (Sundahl, 2003). Meston et al (2004) suggested:

It seems like women's orgasms can be induced by erotic stimulation of a variety of genital and non-genital sites. The clitoris and vagina are the most usual sites of stimulation, but stimulation of the periurethral glands, breast/nipple or mons,

mental-imagery or fantasy or hypnosis have also been reported to induce orgasm (p. 67)

Taormino (2006) promises that women can experience an orgasm through anal stimulation. The debate continues while researchers and sex activists go on to explore other erogenous, orgasm evoking zones in women.

Whipple, Ogden & Komisaruk (1992) demonstrated that women do not necessarily need physical stimulation of their genitals in order to experience orgasm. In the laboratory some women were able to experience physiological orgasmic response through guided imagery with no physical contact. "Spontaneous orgasm," or orgasm occurring without any obvious sexual stimulus, has been described in the sexological literature by Ogden (1999, 2006) and in the psychiatric literature by Polatin & Douglas (1953).

Researchers also have studied the emotional and psychological components of the female orgasm. Meston et al. (2004) suggested the following definition: "Women's orgasm is defined as a temporary peak sensation of intense pleasure creating an altered state of consciousness... Most women experience an induction of well-being and contentment." (p. 66)

Ogden (1999), in her book *Women Who Love Sex*, explored women's perception of sexual ecstasy. Women in her sample described ecstasy as being driven into their own senses, saying it is "being exquisitely sensitive, exquisitely aware... every part of me is tuned into the rhythmic, choreographic cycle of the universe" (p. 65). She found that about a third of the women in her sample listed elements other than orgasm as triggers of

ecstatic sexual experience. Some of the ecstasy triggers listed included exotic settings, romance, intimacy, and love.

Women's experience of their sexuality is much broader than the physical pulsation of their genitalia while releasing sexual tension. In this study I suggest a broader definition of orgasm and sexual pleasure, one that includes the subjective experiences of women during childbirth.

Hormones, Childbirth, and Sexuality

Michel Odent (2002) stated that the same hormones are present in childbirth as in all other episodes of women's sexual lives, including orgasm, and breastfeeding. The body releases a mixture of hormones which when released without disturbance allows labor and coitus to progress normally. Buckley (2005) stated: "These hormones include Oxytocin, the hormone of love; beta-endorphin, the hormone of pleasure and transcendence; adrenaline and noradrenalin (epinephrine and nor-epinephrine), the hormones of excitement and fight-or-flight" (p. 15).

Current childbirth practitioners and childbirth activists stress the importance of physiological birth and encourage women to listen to their bodies and follow their instincts while giving birth. Odent (2001) argued that giving birth is an instinctive process which relies on the primitive brain. Birth hormones are released in the middle or mammalian brain, also known as the limbic system. For birth to proceed smoothly and optimally the primitive brain must dominate over the neo-cortex, the more developed "thinking" brain.

In order to give the primitive brain the lead, a woman in labor must be allowed to focus exclusively on her experience without distraction. When a woman's feelings of

safety and security are disturbed in labor, her labor can slow down or stall, and the natural hormones which promote euphoric and ecstatic feelings during the birth process and towards her newborn may also be disturbed (Goer, 1999; Odent, 2001; Gaskin, 2003; Buckley, 2005). Environmental factors such as quiet surroundings, dim lights, minimal conversation, and preventing unnecessary medical interventions can help a woman open up, relax, and feel safe. “In birth, as in love making, we need to feel safe and private so that we can let down our guard, let our hormones flow and reap the rewards of the process – which includes, in both situations, an ultimate dose of hormonal ecstasy” (Buckley, p. 114).

The hormones involved in women’s preparation for birth are the sex steroids progesterone and estrogen. These influence other hormonal systems by activating, inhibiting, or reorganizing them (Russell, Douglas, and Ingram, 2001). Progesterone and estrogen are thought to play a critical and complex role in the initiation of labor (Weiss, 2000). They also prepare the uterus in late pregnancy for coordinated contractions during labor. Estrogen and progesterone together also activate pain-killing pathways in the brain and spinal cord, assisting the woman in coping with the intensity of labor contractions (Russell, Douglas, and Ingram, 2001).

Oxytocin

Oxytocin is known as the hormone of love because it is released from the pituitary gland during sexual activity, orgasm, birth, and breastfeeding (Odent, 2001; Buckley, 2005). Oxytocin is also produced during social situations such as sharing a meal (Verbalis et al, 1986). When oxytocin levels are high people feel loving and positive

towards others, therefore it is also considered to be the hormone of altruism, or as Odent (2001) suggested, the hormone of “forgetting oneself.”

Oxytocin is one of the most potent uterotonic agents and is known to fluctuate throughout the menstrual cycle, showing an increase during sexual stimulation and arousal, peaking during orgasm in women (Blaicher et al., 1999; Muller et al., 2006). Oxytocin is believed to trigger the rhythmic contractions of the uterus during labor and to cause vaginal and uterine contractions during orgasm (Levin, 2002).

Oxytocin is involved in facilitating the expression of maternal behavior (Russell, Douglas, and Ingram, 2001). When released in the brain through giving birth, oxytocin is involved in promoting parent-offspring bonds in animals (Young, Wang and Insel, 1998; Kendrick, 2004). It is also one of the brain chemicals that contribute to the sense of fusion, closeness, and attachment one feels after sex with a beloved (Fisher, 2004).

Oxytocin that is released during coitus is thought to contribute to the analgesic effect of vagino-cervical stimulation in rats. Komisaruk & Sansone (2003) have proposed that this analgesic mechanism, which may have a fundamental role in reproduction by making mounting and intromission less noxious for the female, in part involves oxytocin. Oxytocin levels also peak at birth through stimulation of stretch receptors in a woman's lower vagina as the baby descends (Dawood et al., 1978).

Beta-Endorphins

Beta-endorphins are substances produced by the body which inhibit the perception of pain. High levels of beta-endorphins are present in pregnancy, birth and lactation (Lechner et al., 1991). Beta endorphins act like a natural pain killer (Laatikainen, 1991), reduce the effects of stress, and induce feelings of pleasure, euphoria, and attachment

(Odent, 2001; Buckley, 2005). All mammals protect themselves during the birth process by increasing their levels of endorphins (Odent, 2001). This is also the beginning of a chain reaction in which beta-endorphins release prolactin and therefore initiate lactation (Schultz et al., 1980; Franceschini et al., 1989).

During the birth process beta-endorphins are increased in the mother and in the fetus so that, in the first minutes following birth, both the mother and the baby are affected by their pleasurable effects. This increase precipitates the beginning of attachment between mother and child and is essential to the survival of the species (Odent, 2001).

Endorphins also play an essential role in coitus. They facilitate the reward system and the incentive to make love by boosting the experience of pleasure. During intercourse partners release high levels of endorphins that create the feelings of bonding and attachment that are similar to those between the mother and the newborn (Odent, 2001). Keverne, Martensz & Tuite (1989) suggested that endorphins play an important role in mediating social attachment and are thought to provide the neural basis on which primate sociality has evolved.

Catecholamines (Adrenalin and Noradrenalin)

Sexual experiences may be inhibited or stopped completely by hormones from the adrenalin family. These emergency hormones are produced in the body in response to stresses such as hunger, fear, and cold. The purpose of the adrenal hormones is to protect us by creating the “fight or flight” response. When in the presence of a perceived danger the focus is shifted from reproductive behavior to running away from or fighting the perceived danger. In non-human mammalian lives, when a birthing mother senses danger

she stops laboring and flees to safety to save herself and her fetus. The release of adrenalin that is caused by fear and feeling insecure inhibits the birth process by interfering with the release and action of oxytocin (Odent, 2001, Buckley, 2005).

Odent (2001) believed that this is the reason why human beings experience difficulties like complications during labor, slow and painful births, low sex drive and difficulties in breastfeeding. When fear, shame or other stressors are present in these natural processes, the release of adrenaline inhibits the natural pace and may cause difficulties and complications seen in childbirth, breastfeeding, and sex. Indeed, high levels of adrenaline have been associated with long labors and with lower levels of oxygen supplied to the baby (Ledeman et al., 1985).

Adrenalin, nonetheless, has an essential role in human sexual life. During the very last contraction before birth the level of adrenalin in the mother peaks and triggers the “fetus ejection reflex” (Odent, 1987, 1992) that empowers her to push the baby out. “This is why as soon as this reflex starts women tend to be upright, full of energy, with a sudden need to grasp something or someone” (Odent, 2001, p. 12). The adrenal hormone release helps to keep the mother awake to take care of her baby once it is born (Lederman et al., 1977).

The fetus is also flushed with hormones just before birth; catecholamines serve different purposes to protect the baby’s survival and help smooth the transition to the world outside the womb (Phillippe, 1983; Hagnevik et al., 1984; Lagercrantz and Slotkin, 1986). One of their functions is to enlarge the baby’s pupils and increase the baby’s alertness for the initial connection with the mother when they first gaze into each other’s eyes (Eliot et al., 1980; Colson, 2002).

In the same way that adrenalin helps the mother push her baby out with the fetal ejection reflex during birth, it helps the breasts eject milk during breastfeeding. Adrenalin is also involved in the ejection of sperm (Odent, 2001, 2002). Unfortunately, there is no research targeting the role of catecholamines in female orgasm and female ejaculation.

Prolactin

Prolactin is known as the mothering hormone and is released from the pituitary gland during pregnancy and lactation. Prolactin prepares the breasts for lactation. Prolactin receptors are found in most parts of the body, and prolactin has been reported as having more than 300 functions in vertebrates, a substantial majority of which relate to reproduction (Bole-Feysot et al. 1998). In all mammalian species prolactin is thought to play a major role in maternal behavior through its actions on the nursing mother's brain (Grattan, 2001). The spectrum of prolactin effects has been called the "maternal subroutine" and is associated psychologically with the perceived need to take care of a child (Buckley, 2005). Studies show that prolactin is elevated while carrying infants and is also associated with paternal nurturing. Human studies show that just before the birth fathers-to-be also have elevated prolactin levels, which parallel the rise of prolactin in their partners (Storey, et al., 2000).

Prolactin levels also peak following male orgasm (Kruger et al., 1998, 2002, 2003) and female orgasm (Exton et al. 1999) and their levels remain elevated for an hour afterwards. Prolactin reduces the sex drive; this may explain the usual post coital drop in desire as well as the decrease in desire in lactating women (Kruger, et al. 2002).

To summarize, ample evidence demonstrates that a unique and particular blend of hormones is present during both birth and coitus. This may contribute to some women

experiencing orgasm during childbirth. Studying sexual arousal and orgasm during childbirth can shed light on this rarely discussed aspect of female sexuality.

Childbirth as Part of Women's Sexual Cycles

Niles Newton (1976) emphasized that although a woman has many sexual phases in her life, including menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, intercourse is often singled out as the only important part of women's sexuality and unrelated to any other aspect of women's sexual experience. Newton cites Kinsey's volume on female sexuality (Kinsey et al., 1953) as an example of this narrow point of view, as the entire volume deals only with the orgasmic and coital aspects of female sexuality, while menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding are simply excluded as if they were not part of women's sexual behavior. She adds that "The fact that this discrepancy was seldom, if at all, noticed by reviewers shows that Kinsey et al.'s habits of thought are in keeping with those of most of the culture" (Newton, 1976. p. 85)..

Newton (1976) compared the physiology of uninhibited, undrugged childbirth and the physiology of sexual excitement. She created this comparison based on the sexual data found in Kinsey et al. (1953) and on the birth data gained from Grantly Dick-Read (1944, 1949) which analyzed 516 labors. Read made every effort to keep women free from fear or disturbance, and therefore uninhibited. Here is the citation of Newton's (pp. 87-88) comparison of childbirth and sexual excitement.

Uninhibited, Undrugged Childbirth**Sexual Excitement*****Breathing***

In the first stage of labor breathing becomes deeper during contractions.

Second stage brings on very deep breaths with breath holding.

Tendency to make noises, grunts, etc.

During early stages breathing becomes faster and deeper.

As orgasm approaches breathing becomes interrupted.

Tendency to make gasping, sucking noises.

Facial Expression

As delivery approaches face gets intense, strained look which makes observers often assume woman is suffering great pain.

Face looks like that of an athlete under-going great physical strain.

As orgasm approaches face gets what Kinsey, et al. call a “tortured expression.”

Mouth open, glassy eyes, tense muscles.

Face looks like that of an athlete undergoing great physical strain.

Uterus

The upper segment of the uterus contracts rhythmically.

Loosening of mucus plug from os of cervix is one of the standard signs of labor.

The upper segment of the uterus contracts rhythmically.

Cervical secretion may loosen mucus plug which ordinarily lies at os of cervix thus opening it for spermatozoa.

Abdominal Muscles

Contract periodically. A strong, instinctive

Abdominal muscles contracts

urge to bear down by using abdominal muscles as delivery approaches.

Legs wide apart and bent.

Central Nervous System

Woman becomes uninhibited particularly during second stage of labor. All veneer of “refinement” disappears.

Delivery of the baby through the narrow passage calls for unusual strength and body expansion.

Sensory Perception

The vulva becomes anesthetic with full dilation, so that woman often must be told of birth of baby’s head.

Amnesia, tendency to become insensitive to surroundings as delivery approaches.

Suddenly, delivery completed, woman

periodically with considerable force.

Movement builds up as orgasm approaches.

This position is used by women in intercourse.

Inhibitions and psychic blockages are relieved and often eliminated.

Unusual muscular strength. Many persons become capable of bending and distorting body in ways they could not otherwise do.

Whole body of person who becomes sexually aroused becomes increasingly insensitive even to sharp blows and severe injury.

As orgasm approaches loss of sensory perception is nearly complete – sometimes leading to moments of unconsciousness.

After orgasm, sudden return of sensory

becomes wide awake.

acuity.

Emotional response

After the birth of the baby there is a flood of joyful emotion. Read describes it as “complete and careless ecstasy.”

There is a strong feeling of well being in most persons. Many psychologists believe that this relief from tension is the chief source of satisfaction gained from intercourse.

Newton was a pioneer when she created her comparison between sexual arousal and childbirth in 1967. I couldn't find any updated comparisons that included current understanding and research of childbirth and of sexuality. Newton (1964) compared the degree of shame felt towards childbirth in different societies. She found that some primitive cultures see childbirth as a deeply shameful event, and every effort is made to keep from children the knowledge that childbirth exists. Other primitive cultures see childbirth as a natural shameless event. This is reflected in children's games: “After pretending coitus, the girls stuff a coconut inside their dress and realistically enact labor, imitating contractions, and letting the nut fall at the right moment” (p. 261).

While modern Western culture is in neither of these extremes, the attitudes towards birth in the United States are closer to those of the cultures feeling shame than to those who have feelings of openness and acceptance towards childbirth (Newton, 1964).

In this research I present the experiences of women living in Western cultures, displaying a link between sexuality and childbirth. It is my hope that their experiences

may contribute to the inclusion of childbirth in women's sexual life cycle in Western cultures.

Childbirth: Pain or Pleasure?

No one questions the assumption that labor and birth are physically painful experiences for women (Gaskin, 2003). It seems that the more cultured and advanced human beings are, the more they believe that childbirth is painful and dangerous (Read, 1944; Newton, 1964). Suzanne Arms (1994) stressed that:

While most cultures found ways to help a woman keep up her confidence and strength in labor and cope with the pain of contractions, the modern Western culture has built an entire system of care around the belief that women are not able to birth successfully on their own and that the human female body is not designed to cope with the pain of birth....While women in some cultures distract themselves from the pain in different and creative ways so that pain becomes only one element of the birth experience, women in the Western culture often do the opposite: they focus so much attention on the pain that they end up priming themselves for an unendurable experience (p. 127).

The experience of pain and pleasure depend on the same primitive function of the nervous system. This function is one of the components of an "affectivity center" which integrates all of the information that arrives from the nervous system and transforms the information into subjective feeling (Houdart, 1999). The brain can not respond to pain and pleasure simultaneously; when one is predominant, the other is reduced (Arms, 1994).

Alehagen et al. (2005) found a correlation between fear and pain in childbirth; an increase in fear resulted in an increase in the pain women reported experiencing throughout the different stages of childbirth. Is pain an essential component of childbirth? In his classic book *Childbirth without Fear*, Dr. Grantly Dick-Read (1944) wrote about births he witnessed where the laboring women were full of confidence in their ability to give birth and didn't want to use pain relief medicine. He was in awe of the spirit of joy, happiness, and pride that these women exhibited. Read was fascinated with this riddle of why some women feel pain while others do not. This question guided his entire life and career.

Midwife Ina May Gaskin (2003) observed that in some cultures, including the Western culture, women tend to accept or demand pain medication before they have experienced what the unmedicated experience might be like. They tend to be afraid of pain, and want to relieve it as soon as possible or avoid it altogether. Other women, regardless of their expectations about how labor might feel, discover that parts of it, at least, felt extremely good. A few were surprised to find themselves experiencing exquisite pleasure, and some experienced a powerful orgasm when they delivered their baby. Gaskin conducted a survey among her clients in which she found that 30 out of 151 women she contacted reported experiencing at least one orgasmic birth. Although this survey is not statistically representative, it documents that orgasmic birth is possible.

Pregnant women are rarely told of the possibility of having an orgasmic birth. Gaskin (2003) gives a few reasons for this absence:

One is that most childbirth professionals are not trained to deal with sexual feelings and sexual behavior during childbirth. Another is that women who experience

orgasmic birth don't mention it, since in our culture orgasms are considered to be too private to talk about. Still another reason is that those who know it can happen don't want to raise women's expectations, for fear it might cause them to feel cheated if their experience doesn't compare to these descriptions. Finally, orgasm during birth doesn't seem to happen very often in women whose labors are medicated with narcotics, epidurals, or barbiturates. (pp.160-1).

In addition to these reasons, I contend that sexuality and childbirth are so disassociated in our culture that mentioning having an orgasm during childbirth is taboo.

Physiological Constructs that Block Pain during Childbirth

Komisaruk and Whipple (1995) presented controlled studies which they conducted to check the anecdotal reports in the popular literature regarding awareness of pain being reduced during sexual stimulation. They found that pleasurable self-stimulation of the clitoris, the vaginal anterior wall, and the vaginal posterior wall produced analgesia. Pressure in the anterior wall (G-Spot) even if it isn't pleasurable will also produce analgesia. Komisaruk and Whipple (1986, 1988) believed that the significant increase in pain threshold during labor supports their hypothesis that birth canal distention generates analgesia during parturition. They also hypothesize that even "greater analgesic effect would occur as the fetus passes through the lower birth canal, with further distention stimulating the cervix and vagina" (Komisaruk & Whipple, 1995, p. 162).

Komisaruk and Whipple (1995) reviewed some of the neural pathways in pain and sexual response and found more evidence that "sensory stimulation of the reproductive tract that is evoked naturally during mating and parturition also activate the analgesia-producing system" (p. 179).

The pelvic nerve is stimulated as the fetus passes through the birth canal (Peters et al., 1987) and in rats the mechanism that causes analgesia is activated during parturition (Toniolo, Whipple, & Komisaruk, 1987). This may help to attenuate the pain and stress of parturition. The analgesia producing component of vaginal stimulation may also increase the amount and the intensity of intermittent sensory stimulation that the female tolerates during coitus (Whipple & Komisaruk, 1988). Komisaruk & Sansone (2003) added that “the vagus nerve can evidently convey sensory activity from the reproductive tract, in female rats and in women, directly to the brain, bypassing the spinal cord. Activation of this pathway by vaginal or cervical stimulation can evidently attenuate pain, and in women induce orgasms” (p. 248).

So what are the physiological components which reduce pain and allow women to experience orgasmic birth? First, there is the hormonal cocktail which supports childbirth and allows the woman to cope with contractions by releasing endorphins (Odent, 2001; Buckley, 2005). Beverly Whipple et al. (1989) noted that while the baby comes down through the birth canal, the baby’s head puts pressure on two important nerve systems, the hypogastric and the pelvic, which has an analgesic effect. Whipple found that the intense pressure on these nerves can induce orgasm in some birthing women. This makes sense when we realize that G-Spot, cervical, and vaginal orgasms are caused by a firm stimulation of the receptors of these two nerves (Paget, 2005).

In light of the above studies, there appears to be a definite sexual component in childbirth. This present research intends to illuminate how some women have experienced their sexuality during childbirth and in what way this resembles their experiences of sexuality in other contexts. The experiences of these women reveal the

breadth of women's sexuality, and can help broaden the current definition of women's sexual cycles and orgasms.

Chapter 2

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Statement of the Problem

Even though some researchers acknowledge that childbirth is part of women's sexuality and that orgasmic childbirth is possible, most of the literature on this topic is anecdotal. It is clearly an under-researched phenomenon.

This research aims to understand the sexual birth experience and learn about the women who experience it. Through this research, I will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Who are these women who report sexual experiences during birth? Is there something that they have in common? What are their sexual backgrounds? What are their demographics?
2. What allows these women to feel pleasure, sexual feelings, and even experience an orgasm during childbirth where other women feel pain? Is it something in their childbirth practices, childbirth environment, pain management, and pain coping skills? What are their attitudes towards childbirth and sexuality?
3. What are women's sexual experiences during childbirth? Are childbirth orgasms comparable to orgasms that these women experience while masturbating or in partner sex? On what levels have these women experienced their sexuality during birth—physical, psychological, or spiritual? Did these women purposefully stimulate themselves sexually during the birth, or was the orgasm spontaneous?

4. How did their sexual experience during birth influence these women's experience of their sexuality beyond childbirth?

Hypothesis

This research is based on qualitative methodology. In qualitative research, the function of hypotheses is different than in quantitative research. Maxwell (1996) suggested that explicit hypotheses are incompatible with qualitative research. He argues that qualitative research hypotheses are usually formulated after the researcher has begun the study and that they are “grounded in the data and are developed and tested in interaction with it, rather than being prior ideas that are simply tested against data” (p. 53). These are usually called *propositions* instead of hypotheses (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 75).

Since this research is an exploratory study in sexual childbirth, I prefer not to have preconceptions about how the research questions will be answered, and allow myself to learn from the stories of the women who experienced their sexuality during childbirth.

Parameters of Dissertation: Delimitations and Limitations

This research study is based on the self perception and self reports of eleven women who had sexual experiences during childbirth. Some of their experiences date back decades. Possible biases related to self reporting on past experience are similar to normal biases in memory recall. Delivery related pain, in particular, is known to be underestimated in recall. The need to tell the story in a coherent way might lead to biases in details. This research reports the women's experience and not necessarily the unbiased measurable facts of the experience. The research focuses on the way these women

remember and perceive their experience, and how they believe this experience influenced their sexuality.

This study does not present any data that compare the group of women who experienced sexual childbirth to the large population of women that did not. There will be no attempt to draw any conclusions that apply to all women.

Chapter 3

SAMPLE, DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS

Sample

Participants in the study consisted of 11 women who responded to an advertisement posted on different childbirth mailing lists and websites, inviting women who experienced sexual experiences during childbirth to contact me via email or phone. Every woman who contacted me reporting that she had sexual experiences during childbirth was interviewed.

The women in the study came from different locations in the United States, California (n=3), Ohio (n=2), Washington (n=2), Oregon (n=2). Two women came from Australia. All the women were Caucasian, ranging in age from 35 to 55, with the majority brought up as Christians (n=10), except one who was brought up Jewish. Some of them are actively practicing their religious faith, some are not, and some are neo-pagans. Most of them are married or live with a partner; one is single. Education ranges from finishing high-school to acquiring a post graduate degree. Some participants' are stay at home moms (n=5), others (n=4) worked as midwives, doulas, and childbirth educators, one worked as a social worker and one has retired.

Six of the births described took place at home, five took place at the hospital and one in a birthing center (n>11, since one woman described two of her births). All the

births except one were non medicated births. Only one had major medical interventions which included the use of a pain blocking epidural and resulted in a c-section.¹

Data Collecting Procedures

I submitted the required documentation to the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality's Committee for Protection of Human Subjects – Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received their approval. This was followed by my posting an invitation explaining the research and requesting the participation of women who had sexual experiences during childbirth. The request for participants was posted on various childbirth mailing lists and relevant websites, such as Midwifery Today, South Bay Birth Circle, www.Gentlebirth.org, www.Birthworks.org, www.AASECT.org, and others.

When a woman contacted me, I let her know the research would take one to two hours of her time. She was given an information sheet (see Appendix B), which described the study and its goals, insured her anonymity and confidentiality and explained that she could end her participation at any time. I then interviewed each woman for one to two hours and recorded the interview. Two of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting and the other eight were conducted over the telephone. There was no noticeable difference between interviews conducted at home and interviews conducted face- to- face. I transcribed all the interviews myself within a week after each interview.

Sample Size

Qualitative research usually involves smaller sample sizes than quantitative research (Morse, 1994). An appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question. Practically speaking, the required number of

¹ See Table 1 for complete demographics

subjects usually becomes obvious as the study progresses, as new categories, themes or explanations stop emerging from the data (Marshall, 1996). This point is called data saturation (Marshall, 1996; Ploeg, 1999). As I was collecting and analyzing the data for this study, an interpretative framework was constructed. New themes stopped emerging after about six interviews. I constructed an interpretative framework and stopped interviewing after eleven interviews.

Interview Questions

An individual semi-structured clinical interview was conducted with each participant (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). This approach is widely used in phenomenological studies to enable participants to convey their own experiences while meeting the researchers' goals of understanding and explicating an understudied phenomenon (McCracken, 1988; Mishler, 1986). The strength of this approach is that the interviewer responds to each participant's stories and explanations with questions designed to elicit answers that are lead by and will elaborate on each personal account. This allows understanding of the phenomenology of sexual experiences of women during childbirth. (See the interview questions in Appendix A)

Methods of Analysis

Phenomenological research provides the method of analysis in this project. The phenomenological approach emphasizes the centrality of a person's subjective experience, its intentional character, and its accessibility to consciousness. Phenomenological research examines experiences from many perspectives in order to gather understanding about an event. It integrates the subject and the object to capture the essence of an experience. It is done mostly by interviewing, although other forms of data

observation can be used, and is accomplished in a descriptive, natural, and objective manner (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) described six stages of analysis of phenomenological data:

1. List every expression, significant statements, or images that are relevant to the experience. Notice verbal and non verbal cues, and outline feelings.
2. Determine whether expressions consist of sufficient and relevant information for understanding the experience and whether they can be labeled. Irrelevant and vague expressions are eliminated, and what remains are the salient and prevalent expressions of the experience that have unique qualities.
3. Cluster the expressions into thematic labels. This process requires categorizing the main constituents and themes under varied labels. These clustered and labeled constituents are the core themes of the experience.
4. Validate whether the constituents and themes are compatible with participants' expressions of the experience and with the created images.
5. Use and incorporate the validated and relevant constituents and themes to construct for each participant an individual textural-structural description of the experience (i.e. what the individual experienced and the context in which the individual experienced it).
6. Synthesize and integrate all the individual descriptions and images to develop and cast a representation of the group as a whole, which captures the meanings and essences of the experience.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

This chapter describes eleven interviews with women who had sexual experiences during childbirth. It is presented in a narrative manner and in the participants' unique ways of speaking. Participants' names were changed to guarantee their confidentiality and anonymity. For every participant the narrative starts with a reflection on how the sexual birth experience impacted her life. The narrative goes on to explore topics such as:

- ♥ Sexual messages during childhood
- ♥ The first orgasmic experience
- ♥ Sexuality during the year before conception
- ♥ Sexuality during the pregnancy that preceded the sexual birth
- ♥ Childbirth preparation and attitudes towards childbirth
- ♥ The sexual birth story
- ♥ Sexuality after the sexual birth experience
- ♥ The influence of this experience on her perception of herself as a woman

Beverly

Beverly, a 54-year-old-woman, single and a mother of three, experienced a sexual experience with her second birth. She gave birth at home 22 years ago in 1985. The experience changed her life:

It changed my life and I wouldn't be doing the work that I am doing if I didn't have this experience. Because I remember just a few minutes after he was born saying to my midwife "Oh my God I have to tell women they can have orgasms." It was an

incredible experience of oneness with my baby. It was a feeling of transcendence, a spiritual transcendence. My yoga guru used to say: “A woman that prepares and gives birth with consciousness is the same as spending twenty years on the top of the mountain meditating.” You can experience oneness and transcendence with God. It is an incredibly spiritual experience, it is as if you have the ability to cross over to the other side and then come back and be completely in love with this angel being.

Sexual messages in childhood:

As a child I got the messages that sex is forbidden, dirty, hidden and not to be discussed. I was probably around 15 or 16 when I experienced my first orgasm through masturbation. It just felt different. Like... oh!

Describe your sexuality during the year before you conceived:

I was very sexual. I was having sex every day and I masturbated on top of it. When I orgasm it feels like there is an expansion in my chest. It starts in my groin and it quickly moves through my chakras and I feel the expansion, and it is like a warmth moves through you, and your brain stops...your brain completely stops and you give this sigh of relief... a total body relief and let go. You almost feel fatigued by it and at the same time it energizes you. Orgasms with deep penetration are different than clitoral ones, and those orgasms are more of a mind expansion than the physical rush that you have with clitoral orgasms. With penetration I feel definitely more inside my lower chakra, and it moves up a lot slower, with clitoral orgasms it is very quick very instant. It last longer and moves more slowly.

How I stimulate myself to orgasm? I just had to think. I have taken some tantric yoga classes, and I could be with my partner and he just needed to touch me or lick me... it was so fast, it was always like, Oh my God. I could orgasm sometimes just by touching myself when he was talking to me. We were separated for a while for work, and we were having phone sex all the time, and it was a mind thing... soft voices and talking and I get an orgasm. I had clitoral and G-spot, and I also ejaculated. I tried anal sex but I don't enjoy it. What did it to me was fantasy and phone sex, but only with him. I was very turned on by his voice... he was from the Bronx and he had this accent, and he would talk to me on the phone and I would get very juicy and I would ejaculate. I have had orgasms when I was sleeping. I experienced them both pregnant and not but not too often.

We had a lot of sex anywhere we were. I was more sexually free with him than any other person I have ever been with. He had a huge sexual appetite and I complied. We did a lot of experimenting at that time. It was a time of discovery for sure. During the next couple of years we would pretend we were other people, we met at bars, and we had to be at home by 10:00pm so the sitter could go.

He asked me to have a baby for him, and I finally consented and I conceived the first time that we tried. I had a conception orgasm. I knew that I was conceiving. I felt the moment of conception, and that was an incredible feeling, and I felt the communication of the spirit – everything. Had a vision of the baby talking to me at the same moment of conception. His conception orgasm was probably the most powerful orgasm in my life except the orgasm I had when he was born.

Childbirth preparation:

I believe my tantric practices influenced my second birth, one of the other things that influenced my second birth experience is rebirthing. I worked closely with a rebirther from the beginning of my second trimester all the way to the end of my pregnancy. We would do rebirthing on the bed and warm water rebirthing. We used isolation tank – it is like a coffin that is filled with water, just to be in touch with origins and feelings and all of that and it was an incredible experience, I really had the time to focus and concentrate. The focus was to get me into my body. With that pregnancy I was probably more body focused then anytime in my life. It brought me in touch with what I needed emotionally and mentally. It was more of right brain work and I had this emotional connection with my body and with my sexuality.

I wasn't a midwife. I knew a lot but I decide to totally prepare for a water birth. I actually went to France and went to Pithiviers to find Michel Odent², but he wasn't there, he was on his first trip to the US, actually he was in my home town when I was in Pithiviers... But I stayed there for a week and actually took childbirth classes both in Pithiviers and Melila, outside of Paris at the hospital where Fredrick Leboyer³ worked and he wasn't working then, but I went to his home and interviewed him and met with him. I was on a mission to find out the

² Michel Odent, a French obstetrician, took Leboyer's work further and allowed women to labor and birth in warm-water birth pool. Birthing women found water a soothing pain relief. By the late 1990s, thousands of women had given birth at Odent's birth centre at Pithiviers, and the notion of water birth had spread to many other western countries

³ Fredrick Leboyer was a French obstetrician who developed in the late 1960s the practice of immersing newly-born infants in warm water to help ease the transition from the womb to the outside world, and to mitigate the effects of any possible birth trauma. His book (1975) *Birth without Violence* describes this practice.

most I could about water labor and water birth, so that was about a three week process when I was about six months pregnant.

The birth story:

I had planned a home birth, and I had planned for a lot of people to be there, all together there were supposed to be twelve people. I constructed my own pool, and put it together. It was a lovely house, and when the contractions started I was planting an herb garden in the back yard. I was on my hands and knees, I was very happy that I was having contractions, and I was very comfortable. Being on my hands and knees felt sexy to me, it just felt wow... my lower chakra was kind of buzzing. I went in to take a shower and I remember stimulating myself and having an orgasm while I was in the shower thinking 'It can't hurt,' feeling really good about it and the contractions were really strong right after an orgasm. I think I repeated this three or four times. I got in the car and went to the grocery store. The contractions got very intense when I was in the grocery store and I remember leaning over the cart and breathing. When I got home I started calling people and I couldn't find anybody. So I left messages on message machines. I tried paging my midwife and she didn't answer. I didn't panic; I was ready to do this birth by myself if I had to. My partner finally came home, and he got excited and we filled the tub and we got in bed and made love while I was in labor. I just had him doing clitoral stimulation, and he loved to suck on my nipples, and I had an orgasm after orgasm. I was so happy that nobody was around; otherwise I wouldn't be doing this. Then it got really intense and I was walking around, but never, not even once did I not enjoy the power and the intensity of it and to me it all felt very sexual. It

was just burning in my belly and in my groin, I was always touching myself. I got back in the shower and I was doing the open OM and my midwife finally got there. When the midwife came in she got me on the bed and checked me. I was eight centimeters. I asked her if I could get in the pool and she said “Use your own judgment,” so I got in. The minute I got in, the minute I sank into the water, it was like as if a lightening bolt hit me. I experienced very intense five to eight contractions. I said that I want to push, and she couldn’t believe me since I was just eight a few minutes ago, and she asked me to come out and to check me again, I stood up and had another contraction and said “No.. no.. no I am getting back in the water, I can’t get out.” My partner got behind me and very soon after that I started pushing. Oming... I was making sounds as if I was being made love to... really letting that sound out enjoying every single movement... I could feel the micro-movement of his head right through me, I could feel everything intensely. As I was birthing him there was this incredible orgasmic tantric relief, and my body just went with it, I shuddered from head to toe. When I have an orgasm my toes always curl up and I remember my toes curling at the bottom of the birthing pool. It was as if every fiber of my being was having an orgasm and the midwife lifted him right up to my chest. I got out of the tub and into the bed and I heard a dripping sound ... and in few minutes the whole tub collapsed... 300 gallons of water on the bedroom floor and placental pieces all over. I was high from the birth and I didn’t care... “It will clean up.” They put him back on my chest and he stayed there for two days. It was amazing.

When I think about the birth I feel pure and absolute joy, remarkable, wonderful and happiness. I still feel the fire in my belly, just a warm sensation. It is not an orgasm. When I tell my birth story I can feel myself relaxing, it just feels pleasant in my body.

I wasn't prepared for this kind of sexual experience, my rebirthing coach talked a lot about moving from pain to pleasure, she worked with me about experiencing pleasure but never put it in sexual or orgasmic terms. But she always talked about choosing... that we can choose in every moment to experience pain or pleasure, and I was choosing pleasure. It changed me in the sense that I felt very powerful afterwards and I felt empowered to be his mother. I fell in love with him so completely, so amazingly, I would do anything to protect him and take care of him. Now that I know what I know about these powerful love hormones... if I am having the most powerful orgasm of my life I am soaked with oxytocin and beta-endorphins. I was changed enormously. I tell everybody that my 22 year old son and I have never had one single argument between us. I look at the picture of him and my chest just expands, and it started with his birth.

What do you think allowed this experience to happen?

I had prepared myself physically, spiritually and mentally for a pleasurable experience in labor. I was surprised by the intensity of orgasm at birth but welcomed it at the same time.

In what way did it feel sexual or orgasmic?

In every way! It was a total body-mind-spirit. With my first birth I left my body. It was so incredibly painful and so humiliating I felt that I was raped. I was raped

when I was 17, so I knew how it feels to be raped. My first birth was in the hospital; I was tied to the bed and couldn't move or protect myself. It was so incredibly emotionally painful that I left my body. Therefore when I was working with rebirthing she worked with me on staying in my body. Now my mantra is: "My body is safe no matter how much energy moves through it." I remember this mantra and I used it with hundreds of women. It really helped me move into it.

How does this experience compare to masturbation or partner sex?

It is different - hundred times more intense. I would say it is the same body feeling and mind exploding, being able to open your chest and expand, all of that – hundred times more intense than orgasm through either masturbation, penetration or Tantra. It was an explosion from every fiber of my being. I was surprised by the intensity. When my sexuality arose I accepted it as a benefit and a reward for doing homework and being clear that my body had the incredible ability of doing this. I used a lot of imagery in my head. I used the candle imagery and the flower imagery, but not so much sexual imagery. Flowers tend to represent sexual imagery for me – a yoni opening.

Did you share it with someone?

I tried to explain it to people 20 years ago and I had people say that I was doing a disservice to women. I was ridiculed and yelled at so I stopped talking about it... and I realized too that you really have to prepare your mind to have an orgasm during birth. You have to be in a place of being able to transcend and move from pain to pleasure. I have written things about it, but I stopped yelling it from the roof

top and realized that we have so much work to do... that is why I rolled up my sleeves and began this work.

Did you experience pain?

I never felt pain. The sexual stimulation, making love in labor, and stimulating myself with my fingers and with my husband's tongue opened me more. It just added to the pleasure and I never felt pain.

When did you want to be sexual after the birth?

Three days after the baby was born my husband wanted to have sex. We had intercourse but it was really painful, I don't recommend it. He desired to have sex while I wanted to be close to him. I had no desire.

Did you feel sexual during breastfeeding?

We often had sex while our baby was nursing. That was interesting as well, I'd be nursing him as Hal did clitoral stimulation on me - I had orgasms. I found nursing very sexy, not exactly arousing but pleasant enough to know that it was juicy.

How did your sexuality compare before and after childbirth?

I feel like for a little while it was harder for me to have an orgasm, just for a little while, and maybe it was my mothering hormones but that came back. I would say it was the same for me; because my sex life with Hal was always very open and passionate. We still had amazing sex.

My sexuality is very much connected to my body image; I remember an intentional thought that I had around 1992-3 that if I get fat I won't have to deal with my sexuality. My body image was very much wrapped around my sexuality. I was a child of the Seventies, before AIDS came into play, so there was a lot of

experimentation. I just drew a line and said that was enough, and my body changed and I allowed myself to gain weight and get out of shape, so in my mind if I wasn't appealing, looking sexy I wouldn't have to think about my sexuality.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

Even though I didn't have sex for 15 years, I love my body, I love the feelings in my body, I test it out every now and then. I can still get orgasms from kissing – it still works, I know it works so I am not worried about that at all. And when I get back to it, it will be extra special.

Faith

Faith is a 44-year-old-woman, a mother of three who lives with the father of her third child. She described her three births, where in every birth a new layer of her sexuality unfolded. We focused on her third birth which occurred six years ago in 2000, as this birth felt most sexual to her. Even though this pregnancy wasn't planned and she tried to abort the child naturally, she ended up feeling that this child was meant to be in her life and embraced the pregnancy. She summarized her feelings about this birth: "I did it exactly the way I wanted and needed it to be. It was so empowering, the best thing in the world. I felt a complete sexual human being."

Sexual messages in childhood:

I was raised Catholic, so the attitudes towards sexuality are just whatever comes with that. I didn't recall any sexual abuse during childhood but when I was pregnant with my second child, I realized that I had been sexually abused. My whole second pregnancy was dealing with this issue.

Sexuality during the year before conception of your third child:

I was in the process of separating my life from my ex husband, he used to molest me while I was sleeping. I had completely shut down my sexuality, I was absolutely an asexual person, I was afraid of him, I wasn't interested in him, I was turned off by him. I found out that I wasn't interested in anyone else either. I wasn't interested in masturbation, I didn't have any feelings any more and I was afraid that I was dead. I just existed, I was there for my children and my work in midwifery, but I had no physical experience of pleasure.

Then David came into my life and I became sexual again, very sexual, at the beginning with both of them, we were kind of a triad (one at a time), and this is when I conceived with David.

With David I became very orgasmic. Probably for me the emotional part is the most important part, I need to feel emotionally connected and ready. Clitoral stimulation definitely helps although it is not always necessary. Vaginal stimulation is very important. Penetration is best. I have experienced only G-spot orgasm/vaginal orgasm without clitoral stimulation. I love when it happens but it just not so frequent. I think I have experienced ejaculation from intense physical stimulation; it is much more physical for me and not so emotionally engaging.

Sexuality during the pregnancy that preceded the sexual birth:

David and I made love a lot during my third pregnancy, it was a very sexual pregnancy, and we really enjoyed that. In the latest stages of my pregnancy I felt that my baby was connected, that she was involved too. When we were making love I would feel her spirit joining with us, like she was just part of us, there was no

separation. And I started to wonder how anybody could separate it out, why people get so intimidated about having sex when they are pregnant, because they feel like they are having sex in front of their baby. For me it is...well the baby got there this way, so she must know. It wasn't something that I am hiding from her.

A few weeks later I went into labor. I just wanted her badly to come out. I thought that having sex would stimulate her. We were very sexual during that month, I was trying to get this baby to be born, and I did anything I could do. I also really wanted to be connected to my sexual self.

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

I was a midwife for years before; I knew everything I needed to know. During this pregnancy I met Michel Odent and talked with him about how sexuality affects birth. And I had decided that birth really should be a sexual experience, getting the baby in there is about sexuality, and birth is the ultimate expression of women's sexuality. By this time I was very open: I was very open with my current partner, I felt very free and safe with him, and I very much opened myself sexually. He is very accepting of everything. I felt that this was my last chance to have a baby, so if I wanted to experience birth as sexuality this was my last chance to do it. I said my perfect birth will be about ten hours; this will give me the perfect time to integrate it physically and emotionally and recover. I wanted to completely feel every thing.

The sexual birth story:

I wanted to have my baby during the blue moon, and she came on the blue moon. We did a circle, with my daughters, my partner, and husband. We passed a huge

apple the size of a baby's head. We had an altar with a very pregnant goddess, and then we put the kids to bed, and promised them that if the baby comes we will wake them up.

David and I went for a walk, when we came back I felt very very sexual, this was early stages of labor, and we made love. And it was...I never had an orgasm like that. We were looking into each others eyes; we both had orgasm in the same moment. I couldn't speak, I couldn't make a sound... it was as if I opened up and I was floating in the universe... I looked into his eyes and what I saw was the universe, and inside of me was the entire universe, and I could not speak, I could only smile and laugh. It was the most profound sexual experience I ever had while I was in labor.

So that started it and I felt tired and we went to sleep. I was all curled up in my partner's arms, and I said we will wake up in the morning and we will have the baby, I will be in active labor.

We woke up at about 8:00am and I was refreshed and was having very strong contractions, not very often but very strong. And since I had this sexuality between me and David, since we were still feeling very much together, even though the contractions were strong they weren't bothering me.

I called my midwife and she came. I have known her forever, we both trusted each other. We had a birthing tub and we had an antique mirror on a shelf next to our bed, and there were lots of pillows on the bed. I watched myself masturbating during contractions, and it felt good and it made the contractions

easier. I wasn't afraid; I was very loose, feeling so good in my body. I was working very hard on the inside but nobody on the outside could tell.

She called her assistant, and we called my best friend, and I called my husband, and within 20 minutes I felt I needed to get in the tub. What I didn't realize was that the tub was a little bit too narrow and I couldn't spread my legs far enough. It hurt like crazy, I never experienced something like that. At that point I didn't care who was watching, I started masturbating in the water in order not to hurt so much. Internally I said "This is the center of the universe, if I could push her through my own center it all will work, as soon as she is out the hurt stops". What came out of my mouth was "center... center... center... center..." The only way I could deal with the pain was through masturbation. It didn't hurt as much when I did it... it hurt but not as much.

This is how I used my sexuality to birth this baby. It was a perfect birth; it was exactly the ten hours that I wanted it to be. And I felt very committed with my partner and our sexuality during the pregnancy and during early labor, I felt that I just had to look at him and he was right there and knew where I was, it was the most profound thing – extreme feelings of closeness.

The birth itself felt like an orgasm, this sensation of feeling her passing through me. There was a period where her head was out and inside she was kicking, I birthed her myself, I could feel her kicking inside my belly while I was holding her shoulders, this was the most incredible experience of my life. When the final rush of pushing her out came, that felt orgasmic.

When you think about your childbirth experience what emotions do you feel?

I felt very integrated; the physiological feeling was relief. There was pain, there were contractions, there was the head of the baby, there was so much going on inside. The clitoral stimulation was what matched that and made it not hurt. It was like meeting that expansion that is happening with the uterus and the baby coming, and helping it out. Specifically it felt like the balancing of those strong sensations.

What do you think allowed the sexual experience to happen?

I was ready for it. I thought to myself that if I want to incorporate my sexuality in childbirth this is my opportunity to do it. I had a wonderful partner to share it with me, our love making at the beginning of the contractions colored the whole experience.

How did it compare to masturbation or partner sex?

The birthgasm is much more total, much more complete. There is always a bit of longing left when I experience an orgasm with my partner. This was absolute completion – I was everything and everything was me. It is very spiritual. That is what all women are supposed to be doing and women are missing that now. The connection that David and I felt, I think this is what is supposed to happen, this is what nature designed.

How did you feel when sexual feelings and sensation arose?

“Wonderful, I felt like a complete human being. I shared it with the people in the room and it was very accepted.”

Sexuality after childbirth:

I wanted to be sexual very fast. I could hardly wait for two weeks to pass. Being with my partner and the experience of pregnancy transformed me, because just a year before that I felt completely asexual, and I was worried that I would never feel sexual again, but my experience with him and the birth brought back my sexuality. It was very important for me to have this birth to be such an expression of sexuality.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

I did it exactly the way I wanted and needed it to be. It was so empowering, the best thing in the world. I always wondered if I could experience myself as a sexual being fully, since I had so many things working against it, my husband cheating on me, my husband molesting me, childhood sexual abuse, all these different things that stood there against my sexuality... being raised Catholic, you know. To experience myself that fully was quite an accomplishment, you can't take that away.

Ashley

Ashley, a 37-year-old-woman, married and a mother of five children described her fourth birth as the most sexual birth she experienced. She gave birth at home three years ago in 2003. For her this birth increased her confidence and trust in her body and in her relationship:

When I think about this particular birth, I think of it as a really beautiful, intimate time with my husband when we were physically demonstrating our love for each other, our marriage, and our oneness. I feel strength and fullness, wholeness,

completeness. It was a time where everything worked right, even though it was very painful. I feel confidence and trust in my body, and the process of trusting the people who chose to support me.

Sexual messages in childhood:

I was raised in a Catholic family, and got the messages: “Don’t touch yourself. You should feel guilty if you touch yourself.” As a teenager I was very curious about how my body was going to change and how it would be when I got my period. I was fascinated about this cycle, but the message that I got from my mom was that I had a real obsession with it and I was far too interested in it. When it came to sexuality, my parents were very close. My mom would never sit on a chair, she would sit on my dad’s knee, they were caressing and touching, but that was an adult thing and only when you are married. Pleasure in your own body was not discussed, so I was a very guilty masturbator.

I had been sexually active at 14 with a partner, and I didn’t masturbate until 16 or 17. I didn’t have an orgasm until I was 17. I needed fantasy with my touch. I really felt that my vulva was dirty, and I needed to touch myself only over my underwear, and I was a bad girl to do any sexual activity whether solo or coupled. Therefore I was a very rebellious teenager... I was very sexually active. Also it was tied in with me wanting people to like me through my sexuality.

I experienced my first orgasm with my boyfriend when he went down on me for the first time. I was 16. I had feelings of how dirty it was when he was going down on me, and then I felt this volcano erupting, it was very brief, and he told me that this was an orgasm. “Mmm... that was good, I can do that again.” And I felt

something was working with me, I was beginning to be really turned on and then I would have penetrative sex and nothing happened. So this was a real discovery.

Sexuality a year before you conceived:

I was still breastfeeding both of my kids and I had lots of physical touch. It was really difficult because particularly when I am breastfeeding I don't feel sexual. But when we did it I felt... "Oh this was so good, why we don't do it more often," and until then I was not really in touch with my desire, so it was more of the starting that is difficult.

It is very rare with James that I didn't have an orgasm. Our lovemaking wasn't goal oriented but I usually had an orgasm. Occasionally I masturbated, and sometimes masturbation was just a way to go to sleep.

My orgasms were mostly clitoral-- at that time we hadn't really done any G-Spot exploration, and we hadn't done any anal. Sometimes I had uterine orgasms; deeper in my body and more emotional. Like velvet as opposed to silk. Silk is a clitoral orgasm which is more on the surface level and is more like a sneeze, very nice and relatively brief. The uterine one is more rolling and more full body the way red wine is full body, it is more in the center, much more...more oxytocin... everything is ok and the world is good.

I experienced orgasms from breast stimulation. And one time James was inside me, and we were eye gazing and our hands were just caressing and I had amazing physical orgasm. I also experienced orgasms while dreaming. I don't remember if it was specific during pregnancies.

Sexuality during the pregnancy preceding the sexual birth:

“I had less desire and less sex. The quality of orgasms didn’t change, so just the fact that we were having less sex meant that I had less orgasms. I was breastfeeding two kids and I was pregnant.”

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

“I was already a childbirth educator, I also did birth art. I believe that birth is a normal function of your body and generally it works quite well and it works like it should. I also practiced prenatal yoga.”

The birth story:

This was the one where my husband and I were the most connected, the most intimate within the duration of the labor and particularly within the early part when we were on our own. We had a really pleasant morning. The kids went to school and we had the morning together for doing pleasant things so we took a bath and we made love, preparing for when it was going to be more intense and for when we needed more people around. So it was almost like... I don’t know, it was almost like a honey moon but before the wedding, we had this really nice close time before we had to go public. So I felt very comfortable in my body, very relaxed about how I was progressing.

When I felt that labor was changing I wanted to stop the lovemaking. I still felt very connected to James, and when people started to come I didn’t really want to be aware of them or socialize with them, so James was holding me and I would keep my face against him so my connection was with him. I don’t know if I would

have been able to maintain the connection with James if I had not had that really intimate sexual time before.

When you think about your childbirth experience what emotions do you feel?

I feel that it was very intimate and the time that I spent with James laboring and when the other people were here, I knew that I could completely trust everyone. It is really a significant factor in my relationship with James that I completely trust him. Having that safety really makes it right. It is so intertwined. I learned about my body while I was having our babies, and he learned about my body as well. All the taboos were really dissolved, because we had this great foundation of trust.

In what way did it feel sexual or orgasmic?

We were able to explore sensations. I was curious of how oral sex was going to feel in my body combined with this powerful force of labor that was going on.

I didn't have an orgasm during our lovemaking. I wanted to have an orgasm, but I feel really that I was afraid to combine the power of the labor and the power of orgasm. Now I think that I wasn't really able to let go in my body, I was just guarding it very close. I wasn't ready to unleash all that. There are certain types of orgasm that I haven't let myself fully experience because I have been afraid of the intensity. Knowing what I know about women's labor, I knew that in my body there is this uncontrollable force. The possibility of combining this with orgasm was too scary... but what if it isn't nice, and what if you let it go and you have this thing that is going on, and who knows how long it is going to last...and how intense it will be. At the time I couldn't figure it out, just intuitively didn't want to go there.

When I tell my birth story I say that we had made love, and when I teach classes I talk about the possibility of making love in the list of things that they might be doing.

The experience of pain:

I don't think that lovemaking helped with pain because it came to a point where the pain was too much and then we stopped. It felt like lovemaking was building nicely and then there was the pain-- like one of the kids waking you up, and then you have to go back to square one. And then you get going again and then you get a leg cramp and you go back to zero, and you need to build it again. The contractions and the intensity interfered with our love making and I just gave it up.

Making love helped me deal with the pain since I was feeling very loved and supported and cherished – this was wonderful.

Sexuality after childbirth:

I learned and realized particularly after this baby that even though we weren't having penetrative sex during the first few weeks it was very important that we had physical intimacy. It wasn't so much about wanting or feeling very turned on but mostly showing him my appreciation to him and how much I loved him.

After the baby was weaned we began sexual exploration and my sexual response changed because we were trying new things. I believe that what allowed it to happen was personal maturity and maturity in our relationship. Reading and shifting attitudes to certain things and losing weight made a difference. I began feeling hot again. I enjoyed seeing myself in clothes and feeling that I looked good in them. I still have difficulty reconciling feeling motherly and feeling horny.

When I am post partum and stretchy and over weight and out of shape and milky it is hard for me to feel sexual. Intellectually I know that James is excited about me just the way I am, and actually he likes me fuller than thinner, but the social thing is so deep in me – to be sexual you have to be beautiful... slim. The message we get is that to be beautiful you have to be slim. And I look at other women and I see the beauty in women who are not slim. But when it comes to my body I need to be slim.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

It was amazing. I felt this goddess woman in my body is so powerful and worked so well, particularly once I lost weight and could look at the mirror and appreciate my body more. It was a powerful time for me because I was working and having these children, it was all wonderful. I felt this juicy woman who can do all this stuff. I think that the birth experience and the fact that I had this beautiful intimate birth was a great foundation to whatever came afterwards.

Cathy

Cathy is a 54-year-old married woman. She is a midwife and a mother of seven children. Cathy was very excited about discussing sexuality and childbirth. She said that most of her births were sexual in some way but the most sexual one was the birth of her sixth child 15 years ago in 1991: “I feel that birth is amazing and so sexual, I am so sorry that many women do not go there”.

Sexual messages in childhood:

As a child I didn't get much information about sexuality; my mom didn't talk about stuff like that. As a child I was molested three times.

I experienced my first orgasm when I was 29 with my husband. It was pretty clear that it was an orgasm - it was unmistakable. It had a crescendo and you need to let go and release into it... it is very much like birth, I mean, I see a phenomenal resemblance. There are few things about orgasm that are unmistakable, you build up you build up, you build up and a crescendo and you have an orgasm all throughout your body, and then you have an amazing sense of relief.

Sexuality a year before you conceived:

Well I am a very sexual person. I love to make love, I have orgasms freely. I have always been very sensual. So when I am ready to give birth and I make love, the orgasm develops into contractions. I have known my husband for 23 years and we are very compatible when it comes to sex. I like sex.

The most effective way for me to orgasm is probably through clitoral stimulation. We don't always go to the G-Spot, but when we do the most effective stimulation is by fingering my G-Spot. I think I ejaculate. I didn't know that women could (ejaculate) so for a while I asked, "What is that?" Sometimes if I haven't had an orgasm for a long time, it can be much more intense.

When I see women giving birth, you can tell when the baby is hitting the G-Spot. Women make this kind of primitive screech, and it is a very typical and very orgasmic reaction when the baby is descending into the birth canal. I felt it myself with my births.

Sexuality during the pregnancy that preceded the sexual birth:

"During my pregnancy I was major hornier. I didn't do lots of masturbation, I didn't need to, I have a lot of partner sex, he never says no."

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

I am a midwife so I see lots of women give birth. Sexuality brings the baby in--I think that the best way babies come out is the way they come in. If you allow intimacy and sexuality birth just moves much faster. I always encourage the sensuality part. I think that privacy is a big deal. The more private you are the more you can discover how birth is sexual, and most people don't do it. When I attend births I always think that the way people give birth this is how they make love.

The sexual birth story:

We made love and contractions began, it started with a lot of sensual foreplay and kissing, and I went into labor. I knew that making love would be helpful; when I was done I got up and set up for the birth. The thing that was the biggest exclamation point for me was the actual expulsion of the baby ... and this was very orgasmic. And the sensation of relief, release that begins with a build up, just like an orgasm. The actual expulsion of the baby, when the baby moves out of your body is like a massive orgasm. Every one interferes at that time, taking care of the baby, etc, so it is really hard to really savor it.

For me I would have preferred to be left alone. I think that if I would have been left alone, I could go more into the sexuality of birth.

The actual moment of birth was ecstasy! Its like to me, I looove giving birth... I love having an orgasm... I love making love!

What do you think allowed this experience to happen?

I think my sensual experience began when I gave birth at home. My first two births were at the hospital, and births 3-7 were at home, and I think I was more in touch

with my sensuality, and the freedom to do what I want made the difference. In the hospital people go in and out, you do not know exactly who is going to show his face in the door, you are hooked to wires... you do not know exactly what is going on but it can be very distracting from your experience... where as at home you can be more in tune with the rhythm of the birth, and I think that the rhythm of birth is sexuality. What allowed me to do it is that I believe in birth, and I feel very confident about myself.

In what way did it feel sexual or orgasmic?

Building up, building up, building up building up and then the actual baby's head is born, when you get this pulsation when you are having an orgasm, and then when the baby is born it is like the major gush... a release, that same release.

How did it compare to masturbation or partner sex?

It is different from orgasm because I am having a baby. I also think that it is different because there are people around. If I was by myself I would probably experience it and savor it. I wouldn't be concerned about bringing the baby to the breast, I would be more instinctive.

When sexual feeling and sensations arose I felt wonderful! This is how it is supposed to be. I shared it with everyone I could. It is so weird for this culture. Women have a hard time getting in touch with this part of themselves, they are concerned about performance.

Sexuality after childbirth:

I am stimulated so much by the baby sucking on my nipples. I nursed for 21 years almost non stop - the only time I want my husband to suck on my nipples is for him

to bring me to orgasm. I am not super sexual right away after the birth but probably after 4 weeks. I feel that my sexuality got more intensified over the years, and birth enhances that. I love sex all the time.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

I feel that birth is amazing and so sexual, I am so sorry that many women do not go there. Especially since I had past molestation I needed to let it [trauma] go in order to be who I am and not suffer with my sexuality. Sex is very much an intuitively an expression of all of your feelings, of who you are.

Alex

Alex is a 36-year-old married woman, and a mother of four children. She described two of her births as being sexual in different ways. The first sexual experience was with her second child, Nash, who was born five years ago in 2001, and the second sexual experience was during Amanda's birth three years ago in 2003. Alex expressed her feelings towards Amanda's birth:

Power, satisfaction, and Oh my God I might cry... knowing that that is the way it is supposed to be. It was very sensual. I mean if I had to give one descriptive word it would be DELICIOUS. I feel relaxation when I think about it. It brings me great joy because now I have this experience and that knowledge that I can not only pass to my daughter and say this is how birth is supposed to be, but I can also share that with other people.

Sexual messages in childhood:

As a child my mom was very open; she has just turned 17 when she had me, she got pregnant with me the first time she had sex with my dad. I remember being in

first grade asking her where babies come from, and I remember her being very open and very candid. When I was ready to get my period I remember talking to my mom and being very excited, and she seemed very supportive and very open with me. That continued throughout my lifetime.

My first orgasm-- Oh my God, I was little, I was young. It was part of kids' exploration thing and it felt kind of cool, and that was just that. I didn't know that it was an orgasm then, I think I was probably a teenager when I knew what it was. I had a very active sex life with myself. I got an orgasm from clitoral stimulation using my hand. No penetration just playing with my clitoris.

Sexuality a year before you conceived:

I would say that I am more active in that area than the average woman. I used to have sex about three times a week or more, and by myself every day. I got an orgasm pretty much every time and multiples too. I don't know about ejaculation. When I orgasm it's kind of stiffening and a relaxing of the whole body, I feel it at the beginning in my genitalia and mainly in the clitoral area. It is different than the G-Spot experience. I didn't experience my first orgasm from actual penetration 'hitting the G-Spot', until I was 34/35, after my third child. So before I had kids I had mostly clitoral orgasms alone and with my partner.

Sexuality during pregnancy:

I was equally horny through all of my pregnancies. I am a horn dog. It is probably more during pregnancy. Because I am a multiple kind of girl I usually don't have only one, I have many orgasms. It depends if it is masturbation or sex, but

definitely I have sex at least five times a week whether with my husband or by myself.

I experienced spontaneous orgasms while I was sleeping when pregnant, I don't think that I have ever had one outside of pregnancy.

When I am pregnant I love anal sex. When I am pregnant and after a couple glasses of wine, this is almost the only way I want it.

I always felt that sex and sexuality is a spiritual experience but as far as needing to explore anything like Tantra or more than what I have done within the relationship with my husband, no I don't think so. For me it was always a very emotional, very spiritual experience. You know, a blessing, really!

Nash's birth

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

With my second child I didn't have any childbirth preparation. But I kind of knew what I wanted and followed my feelings, and I went and found a midwife.

I believe that childbirth is natural, and I used to say it to everyone all the time, I have no idea how to do this, but my body does. I probably practiced breathing, and I think that I have always practiced it since I gave birth. When I become frustrated or tense I find myself taking big breaths and sigh and release as if I am in labor, I continue to do it till this day.

The sexual birth story:

During my labor I felt that it was probably during the pushing stage when it happened, it almost felt orgasmic, I mean, I literally felt that I was right on the

verge of having an orgasm. And it was “Wow – Oh my gosh, nobody ever told me” and “holy smokes that is so cool.”

It was absolutely incredible. To push this kid out ... he is my biggest; he was 8 pounds 10 ounces. It was just the most fascinating, intense experience of my life.

I gave birth at the hospital, my husband was there with me, my mother, and a very good friend of ours, and that was it, and the nurses and my midwife.

I had done castor oil the night before and after this I took a long walk and went down to bed. I woke up in the morning, went into the shower and the moment the water hit my stomach the contractions started. They were very mild, and I knew that it was that, we called the midwife and went to the hospital. I walked all over the place, very slow. It was very laid back, even for being in a hospital it was very much like a home birth. I spent some time in the Jacuzzi listening to my music. After my midwife broke my water, contractions got very intense; all encompassing inside outside, no back labor, all in the front in my pelvic region and I would have to say that it was in my genital area too. It was a natural eight hour labor. I pushed naturally. When Nash was born I felt such a relief! And I would almost call this orgasmic. Intense relief.

A few minutes after my son was born the midwife told me, and I will never forget it, “I have never seen a woman labor like you, you should become a childbirth educator”. That is what started the whole process for me to really dig in, think about doing it, and I researched it.

When you think about your childbirth experience what emotions do you feel?

“I almost feel like it was my greatest birth. With him it was not only because of the orgasmic experience but because he was the first baby that I actually pushed out.”

What do you think allowed this experience to happen?

I think this is the way that birth is supposed to be. I really do. That is how Mother Nature set it up. A lot of this comes from the knowledge that I have, but I am just a firm believer that women need to share this and women need to talk openly about it. If women could be really open and truthful with each other, and a lot of that begins with mothers and daughters, talking about sex and birth will be a very common exchange. I think that women experience orgasms the same way I had it with Nash, but they don't talk about it because no one is supposed to have an orgasm during childbirth. The cycle gets perpetuated – “Oooh...that's dirty.” People are afraid to talk about sex anyway in an over sexualized society that we live in....we have dozen of naked women advertising a bra but a woman might be asked to leave a place if she is breastfeeding in public and her breasts might be exposed.

When during the birth did you experience your sexuality?

I felt like I will have an orgasm, I felt the very beginning and then climbing to the peak, and then I had the logical thought... wow you can't do it right now, you can't do it in front of people who are not your husband. So it was right at the very beginning of the pushing stage. It felt like a clitoral orgasm. I didn't do anything to stimulate myself.

How it compares to a masturbation or partner sex?

I think that they all pretty much the same for me – clitoral ones in terms of intensity, and the birth one was the same like the others. I don't know if I really felt arousal, I think it was just a very physical wow... this might happen and the logical mind took over. I felt it just once.

How did you feel when sexual feelings and sensations arose?

I was surprised! There have been very few people that I have shared it with. I don't even think that I shared it with my husband until I read it somewhere in a book that said – this is ok, and this is a normal experience of childbirth – this was probably a year or maybe two after it happened. I thought Oh my God, there is something abnormal with me that I would find sexual pleasure in giving birth – seriously, I had those thoughts.

How did it feel not to be able to share the experience with everyone else?

I don't think I really had any feelings about it, just kind of “OK, I will put that away. That's for me and maybe I will share it with my daughter, if I have one” but in hindsight and having the knowledge that I have now, I look back at it and I find it incredibly frustrating. It is annoying that women can not talk about this, and now I will tell anybody, because this is something that women need to know!

Did the orgasm affect your experience of pain?

“So there was a definite differentiation with what was going on. One was pleasurable and the other was pain. The orgasmic contraction was pleasurable in comparison to the others.”

Amanda's birth

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

Before my third birth I was already ready with all this knowledge, I read so many books. I have two bookshelves on my book case full of pregnancy, doula work, postpartum, you name it. I became a childbirth educator, took doula training. I don't remember if that was something that I read written by Barbara [Harper] or Suzanne [Arms] that told me about the sexuality of birth and really relating to it in those terms. I think it really opened me to a lot more of that experience with my daughter and a lot more to the education that I gave myself about birth. My views had not changed, my knowledge increased and my comfort level too, this is why I sought a home birth with my daughter. I thought, I don't need to be at the hospital, and this was a challenge, I took it as a challenge, you know – having a homebirth with her. Not only physically and mentally because what if something happened, you have to come to terms with that, how am I going to view myself, what is my reaction going to be if something awful happens, it can't be predictable.

The sexual birth story:

With her it was a very sexual experience, even though I felt very comfortable with the midwife that attended the birth of my second child, and that is what allowed me to experience the orgasmic experience that I had with him. With my third I was even less inhibited, it was very sexual, a very primal feeling and just being open to that experience and knowing that it was ok if that happened again, and if it did that I wanted to experience it to the fullest level. My body went there, and my husband wasn't in the labor pool with me but he was very close to me physically. It's just

that when I reflect on it I felt like my knowledge allowed me to open myself emotionally and spiritually whenever sexuality is involved. Let me put it this way, he could have leaned over, maybe not during a contraction, but at any point during my labor, and just kiss me passionately and I would have been like, ok... cool!

I was induced with her. We did home inducing and it was prostaglandin in a gel, half the normal dose. I was miserable at my due date and I was 5 cm, I wanted to give birth, and the midwife said – ok, let's go. Her birth was incredible. It was an hour and 18 minutes from the gel to when she was born. If I am thinking about how I want birth to be for women, I am thinking about my birth with her. The feelings of power--a lot probably came from the education and knowledge that I had about birth. And the fact that I was in my home and the decisions were left up to me. It was just incredible. I feel that it was somewhat sexual, but it was more intimate than the actual physical aspects of that.

I had a doula that I met at the doula training that I took, and a good friend of ours who I met that was there to help me in case my kids woke up. We had two naturopathic doctor/midwives and two student midwives. I knew all of them. Oh my God... people were walking in the door and I was in la la land. I'd look up and there would be a new face and I would say, "Hi, how are you?" It was great! Even though there were many people it was very intimate. We had a great room and I was just in the middle. It was fabulous, dim lights, music playing.

My contractions were very intense, all over the body, very hard, very long, and very fast. They went from nothing, I think I had the first contraction within five minutes of getting gelled, and they were immediately how they would have been if

I was in labor the whole time...very powerful. You know it was so quick, I think I was shocked just because it was so fast. I remember pushing twice and she was out.

What do you think allowed this experience to happen?

Comfort, not only in my body, and obviously a huge amount of sexuality. Having no inhibitions, stripping off my clothes and getting in the pool, and not caring who was at the front door. Being comfortable in my own body is part of my sexuality.

When during the birth did you feel sexual?

I would say during the whole entire thing. The whole thing was just very intimate, from the moment my midwife walked in the door and knowing what is going to happen, not knowing what to expect and knowing I was going to be ok with whatever happened...for a while the only thing I could do was sitting naked on the toilet, and I am crying, I am crying in my husband's arms, and he is holding me in front of the toilet and I don't know if I will pee or have diarrhea, and I just remember looking in his eyes and saying – we are going to have a baby girl and then getting in the tub and just knowing that I was okay with whatever came up during this experience. It was just very intimate, a very intimate way of sexuality, the most intimate way that you can have a sexual experience, you don't even have to have sex because it was so much beyond that.

Did you do something to arouse yourself sexually during childbirth?

“Not during the actual labor. I did try nipple stimulation to get me into labor, and we had sex numerous times before the birth.”

Where you surprised with your sexual feelings?

Not at the time because it was so intense and it was quick And I didn't have time to process it, but afterwards I was definitely surprised, and having a video that I could go and see it... I was surprised looking at myself and seeing myself that way, but it was as intimate as I thought it was in my head and it did happen in the way I thought it did. It was very surprising and exciting.

Did you share your experience with someone?

“Oh, with everybody! With anybody and everybody that would listen.”

Did the orgasm affect your experience of pain?

“It helped me to cope with the pain; it allowed me to relax more.”

Sexuality after childbirth:

Just feeling comfortable with my body and knowing what my body is capable of. I felt much more comfortable with myself. This happened immediately after my first birth. It probably did after other births too, it just continued to give me greater comfort with my body, and this is what it was all about, you have to be comfortable with your body. I feel more open, more relaxed, more confident, I initiate more.

When did you want to be sexual after the birth?

“With my oldest, I think that the first attempt was five to six weeks postpartum... I was ready way before that. I think I was ready the soonest after my most recent birth [the fourth].”

How did your sexual response compare before and after childbirth?

After my third birth something changed, and I have no clue why... I began experiencing G-Spot orgasms during penetration, but it is not all the time. I can't

tell you for sure how many times, maybe ten times, but it felt different. I felt it EVERYWHERE... EVERYWHERE in my body.

I think that my desire changed. I love labor, for me the pain is nothing, for me it is such a mind trip. Birth is such a powerful thing; this is the most powerful thing that we will ever do in our lives! How did that happen – how did that start – you make sex. This is why I believe I want sex so much... I am a woman – let's go to the bedroom.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

Birth and labor are such powerful things. I think that I am a very powerful person anyway, but I think that with each one I became more so. I am more able to verbalize all of my needs, not only the sexual ones but all of them, more so with each time that I have given birth.

I so admire your work, I mean it can't be said enough – women need to be educated for what their body is capable of, and be supported for that. There is not enough that can be said about the importance of support to women in different phases of women's lives. Support is a necessity. The experiences that women have during childbirth are the experiences that they will carry all their lives and that they will pass on to their daughters.

Janet

Janet, a 36-year-old married woman who is a mother of four children, considered her first birth, that happened six years ago, as a very erotic experience:

My whole self-perception shifted after this experience. I had a lot more faith in my body and I felt a lot more able to enjoy my sensuality. I had always felt very androgynous before. Suddenly I felt very ripe and womanly!

Sexual messages in childhood:

I grew up in a Catholic family so I got repressed messages about sexuality. When I experienced my first orgasm I was nineteen and had been in a sexual relationship for several months. We were apart at Christmas and I masturbated, missing him. I felt the orgasm through my whole body. It was pretty apparent that it was an orgasm!

Sexuality a year before conception:

We didn't have sex often and I rarely initiated sex. I felt like it was all too much hard work for little return. Naturally, once a month was fine with me! I experienced orgasms alone quite often, maybe a few times a week. With partner, less frequently – slow to master it! Orgasms by myself were invariably better.

My orgasms were usually clitoral, sometimes vaginal. On a good day it was a shudder through my whole body but that was rare. Around that time my breasts became a focus, but in a maternal way – my biological clock was ticking. We played like he was a baby suckling on my nipples. I never had spontaneous orgasm during dreams.

Sexuality during pregnancy:

“I was very horny and I had lots of sex by myself and with my husband. It was wonderful.”

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

I had read quite a bit about natural birth, and some of Dr. Sarah J. Buckley's work especially engaged me. I did a basic preparation class conducted by the birth center but most of my learning was from the internet. I knew that I was born naturally in a country hospital in rural Australia, and I always had the impression that it was not a bad experience, and whenever I asked my mother about the specifics of childbirth she always said, "You know, it hurts at the time but you forget about it quickly and you have this wonderful gift at the end." The focus was it's a good experience; it was quite influential because I wasn't afraid. So I had no fear – not ever.

I practiced lots of yoga for my three first babies. I actually feel that my yoga breathing helped me a lot to focus and birth my baby.

The sexual birth story:

I did a lot of yoga and had a very sensual pregnancy. I loved my pregnant body, still do. I wasn't planning a particular kind of birth but I had become very accomplished at meditation and knew that I would be able to cope. I trusted. I was in a birth center where they go to a great deal of trouble to get you familiar and get you comfortable with the environment, and I feel that that was a great contributing factor too. I had continuity of care with the midwife, so I knew who would be at my birth and I didn't need to worry about the midwife.

Contractions began to build very slowly and they were painful in a way I suppose I expected (though you can never prepare for it the first time). I relaxed into contractions as much as possible. It was intense, but I felt like I could ride them. I was quite comfortable during the birth; I could just labor and labor

forever... I was quite easy with the labor and the pain was all quite manageable, even though it was intense. I walked mostly and rocked. During intense contractions I stopped and hung from my husband's shoulders.

Around that time I started to vocalize and the sounds I made did surprise me. Very sexual noises! It didn't sound like I was in pain, it sounded like I was having sex. I don't think this thought occurred to me until later. I was beyond thinking about much at all at the time I was so deep inside my own labor. I remember gyrating my hips and feeling very sensual though – like I allowed myself to be primal. I knew that was desirable and tried hard not to fight it. I felt safe so I wasn't very self-conscious.

I labored the last part before transition in a deep, warm birth tub. I really liked the water and it relieved the joint fatigue I was experiencing after so much walking. I remember swiveling and swinging my hips around, kneeling in the water with my legs spread wide. In hindsight again, it was very sensual but the discomfort of contractions kind of superseded any overtly sexual feelings at the time. I do remember wondering what I looked like and whether it looked sexual or not (because it was obviously at the edge of my awareness at the time).

I didn't like pushing at all and had to be coached what to do and when (I think perhaps I just needed to wait longer but I don't recall experiencing an overwhelming urge to push). I do remember feeling a tingling feeling in my hands and feet and face/mouth – the kind I had experienced during times of long-lasting sex and being on the edge of orgasm but not quite getting there! The association was comforting and I was okay with it. As a first timer I was quite scared of the

crowning sensation and thought I was going to tear in two! Everything after birthing the head was quite pleasurable in a relieved sort of way. When he was out it was triumphant and surreal!

During pushing I had several interesting experiences; most profound was the sense that I was pushing simultaneously with other women around the globe, past, present and future. It was powerful and empowering – probably coinciding with the baby's quick descent through my pelvis.

When you think about your childbirth experience what emotions do you feel?

Elated. It was definitely a good experience. The memory is fading and of course I have had several more births since then. I still remember the tingling limbs and the feeling of being on the edge yet totally someplace else. I didn't have that with any subsequent births. It felt like a head trip, I used to smoke pot before and it felt like all those sensations in my body, almost psychedelic. It felt very erotic and sensual.

What do you think allowed this experience to happen?

When I was laboring in the birth centre with our first baby, my midwife very cleverly coached my husband and used him to relay messages to me. It made for a very private, personal, sensual birth experience and made me feel very protected. She did the right thing by me and her presence in the room was never, ever invasive or obtrusive.

In what way did it feel sexual or orgasmic?

“The movements I felt drawn to do, the sounds, the headspace were all very sexual – but not overtly so. It's like the association with how the baby got in and how the baby comes out became intertwined. Very erotic.”

How does it compare to masturbation or partner sex?

Completely different - aside from the tingling sensations that were totally associated with sex for me. Pleasure was not the objective, just a happy incidental. It was not like I felt horny during labor and birth at all but it was “erotic” or “sensual” for sure.

How did you feel when sexual feelings and sensation arose?

I wasn't surprised; I just assumed it was part of the experience. I didn't really intellectualize it until later. I felt a little embarrassed, and I told my midwife “Did you hear my voice?” And she reassured me that all was well, and I found it very comforting. And I could go on and make my voices, and allow myself to be sensual.

Did you tell anyone about your erotic feelings?

I didn't really express it, though I was surprised at hearing my vocalizations. My midwife said it was all good (which was the right thing for me to hear). After it was over she kissed me on the cheek and told me it was the most beautiful birth she'd seen – which meant a lot to me.

Did you do something to arouse yourself sexually during the childbirth?

“No, though I'm sure my yoga breathing was a big part of the experience. Involuntarily I was seeing pink orchid shapes evolving into assorted sensual forms, a bit like the flower penetration scene in Pink Floyd's *The Wall!*”

What was your experience of pain?

The pains just washed over me, or I floated over them (water was a big theme I guess). I still felt everything intensely but just went with the emotional/psychedelic side of everything like I was on some kind of acid trip.

Sexuality after childbirth:

Three days after my baby was born, and on our first night home from the hospital I felt very sexual. We were talking about the birth and we both felt aroused so we had sex, though of course not with penetration because I was quite sore. We both orgasmed and did it several times again that first week home. After the birth I felt like a super woman. I did it! I felt like I ran a marathon, my self esteem was really high, and I felt open to my husband, I felt very connected to him.

My sexuality after this birth is much better! I have much more obvious horny feelings around ovulation that was not very apparent to me before childbirth. I usually find it easier to climax now, but of course, these things are affected by environmental influences too. I am definitely more responsive now.

It began after the first birth, but there were so many things interfering. Adapting to motherhood was challenging. I think I was pretty depressed, since I stayed home with the baby and I was used to being active, traveling, and working. Lactation suppressed my urges more at first, but less now I've had my fourth baby. But my sexuality began developing after my erotic birth, and stronger after the second birth. My second birth wasn't so sensual and erotic but I was more prepared to be a mom and I felt more open with my husband, and our communication developed.

My husband's presence at the birth opened a wonderful communication and openness that we didn't have before.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the erotic birth?

"I was always slim and muscular – boyish - not very curvy. My self-perception was transformed and I felt much more womanly, even though my body snapped back into its previous shape almost immediately."

May

May, a 55-year-old married woman and a mother of two experienced an unexpected orgasm during the birth of her second child twenty eight years ago in 1978.

When asked what the experience meant to her, May said: "Just the wonder of it all. The miracle, the joy of it. It was amazing. I had no idea that it could feel so amazing, so alive."

Sexual messages in childhood:

"I was sexually abused as a child. As a teenager I hardly experienced orgasms."

Describe your sexuality during the year before you conceived:

I didn't orgasm. I was pretty naïve, sex would last fifteen minutes, and I always wanted more. I finally learned how to give myself a clitoral one, so I knew how it felt. I had few clitoral orgasms and I enjoyed every sexual pleasure I could get from a not very experienced husband, and I was very sexual. Orgasms felt good and satisfying, it didn't feel like the turning inside out awesome feeling like I know now. It was focused in the genitals, not the whole body.

Sexuality during pregnancy:

“I can't recall any change in my sexuality before or after. I don't recall how often I masturbated, perhaps once a week, but probably not during pregnancy. I wasn't too good at self stimulation then.”

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

My first childbirth was a nightmare in a military hospital, where I thought I was dying. I screamed and the nurse slapped me and told me to be quiet. I was left alone and I was scared. My friend who was a Bradley childbirth instructor told me I missed the birth experience with my first child and that childbirth could be a rewarding experience. I wanted to have that with my second child. I told the doctor not to give me any drugs, no matter what I said during the birth.

The sexual birth story:

The birth happened very fast. I went to the bathroom and my water broke. I rushed to the hospital feeling like the baby was imminent, so within an hour I was in the hospital lying in the hallway. I told them that the baby was coming, and they finally put me in a room. Transition happened very fast. They wheeled me into the delivery room, and everything happened within two hours from when my water broke until she was born. So I didn't really have time to feel discomfort. I just remember the doctor saying “You can push” and how grrreat it felt to push. Wow, it was wonderful, it was a feeling from my head to my toes, my whole body was – YES! It was so wonderful to push, and he said “You are really a good pusher.” I remember the sense of heat and the rush that came thorough my body. I don't know how to express it, it felt like an orgasm or going on a great ride, that rush of heat

that came all over my body. I felt a wonderful expel that was very much like an orgasm, and I don't think I had intense orgasms at those days. It was the closest word I could come to what it felt like. I felt great, I wanted my baby. When my baby was born it felt like a freeing fast slippery feeling. It seemed like it happened all at once. Like a child coming through a slide.

I don't remember being afraid, with the first child I was terrified, and I was screaming. With this birth I felt more like on task.

Did you experience pain?

"I remember I felt embarrassed because I felt like I wanted to move my bowels. I don't remember terrible pain, I remember terrible embarrassment. I was anxious. I was alone the whole time. I just didn't have time to have anyone to hold my hand, or to control the pain or anything."

When you think about your childbirth experience what emotions do you feel?

"Exhilaration, a rush in my body, a peak, tingling, rushing of heat, a sense of aliveness, like every part of me is just so alive. The word YES!"

What do you think allowed it to happen?

"Having a non-medicated birth."

In what way did it feel sexual or orgasmic?

In the birth my whole body was sexual. And now that I have more dramatic orgasms, I can say that a real great orgasm for me doesn't involve just the vagina, it involves my whole body, so in that sense it was sexual... a whole body sensation. So when I have orgasms now I feel that my body turns itself inside out. At the birth I can say that my whole body turned itself inside out too, but it was different, it was

my chest my stomach my legs everything... it just came through me like a train rushing. When I got the orgasm during childbirth it was stronger than anything that I had sexually.

Did you tell anyone about your orgasmic experience?

Later I shared it with my friends. I didn't describe it in detail; I just said I had an orgasm. They thought that I was funny. I just stopped telling them, after a while you just stop telling your birth story anyway. You need to pick your audience. But when I talk with people about it they say, "Oh yeah, of course, you had an orgasm." It became kind of a joke.

Did you do something to arouse yourself sexually during childbirth?

"No, there was no time."

Where you surprised by the sexual experience?

Totally, oh yes I was so surprised! I was terrified of having another child. I did not have any expectations to experience joy and orgasm, the only thing I wanted was to have another child naturally. So I had no expectations of this at all, it was totally a high. Drugs can't take you so high.

Did you believe the sexual experience you felt?

Yes, I did. I didn't understand it, nobody ever told me it might happen, so I thought it was unusual and weird, but it was wonderful. But at the time it happened, I was excited and exhilarated from having the baby, so the whole experience was phenomenal.

Did you experience pain?

“I don’t remember anything like pain, just the discomfort that I felt before I was allowed to push.”

What do you think allowed it to happen?

I was determined not to have drugs. I wanted to experience a natural childbirth; I wanted to be a part of the birth process. I was more educated; my friend reassured me that it doesn’t have to be a bad experience.

Sexuality after the birth:

“Things changed anyway since I had a different partner and I learned about sexuality over time. I was sexual again very fast.”

How does your sexual response compare before and after childbirth?

I am very free with my body now. Over the years after birth I had an amazing sex life, but I don’t know that birth was a pivotal point in creating it. If you think about it now, it is a point of reference, now I can have a whole body orgasm and I can say “Wow!” I don’t think I can give my birth experience credit for creating the change. I never put it together in my mind. On the other hand once I gave birth, and I felt so comfortable in my body, it made sense that if I felt that my body delivered me such joy, it naturally changed how I experienced sex. You are more open with yourself. I don’t know if I have thought about it before.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

The main changes in my sexuality were a result of feeling good about my body, changing my partner, and exploring more sexually. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if women wouldn’t have to be so afraid and proper. Then we go into this shock, and

have to open our bodies to have this child, and we are so innocent, so naïve. Too bad that we can't have more comfort with our bodies prior to that, so that birth and sexuality would seem more natural and beautiful. I feel very lucky that I allowed myself to enjoy this experience. I feel very womanly. I feel very much in touch with myself and with my body. With the first pregnancy, I was detached from the experience; with this one I felt wonderful, so part of my body.

Margaret

Margaret, a 60-year-old married woman and a mother of two, was very excited to share her orgasmic birth story. Her unexpected birth orgasm happened during childbirth 36 years ago in 1970:

It was one of the major highlights of my life! Because I am a spiritual person, I thought it must be the reward God gives to all women at the end of the deepest pain I had ever experienced. I know I said out loud "Oh, it's worth it all." I really thought it must be part of the whole birth experience for every woman.

Sexual messages in childhood:

"As a child I got very secretive and ambivalent messages about sexuality. I experienced my first orgasm during pre-marriage petting. It felt amazing. Few months post marriage I realized what the experience had been."

Describe your sexuality during the year before you conceived:

"I probably had an orgasm every time my husband and I had sex. I experienced vaginal orgasms."

Sexuality during pregnancy:

“I have never been the actively sexual one in our relationship. I did not masturbate.”

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

I took some prenatal classes and learned breathing. I don't know that as a 22 year old, I had any beliefs about childbirth except that I couldn't wait to have a baby and was so excited. I thought a doctor would talk me through the whole labor and delivery.

The sexual birth story:

The birth of our first child was the most sexual to me. I gave birth at the hospital, 36 years ago. My husband wasn't with me. I was attended by two midwives and my doctor. My labor took a long time to establish. My contractions commenced in earnest and I had what I call the “toe turning up pain” for four hours before the delivery of our daughter. The nurse tried to make me take gas, but the smell brought back memories of having teeth extractions which I hated, so I pretended to breathe into it because the nurse was fairly insistent. At the actual moment of birth I thought I was splitting wide open. Just after the splitting wide open sensation, and as the baby was being pulled out, I began to have an orgasm which felt like a thousand climaxes from my head to my toes.

When you think about your childbirth experience what emotions do you feel?

“I still feel graced by my experience. Especially since I came to realize it is not the usual experience for everyone.”

What do you think allowed this experience to happen?

“I always think it was because I was delivered on my side with one nurse up on the table with my leg over her shoulder. I felt I was in a fetal position and felt safe and protected.”

How did it compare to masturbation or partner sex?

“Much more intense and deeper – I find it difficult to find words to describe it”.

How did you feel when sexual feelings and sensation arose?

Totally surprised because I had never read or heard about it from anyone. At first I couldn't believe what was happening, but because I had experienced orgasm I recognized what was happening to me. I didn't say anything except “Oh, it's worth it all” in the actual delivery suite, but I couldn't stop telling my family and friends once I had processed the whole experience. I was ecstatic. It just seemed the most wonderful culmination of the whole experience.

Did you do something to arouse yourself sexually during childbirth?

“No.”

Sexuality after childbirth:

My sexuality after this childbirth was much the same as before. It took me some time to be sexual again because it almost seemed a sacred space with a baby having so recently come from my vaginal area. So we began having sex about eight weeks after the birth.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

“As I said, I thought it must be the norm for all women. It is only now I feel so gifted.”

Jennifer

Jennifer is a 36-year-old married woman and a mother of two. She experienced an orgasm during birth with her first child, who was conceived using In Vitro Fertilization, five years ago in 2001:

When I think about my childbirth experience I feel proud, relieved, happy, excited, joy, excitement, blissful, strong. I feel that I was able to give birth in a way that was best for my baby and for my body and it was a spiritual out of body like experience.

Sexual messages in childhood:

As a child I got the messages that sex is wrong and not good and that I need to wait for it until I get married. I experienced my first orgasm when I was eleven and I felt it all over my genital area and my legs. I don't think I knew to call it an orgasm but I knew I was masturbating.

Describe your sexuality during the year before you conceived:

I had orgasms most of the time, always when alone, and most of the time with partner. My orgasms were mostly vaginal into my belly and down my legs, like a huge release and letting go, like a communion with something spiritual. I enjoyed both clitoral and vaginal stimulation. A vaginal orgasm feels deeper in my body and more pleasurable. Maybe it lasts longer, more like a wave. It is all over my body rather than local. I had vaginal orgasms before I had children. I don't think that I have ever ejaculated. I had dreams that I was having sex and then I had an orgasm.

Sexuality during pregnancy:

Obviously during my pregnancy having sex was different. I was probably less horny. I don't remember having those sex dreams while I was pregnant. I masturbated a few times, maybe once a month. But I think I remember masturbating more often towards the end of the pregnancy. I don't remember being able to have orgasms during partner sex after my belly started protruding.

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

"I took a childbirth preparation class with my doula. I knew that childbirth was very challenging but was unaware of the pleasure it brings as one puts their body through such an intense experience."

The sexual birth story:

I gave birth at the hospital. My husband was with me, and so was my doula. The contractions felt like a wave and it was difficult to endure the peak. I didn't have any drugs. I used the support of my husband behind me as I reclined and let go during the contractions. I imagined myself riding waves and staying above the water. The birth didn't move forward enough because I ended up with a cervical lip which required me to get on my hands and knees during a contraction, which was very difficult. It only took one contraction and the lip was gone. The baby was nine pounds. I was encouraged to push and knew when to push through the contractions but I never felt the urge to push.

The head was out. I saw his face in the mirror. Thought to myself he is "half born." Gave it one more push at the next contraction and I felt like I wasn't making progress, and was surprised that I felt it was so hard to get the shoulders all the way

out. Then when I thought I was about to have to wait for the next contraction to give it another push, I suddenly felt his body, little boney parts rapidly slide through my vagina and I thought "Is the doctor aware?! Is he gonna be caught?" I had been moaning deeply during the pushing and when I felt him rush out, I had an orgasm. I remember hearing my voice go from low to high pitch, at which point I was surprised by what I had just felt and also that he had so suddenly left my body. I couldn't wait to hold him.

I am not sure what allowed this orgasm to happen except that he slid over just the right spot as he slid out. I never did anything to arouse myself. When I compare it to masturbation or partner sex there is no pleasurable build up - just all of a sudden orgasm.

How did you feel when sexual feelings and sensation arose?

I was surprised, not sure for a moment if anyone else noticed or knew and then realized no one did. I felt happy and surprised that I had that experience that I had heard could happen. I told my husband and my doula a bit later after the birth when the doc and nurse weren't there. They were both happy for me and laughed a little. I felt fine about their response.

Sexuality after childbirth:

My sexuality didn't come back full force till my baby was nursing a lot less. I'm not sure if there is much difference except for maybe a greater appreciation for my body and the strength it has. My desire has changed throughout my life, but recently I would want to have sex everyday during ovulation time and then not much, maybe once a week I would want to initiate.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

“More powerful.”

Christina

Christine is a 35 year old married woman and a mother of two. She experienced orgasm during the birth of her first daughter four years ago in 2002:

It is one of the most important events in my life. It brought me closer to God. I am not sure that I believe in God, but this is how this experience was, touching the Divine, and being connected to the women before me. I guess I am lucky that my first sexual experiences were all good ones. I wanted to make it the best. Somehow I knew that childbirth and sex were connected, and I wanted to be private in my way, it was important for me. I can't imagine myself being in a hospital, and people walking in and out, and I am kind of noise sensitive... Sometimes I wonder why other women don't go after having a great experience; there is so much happiness in it. I had self esteem enough to go after what I wanted.

Sexual messages in childhood:

As a child I got the message that you are supposed to wait for marriage for sex. I got the idea that masturbation is completely normal. My mom was a nurse, and she was okay with information. I had a friend who wanted to know everything about it, so I learned a lot from her. I considered myself bisexual, even though now I am a non-practicing bisexual since I am in a committed relationship.

I got my first orgasm when I was in sixth grade; I know it because I was very focused on getting this experience. I also remember my first ejaculation at that time; I used magic markers as dildos when I masturbated, the magic marker got

very wet so I knew I ejaculated. Orgasms worked best with the markers but I had orgasms before without penetration.

I talked with my friend about it, she was very interested in the ejaculate, in the fluid. I told her it felt good, and it had a peak. Stimulation of the clitoris is different. The penetrative orgasms are much deeper.

Sexuality a year before you conceived:

I was teaching full time. Being with high school kids all day you kind of tend to lock away your sexuality. Also my thyroid was low, and my desire was low. Not the best time in our relationship. I didn't orgasm too often, I think one out of three times that we made love. Something like once in three weeks, I also masturbated, here and there. Most of my orgasms were clitoral. Occasionally I had orgasms at night when I was sleeping.

Sexuality during pregnancy:

I was much more interested in sex in both of my pregnancies, especially with my second pregnancy. With my first child I wouldn't say that frequency was up. I really liked nipple stimulation, but it wasn't a big change from before the pregnancy. With my first pregnancy we felt more intimate, and I would orgasm probably two out of three times. I also used to masturbate more often. The day before she was born I masturbated a lot.

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

I heard about birth orgasms from a Bradley book. To me that seemed another reason to do natural birth. We took the Bradley childbirth preparation class. We were committed to do it ourselves. I wanted to be private; I didn't know if I could

open up as well in a hospital setting. I was worried about the pain but not about the safety of childbirth.

The sexual birth story:

When the midwife came I was seven centimeters and a bit disappointed. My eyes were closed, I was much focused inwards. I was in the shower, on the birthing stool, and I squatted for one contraction – and it broke my water. It is funny when they say that squatting is very good... I just felt every thing opened inside me. That one squat that I had with her gave me so much confidence that I could birth this baby safely at home. I knew I could get into a squat if things got dicey, and I knew how much more I could get open, I felt it in my body. I felt the stretching of the perineum, when her head was still sliding back in, it definitely felt like a ring of fire. I had to push through this ring, it was burning like crazy, and I was hearing myself whimper. This is when I kind of gave up, and I didn't think that I could do it. It sounded like an animal who was bitten up. The burning and the pain went away before her head came out. When I was on my left side, the head came out.

For me, the part that felt like an orgasm was feeling the body parts come out. The relief of the head – oh wow that felt great. In the last part where everything came through it didn't feel like pain, it was pleasure. I was so much in my own zone that when I reached down, and felt my baby's hair I was surprised... I almost forgot I was having a baby.

My husband was with me the whole birth. We were both naked the whole time. I wasn't really looking in his eyes, because my eyes were closed. The contractions felt like a pulling, they started low and pulled out. I really liked the

pushing. They felt like hard work. For me the pain was in the perineum stretching, the rest was hard work, and as long as I stayed relaxed...I was on the birthing stool, and the midwife talked me through with visualization, she kept me relaxed, as long as I stayed floating on top of the wave it didn't hurt.

When you think about your childbirth experience what emotions do you feel?

I feel so grateful, I feel great fullness. I feel some pride, in our culture it is so rare to experience what I experienced, and I feel awe. That is Mother Nature and this is my body. I respected my body as an athlete before. My body is a woman's body. It made me feel awe.

When during the birth did it feel sexual?

In the last bit of pushing. The sounds were so animalistic. There was something that I was so attracted to. Maybe not at the time, but afterwards I kept getting back to those noises. Where did they come from, they sounded so sexual and beyond. Maybe I am saying animalistic but this is because I don't have a language for that... they were sounds of totally letting go. But at that time I couldn't connect it to sexuality. For me the only moment that felt like "Wow, that was sex" and felt pleasurable was when the body parts came through after the head.

How did it compare to masturbation or partner sex?

For that moment there wasn't the building up, it was constant "Shooooo." It was shorter and faster, and totally filling. How can you be more filled than with every part filling me!? I felt a release. I guess the release was the same and happiness afterwards. But there you just had a baby and it is totally different.

How did you feel when sexual feelings and sensations arose?

I just felt surprised, and I remember going like this... as if my hair has been spin blown back. Oh my God! I shared it with my husband later. Then I shared in a group. I also told it to other women in the yoga class. I didn't share it with my midwife, since there was so much to talk about. When I experienced it I didn't say anything. I don't think that she knew about it. I wasn't embarrassed, just that there were so many questions...

Did you do something to arouse yourself sexually during the birth?

“No.”

Sexuality after childbirth:

Even though the birth was such a great experience, I don't think we had any sexual relations soon after the birth. I was worried to get pregnant again; I was busy with being a mother. I didn't feel like being sexual until several months after the birth. I don't remember masturbating for a while.

How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

“I felt strong as a woman. And then I was glad to have an experience like this.”

Sage

Sage is a 36-year-old woman, married and a mother of two. She experienced orgasms in both of her births, but we decided to focus on her first birth that happened four years ago in 2002. Both of her births ended up with a C-section.

There was the pain of the contraction there along with the orgasmic sensation. And it was confusing because I didn't expect it, and I never and still don't associate birth and sexuality together. I know that sexuality can lead to birth, but I don't see

that at the time of birth, but I experienced it [laughs]. I understand that it's all about the sexual ...no I don't get it.....I have an idea, but I don't get it.

Sexual messages in childhood:

As a child we didn't really talked about sex that much. I learned about sex at school. My mom was a nurse, and with every question I had I could have asked her. But I wasn't really interested in it. By the time I became sexually active, when I was nineteen, I had friends that I would talk about sex with. I don't remember my parents sitting with me and telling me how it works, but I never asked them to. I grew up in a very warm and loving home but I was never really that curious about it.

I really don't remember my first orgasm. I think I was in eighth grade. I started to feel around and I sort of went from there. I didn't really know exactly what it was, I just knew that I would reach this point and then it just felt amazing. And it just felt really really good. Now I look back and I know that I was having orgasms, but at the time I just knew that it felt great.

I felt it real deep inside, kind of a buckling sensation. My body was definitely trembling. It felt like I was light weight. I felt very light.

Describe your sexuality during the year before you conceived:

My sex drive has always been a lot stronger than my husband's. I was always the aggressor, and we had a good sex life. I was, "Hey," all the time! much more than other women. If I could have it every day, I would have it very day. Both masturbate and partner sex. All along I needed clitoral stimulation. It is hard to know for sure if I have had a G-Spot orgasm without touching my clitoris. The

clitoral ones aren't as vigorous, they aren't as strong, and they don't make my eyes role back into my head. The G-spot seems to penetrate my entire body. It seems that every bit of my body is totally overwhelmed with electricity and energy.

I experienced spontaneous orgasms while I was sleeping, not many times, maybe five. They were very mild, but I would wake up and say, "Oh my gosh, what was that?" I don't think they happened while I was pregnant or after. It was before having children.

Sexuality during pregnancy:

The second trimester I was more turned on and wanted to have sex more often. I felt sexier with my body, with how it looked and how it was changing. The third trimester I was not interested at all. I did not feel sexy, I did not feel attractive, I did not feel sensual, I just didn't want it at all. I think that since I became much larger since I was pregnant, I had this image that I was not attractive. I felt attractive as a pregnant woman, but when it came to sex I felt "Oh NO!" In the last trimester I still had the urge to masturbate. I wanted to have that feeling... but no partner sex. I masturbated probably once a day.

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth:

"We took a Bradley class. I thought it was great. At that time I believed that I could have a baby without pain killers that I could deal with the pain that accompanies childbirth."

The sexual birth story:

I gave birth at the hospital. In Ohio you have 24 hours to give birth from the time your water begins trickling. So they gave me pit and fifteen minutes later it started

working and I hated it, I hated those contractions. And then my water broke and I had horrible hip pain. It felt like a sword going inside my hips and turning with each contraction. I eventually got an epidural. This wasn't what I wanted to do but I knew that I couldn't continue and I think I was only five centimeters dilated. When I felt like I wanted to push the doctor had to go to an emergency c-section in another hospital. So he said, "You can keep pushing and a resident will deliver your baby, or you can wait for me and I will be back and I will deliver the baby." For some reason I was scared to death that a resident would deliver the baby. I decided that I would wait for the doctor. This is when I started to feel what felt like an orgasm. I was sort of blowing through the contractions for at least forty minutes. Every time I had a contraction it felt like a mild orgasm. The sounds that I make when I have an orgasm normally were there and so I was like, "Oh my gosh." During the Bradley class the instructor said that sometimes ladies have an orgasm when they give birth, and I said, "Yay, that could be fun" and sure enough I was having an orgasm almost every time I was having a contraction. It felt good but was such a confusing feeling because I was still sort of in pain but it felt good.

I was having these orgasms, and eventually the doctor came back, and I began pushing. I think that I was pushing for a total of three hours. The baby wasn't coming down, and we elected to have a c-section.

In what way did the birth feel sexual or orgasmic?

"I did not feel sexual at all but I was having these orgasms. And I could feel these sensations, and I could tell you that I was having an orgasm, but I didn't feel sensual or sexual at all."

How did it compare to masturbation or partner sex?

If you think of the earth and you think of the hot core in the center that is what it seemed like where it was coming from. A normal orgasm for me is it starts from the inside and then it reverberates out, and I feel my uterus contracting, and the energy just goes all over me and explodes, and I feel it shooting to my fingertips and my toes. At the birth it seemed much more contained, it was just in the trunk of my body and it didn't go any further.

How did you feel when sexual sensations arose?

“It was confusing because I didn't expect it, and I never and still don't associate birth and sexuality together.”

Did you tell anyone about your orgasmic labor?

I think I did... I think I said it to my husband. I know I said it to someone, I don't remember who. It was the sounds that I was making that clued me in what was happening. I mean, I was having the pain, but I was also having these wonderful sensations, that faint orgasm. It wasn't really strong, but it was the sounds that I was making and that also clued me in.

Did you do something to arouse yourself sexually during childbirth?

There was no physical arousal, just an orgasm without preparation to orgasm; this is another reason why it was so surprising. All of a sudden I was feeling it, and there was no stimulation, there was nothing.

Where you surprised by the sexual experience you felt?

“Hell, yeah! I mean it was pleurably surprising; it was a nice surprise. I was sort of confused, “Wait a minute, what is going on here, I'll take it but I don't get it.”

How did you experience the pain when you had the orgasms?

I was welcoming the orgasms; it was something else to think about out of the pain I was feeling. I didn't have lots of pain because I had an epidural, but when these sensations started coming it took my mind from the pain.

Sexuality after childbirth:

After birth I don't feel good about my body and how I look so I don't feel sexy and I don't feel attractive, and I don't feel at all sexually active. It is the last thing on my mind. No thank you! I am not one of those ladies that shed all of their pregnancy weight within a week or two. I didn't feel attractive to my spouse so, you know, I wasn't interested.

When did you want to be sexual after the birth?

I would say like ten to twelve weeks before I started feeling interested again. I was mostly engaged in partner sex. I don't remember if I masturbated before, maybe I tried just to see that everything was working, but I don't think I did it on a regular basis.

I remember having sex after my first son was born, and I remember telling my husband, why didn't we do it until now? Because it felt so good, and I forgot. I enjoyed getting back to it. I don't remember that it felt different than before the pregnancy.

This chapter described the research participants' responses to questions about their sexual experiences before, during, and after their sexual childbirth experience. The next chapter discusses the results and outlines common themes and experiences.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

It appears that these women's sexual experiences during childbirth ranged widely. Some women intentionally incorporated sexuality in their labor and birth, initiated passionate love making during labor, vocalized, masturbated, and perceived their birth as very sexual. Others felt that the rhythm of birth was very erotic, intimate, and sensual, but did not do anything to arouse themselves sexually. Yet others didn't perceive birth as a sensual or sexual experience and were extremely surprised when they experienced orgasms while pushing their babies out. Although every woman's story was unique, when analyzing the participants' childbirth experience, two major scenarios arose. I will call the first scenario "Unexpected Birthgasm", and the second "Passionate Birth".

The Unexpected Birthgasm

The unexpected birthgasm experience is well represented in the stories of May, Margaret, Jennifer, Christina, Sage, and in Alex's second birth story. All these women, except Christina, gave birth in a hospital. They all experienced the orgasmic birth with their first or second baby. For them the sexual experience was totally surprising. They prepared for a natural birth, and even though they might have heard about the possibility of orgasm during childbirth, orgasm wasn't one of their expectations. When they experienced orgasm during the pushing stage or when the baby slid outside of their bodies, they were totally surprised, especially since there was no arousal preceding the orgasm.

Jennifer: “I was surprised, not sure for a moment if anyone else noticed or knew and then realized no one did. I felt happy and surprised that I had that experience that I had heard could happen.”

May: “Oh yes I was so surprised! I did not have any expectations to experience joy and orgasm....Drugs can’t take you so high.”

Margaret: “Totally surprised because I had never read or heard about it from anyone.”

Even though Sage experienced orgasms during both her first and second births, she couldn’t grasp how sexuality and birth are bound together:

“I could feel these sensations, and I could tell you that I was having an orgasm, but I didn’t feel sensual or sexual at all.... It was confusing because I didn’t expect it, and I never and still don’t associate birth and sexuality together.”

When asked about what they believed caused the orgasmic experience, they were not sure:

Jennifer: “Not sure really except that he slid over just the right spot as he slid out.”

May: “Having a non-medicated birth.”

Margaret: “I always think it was because I was delivered on my side with one nurse up on the table with my leg over her shoulder. I felt I was in a fetal position and felt safe and protected.”

Sage: “I have no idea... I still do not understand how sexuality and birth go together.”

Beverly Whipple et al. (1989) suggested that when the baby comes down through the birth canal its head puts pressure on two important nerve systems: the hypogastric and

the pelvic. The intense pressure on these nerves can induce orgasm in some birthing women. This can explain physiologically how these women experienced unexpected birthgasm while pushing their babies out.

Moreover, Komisaruk et al. (2004) found that for some women with spinal cord injury above the level of entry into spinal cord of the known genitospinal nerves, the Vagus nerve provided a genital (vaginal-cervical) sensory pathway that bypassed the spinal cord, and projected sensations directly to the brain. Komisaruk et al. found that genital (vaginal-cervical) sensory activity transmitted through the Vagus nerve is evidently sufficient to induce orgasm in some women. That can explain how Sage, whose spinal cord was numbed with epidural analgesia, could still experience orgasms.

The Passionate Birth

The passionate birth experience is well represented in the stories of Beverly, Faith, Cathy, Ashley, and in Alex's third birth story. All of them gave birth at home. These women incorporated their sexuality openly and purposefully in the birth process and allowed themselves to explore it fully. They made love, vocalized, kissed passionately, and some of them masturbated to ease the pain. They explored and celebrated their sexuality during the birth. They were all very well prepared for childbirth; being trained as either childbirth educators, doulas or midwives. They were all familiar with the possibility of incorporating pleasure and sexuality in childbirth. When asked how they felt when the sexual feelings arose, they were very excited and welcomed their sexuality:

Faith: "Wonderful, I felt like a complete human being."

Cathy: "Wonderful! This is how it is supposed to be."

Beverly: “I accepted it as a benefit and a reward of doing homework and being clear that my body had the incredible ability of doing this.”

These women experienced their sexual birth as an integral part of their lives and not as a unique event; the birth was part of their sexual growth, and their growth as women. When asked how the sexual birth experience influenced their perception of themselves as women they said:

Faith: “I did it exactly the way I wanted and needed it to be. It was so empowering, the best thing in the world....To experience myself that fully it felt as quite an accomplishment, you can’t take that away.”

Ashley: “It was amazing. I felt this goddess woman in my body is so powerful and worked so well.”

Alex: “I am more able to verbalize all of my needs, not only the sexual ones but all of them, more so with each time that I have given birth.”

Beverly: “It changed my life and I wouldn’t be doing the work that I am doing if I didn’t have this experience. Because I remember just a few minutes after he was born saying to my midwife ‘Oh my God I have to tell women they can have orgasms.’”

Women in this group felt that they were open to the experience and prepared for it. In their stories a number of consistent themes arose: preparation for birth, the place of birth, privacy, trusting their partners and the birth team, intimacy, and feeling good about their bodies, their sensuality and their sexuality. These components appear to be essential aspects of passionate birth.

Preparation

Preparation was essential for including sexuality in the childbirth experience. The respondent's preparation included knowledge and understanding of the physiology of birth and of the birth process. They were convinced that sexuality and pleasure are part of birth and made special attempts to incorporate them in their experience.

Beverly: "I had prepared myself physically, spiritually, and mentally for a pleasurable experience in labor."

Faith: "I was ready for it. I thought to myself that if I want to incorporate my sexuality in childbirth this is my opportunity to do it."

Alex: "The feelings of power, a lot probably came from the education that I had about birth. And the fact that I was in my home and the decisions were left up to me. It was just incredible."

The place of birth

The choice to give birth at home was an essential component in a "passionate birth" experience. Cathy:

I think my sensual experience began when I gave birth at home. My first two births were at the hospital, and births 3-7 were at home. I think I was more in touch with my sensuality, and the freedom to do what I want made the difference. In the hospital people go in and out, you do not know exactly who is going to show his face in the door, you are hooked to wires, etc... you do not know exactly what is going on but it can be very distracting from your experience. At home you can be more in tune with the rhythm of the birth, and I think that the rhythm of birth is sexuality.

Privacy

Women needed privacy to feel comfortable to express their sexuality.

Beverly: “I had him doing clitoral stimulation, and he loved to suck on my nipples, I had orgasm after orgasm. I was so happy that nobody was around, otherwise I wouldn’t be doing this.”

Janet:

My midwife very cleverly coached my husband and used him to relay messages to me. It made for a very private, personal, sensual birth experience and made me feel very protected. She did the right thing by me and her presence in the room was never, ever invasive or obtrusive.

Cathy:

If you allow intimacy and sexuality birth just moves much faster. I always encourage the sensuality part. I think that privacy is a big deal. The more private you are the more you can discover how birth is sexual, and most people don’t do it. When I attend births I always think that the way people give birth, this is how they make love.

Indeed, birth activists (Goer, 1999; Odent, 2001; Gaskin, 2003; Buckley, 2005) stress the importance of not disturbing the laboring woman.

In birth, as in love making, we need to feel safe and private so that we can let down our guard, let our hormones flow and reap the rewards of the process – which includes, in both situations, an ultimate dose of hormonal ecstasy (Buckley, p. 114).

Trust and intimacy

Some of the women in this group felt that the trust and intimacy they shared with their partners and with the birth team allowed them to explore and tap into their sexuality during the birth.

Ashley:

When I think about this particular birth, I think of it as a really beautiful, intimate time with my husband when we were physically demonstrating our love for each other, and our marriage and our oneness. It was very intimate and the time that I spent with James laboring and when the other people were here, I knew that I could completely trust everyone.

Faith described her lovemaking at the beginning of labor:

It was the most profound sexual experience I ever had while I was in labor. I had a wonderful partner to share it with me, our love making at the beginning of the contractions colored the whole experience.

Alex brings to the picture another aspect of intimacy:

The whole thing was just very intimate...for a while the only thing I could do was sit naked on the toilet, and I am crying, I am crying in my husbands arms. I just remember looking in his eyes and saying – we are going to have a baby girl and then getting in the tub and knowing that I was okay with whatever came up during this experience. It was just very intimate, a very intimate way of sexuality, the most intimate way that you can have a sexual experience, you don't even have to have sex because it was so much beyond that.

The partner's role in a passionate birth

Many books talk about the importance of the emotional support given to the laboring woman. Klaus, Kennell and Klaus in *The Doula Book* (2002) reminded us of the ancient practice of women supporting laboring women, helping them to have a satisfying birth experience. The authors stated that few men have real understanding of the birth process, and that they are too emotionally involved and worried about the outcome themselves to provide their partners with the objective, calm support they need. Their research demonstrated that when a woman in labor receives the undivided, compassionate support of another woman, the birth progresses more quickly, more easily, with less medical intervention, and with a remarkable drop in the mother's need for pain medication.

Nevertheless, women in this study described their partners as essential for their passionate birth experience. They perceived their privacy and the time spent with their partners, engaging emotionally and sexually, as an important factor leading to this kind of birth.

Faith: "I had a wonderful partner to share it with me, our love making at the beginning of the contractions colored the whole experience... I think this is what is supposed to happen, this is what nature designed."

Ashley:

I still felt very connected to James, and when people started to come I didn't really want to be aware of them or socialize with them, so James was holding me and I would keep my face against him so my connection was with him. I don't know if I

would have been able to maintain the connection with James if I had not had that really intimate sexual time before.

Beverly: “I had him doing clitoral stimulation, and he loved to suck on my nipples, I had orgasm after orgasm. I was so happy that nobody was around, otherwise I wouldn’t be doing this.”

It is time to reconsider men’s role in childbirth. Let us give men the opportunity to support their partners in a way that is most natural to them. Let them be their partners’ lovers, witnessing their beauty and sexuality while giving birth. This may well reinforce the couple’s connection after childbirth and might produce similar benefits to those of professional labor support: a birth that is progressing more quickly, more easily, and with less medical intervention. Further research is needed to reaffirm these assertions.

Positive feelings towards the pregnant body

The women who experienced passionate birth felt good about their bodies, and enjoyed and welcomed their sensuality.

Alex: “Having no inhibitions, stripping off my clothes and getting in the pool, and not caring who is at the front door. Being comfortable in your own body is part of my sexuality.”

Beverly:

With that pregnancy I was probably more body focused than anytime in my life. It brought me in touch with what I needed emotionally and mentally. I had this emotional connection with my body and with my sexuality.

The Experience of Pain

In Western society birth is perceived mainly as a painful experience. While women in some cultures distract themselves from the pain in different and creative ways so that pain becomes only one element of the birth experience, women in Western culture often do the opposite - they focus so much attention on the pain that they end up priming themselves for an unendurable experience (Arms, 1994). The women in this research had many ways of describing their experience of their contractions. Pain was one of them, as presented in Margaret's perception of her contractions as "toe curling up pain." Others did not experience contractions as painful, but rather used words such as "hard work," "pulling," "intense," "all over the body," "very long and very fast," "powerful," and "wild." Still others found "I was quite comfortable during the birth, I could just labor and labor forever," "as long as I stayed floating on top of the wave it didn't hurt," and "I felt more like on a task, they were strong but not frightening."

The influence of sexual stimulation on awareness of pain

Komisaruk and Whipple (1995) found that awareness of pain is reduced during sexual stimulation. Women in the passionate birth group found that sexual stimulation helped them cope with the pain.

Faith: "The only way I could deal with the pain was through masturbation. It didn't hurt as much when I did it... it hurt but not as much."

Alex: "It helped it... it allowed me to relax more."

Beverly: "I never felt pain. The sexual stimulation and making love in labor, and stimulating myself with my fingers and with my husband's tongue, it opened me more, it just added to the pleasure, and I never felt pain."

Sexuality before Childbirth

Vaginal orgasms

When asked about their sexuality before their sexual birth experience, nine out of eleven women in the sample stated that they experienced vaginal orgasms prior to birth.

Faith: “Vaginal stimulation is very important. Penetration is best.”

Jennifer: “Mostly vaginal into my belly and down my legs, like a huge release and letting go like a communion with something spiritual.”

They went on and described how their clitoral orgasms differ from their vaginal orgasms.

Ashley:

Sometimes I had uterine orgasms; it is deeper in my body and more emotional orgasm. Like velvet as opposed to silk. Silk is a clitoral orgasm which is more on the surface level and is more like a sneeze, very nice and relatively brief, and the uterine one is more rolling and more full body the way red wine is full body, it is more in the center, much more...more oxytocin... everything is ok and the world is good.

Beverly:

Orgasms with deep penetration are different than orgasms from clitoral stimulation, and those orgasms are more of a mind expansion than the physical rush that you have with clitoral orgasms. With penetration I feel definitely more inside my lower chakra, and it moves up a lot slower, with clitoral orgasms it is very quick very instate. It lasts longer and moves more slowly.

Sage:

The clitoral ones aren't as vigorous, they aren't as strong, and they don't make my eyes roll back into my head. They still feel great, but they just not as strong. The G-spot just seems to penetrate my entire body. It seems that every bit of my body is totally overwhelmed with electricity and energy.

Cathy made the connection between her experience of her G-Spot and how she had seen women experiencing their G-Spot during childbirth:

I see women giving birth. You can tell when the baby is hitting the G-Spot, women make this kind of primitive screech, and it is very typical and a very orgasmic reaction when the baby is descending into the birth canal.

Hite (1976) in *The Hite Report* reported that more than seventy percent of the women in her survey did not orgasm through penetration. Even though the sample in the current study is very small, which makes it impossible to draw conclusions for all women, it is striking that nine out of eleven women experienced vaginal orgasms. It seems that these women were very much aware of vaginal sensations and drew pleasure from vaginal stimulation. It is possible that since they were more aware of vaginal sensations before birth, they were more likely to be aware of vaginal sensations during delivery. Further research is needed to shed light on this topic.

Sexual desire

Seven of the women in this sample stood out in their sexual appetite, their sexual excitement, and their sexual desire, before their sexual birth experience.

Cathy:

Well I am a very sexual person. I love to make love, I have orgasms freely. I have always been very sensual. So when I am ready to give birth and I make love, the

orgasm develops into contractions. I know my husband for 23 years and we are very compatible when it comes to sex. I like sex.

Beverly: “I was very sexual during that period and I was having sex every day.”

Alex: “I would say that I am more active in that area then the average woman. Before I conceived my oldest child 3 times a week or more, and by myself every day.”

Sage: “My sex drive has always been a lot stronger than my husband’s. I was always the aggressor, and we had a good sex life. It was, hey, all the time! Much more than other women.”

May: “I was very sexual, I always wanted sex, and people thought I was a nymphomaniac.”

It is possible that these women’s comfort with their sexuality, and their sexual appetite before childbirth, allowed them to express their sexuality while giving birth, and to relate to their birth experience within a sexual context.

Sexuality after Childbirth

Participants described their sexuality after the sexual birth experience in different ways. It was related to how they experienced their sexuality before their pregnancy as well as other life changes that might have introduced new sexual experiences.

Faith:

Being with my partner and the experience of pregnancy transformed me, because just a year before that I felt completely asexual, and I was worried that I would never feel sexual again. My experience with David and the birth brought back my sexuality. It was very important for me to have this birth to be such an expression of sexuality.

Janet:

After is much better! I have much more obvious horny feelings around ovulation that was not very apparent to me before childbirth. I usually find it easier to climax now. But of course, these things are affected by environmental influences too.

Alex: “After my third birth something changed, and I have no clue why. began experiencing G-Spot orgasms during penetration.”

Cathy: “I feel that my sexuality got more intensified over the years, and the birth enhanced that.”

May: “Things changed anyway since I had a different partner and I learned about sexuality over time.”

For some women like Beverly (“I would say it was the same for me”) and Margaret (“Much the same”) sexual response and sexual expression weren’t influenced by their sexual birth experience.

The majority of the participants were sexually active soon after the birth. Janet describes her first sexual experience after the birth:

We were talking about the birth and both felt aroused so we had sex, though of course not with penetration because I was quite sore. We both orgasmed and did it several times again that first week [after the birth] I felt like a super woman, I did it, I felt like I ran a marathon, my self esteem was really high, and I felt open to my husband, I felt very connected to him.

For many of them their sexual response didn’t come back fully until their baby weaned or nursed less frequently.

Jennifer: “It [desire] didn’t come back full force till he [the baby] was nursing a lot less.”

Ashley: “After he weaned we had 18 months or a year that we had real change and exploration, and my sexual response changed because we were trying new things.”

Janet: “Lactation interferes but when my cycle returns my desire is much stronger. Also, having my husband participate actively was good for our relationship so we have better communication about our sexuality now.”

For some of the women their feelings towards their bodies played a major role in feeling sexy and desirable. Alex and Jennifer felt that their birth enhanced their positive feelings towards their bodies.

Alex: “Just feeling comfortable with my body and knowing what my body is capable of. I feel more open, more relaxed, more confident, I initiate more.”

Jennifer: “I’m not sure if there is much difference except for maybe a greater appreciation for my body and the strength it has.”

Sage and Ashley didn’t like their post-partum bodies and felt that this interfered and inhibited their sexuality.

Sage: “I don’t feel good about my body and how I look so I don’t feel sexy and I don’t feel attractive, and I don’t feel at all sexually active. It is the last thing on my mind. No thank you!”

Ashley:

When I am post-partum and stretchy and over weight and out of shape and milky it is hard for me to feel sexual. Intellectually I know that James is excited about me just the way I am, and actually he likes me fuller than thinner, but the social thing is

so deep in me – to be sexual you have to be beautiful, slim. And I look at other women and I see the beauty in women who are not slim. But when it comes to my body I need to be slim.

Ashley brings up another widespread social message in our culture: being a mother and being a sexual woman cannot go together: “I still have difficulty reconciling feeling motherly and feeling horny.”

Birth as Part of Women’s Sexual Experience

In our culture birth is not considered a sexual experience and part of women’s sexual cycles (Newton, 1976). Participants in this research, however, described how their birth experience felt sexual or orgasmic.

Faith:

The whole birth felt very sexual to me, I felt like a complete human being. Just the rush of energy, just completely complete and finished, everything reached climax, I was physically finished. I was emotionally finished but not in a bad way, not depleted, completely strong but it was a completion.

Cathy: “Building up, building up, building up building up and then the actual baby’s head born, and then when the baby is born it is like the major gush... a release that same release.”

Janet: “The movements I felt drawn to do, the sounds, the headspace were all very sexual – but not overtly so. It’s like the association with how baby got in and how baby comes out became intertwined...Very erotic.”

Beverly: “It was a total body-mind-spirit...What was interesting is that it was a physical sensation that felt sexual.”

Christina: “When I let go I felt pleasurable sensations”.

Alex: “It felt like a clitoral orgasm.”

May: “In the birth my whole body was sexual.... it was my chest my stomach my legs everything... it just came through me like a train rushing through you.”

Margaret: “I had a pleasurable orgasm when his body rapidly slid out.”

Sage found it challenging to connect her birthgasm with sexuality: “I did not feel sexual at all but I was having these orgasms. And I could feel these sensations, and I could tell you that I was having an orgasm, but I didn’t feel sensual or sexual at all.”

Birthgasm – expanding the definition of women’s orgasm

Participants were asked to describe their birthgasm and compare them to masturbation or partner sex experiences. Faith:

The birthgasm is much more total, much more complete. There is always a bit of longing left when I experience an orgasm with my partner. This was absolute completion – I was everything and everything was me. It is very spiritual.

Beverly:

It is the same body feeling and mind exploding, being able to open, your chest expands, all of that – hundred times more intense than orgasm through either masturbation, penetration or Tantra. It was an explosion from every fiber of my being. I was surprised by the intensity.

Women who experienced an unexpected birthgasm compare their birthgasm experience to other sexual experiences. Christina:

For that moment there wasn’t the building up...it was constant shooo... it was shorter and faster, and totally filling. How can you be more filled than with every

part filling me!? I felt a release. I guess the release was the same and happiness afterwards, but there you had a baby and it is totally different.

Alex: “I think that they all pretty much the same for me – clitoral ones in terms of intensity, and the birth one was the same like the other. I don’t know if I really felt arousal, I think it was just a very physical wow.”

Sage:

A normal orgasm for me is it starts from the inside and then it reverberates out, and I feel my uterus contracting, and the energy just goes all over me and explodes, and I feel it shooting to my fingertips and my toes. It seemed much more contained, it was just in the trunk of my body and it didn’t go any further.

Jennifer: “No pleasurable build up - just all of a sudden orgasm.”

May: “At the point of orgasm you feel an inside out feeling, opening up, expanding, pushing out and bursting...it was stronger than anything that I had sexually - much more intense and deeper.”

Sharing the sexual birth experience

Some women felt comfortable sharing their experience, others tried and were ridiculed and laughed at, and others felt that what they felt was probably wrong and didn’t dare to share their experience.

Faith: “Yes, it was very accepted.”

Cathy: “Oh yes, I do it all the time. It is so weird for this culture. Women have a hard time getting in touch with this part in themselves, they are concerned about performance.”

Janet: “I didn't really express it, though I expressed surprise at hearing my vocalizations. Midwife said it was all good (which was the right thing for me to hear). After it was over she kissed me on the cheek and told me it was the most beautiful birth she'd seen – which meant a lot to me.”

Beverly:

I started talking about it right away and people said I was crazy...I had people say that I was doing a disservice to women. I was ridiculed and yelled at so I stopped talking about it... and I realized too that you really have to prepare your mind to have an orgasm during birth. You have to be in a place of being able to transcend and move from pain to pleasure. I am sure that some women can spontaneously do that but I find with my own clients that some are ready for that place and others aren't.

Alex:

No! There were very few people that I shared it with. I don't even think that I shared it with my husband until I read it somewhere in a book that said this is okay, and this is a normal experience. This was probably a year or maybe two after it happened. Because I thought, “Oh my God there is something abnormal with me that I would find sexual pleasure in giving birth.” I look back at it and I find it incredibly frustrating...now I will tell anybody, because this is something that women need to know!

Sage: “I told my husband and my doula a bit later after the birth when the doc and nurse weren't there. They were both happy for me and laughed a little.”

May: “Later I shared it with my friends...they thought that I was funny. You need to pick your audience.”

Margaret: “I couldn’t stop telling my family and friends once I had processed the whole experience. I was ecstatic.”

Holding back

Three of the interviewees described their experience of holding back sexually. Each of them had a different reason for holding back.

Cathy expressed her discomfort with other people’s presence at the birth: “If I was able to get by myself, and I wasn’t distracted by human beings, I would probably savor it, experience it and savor it. I would be more instinctive.”

Alex described how with Nash’s birth she stopped herself from experiencing the birthgasm fully:

I felt like I would have an orgasm, I felt the very beginning and then climbing to the peak, and then I had the logical thought, wow, you can’t do that right now, you can’t do that in front of people who are not your husband.

Ashley described her fear of feeling the sensations to the fullest:

I didn’t have an orgasm during our lovemaking. I wanted to have an orgasm, but I feel really that I was afraid to combine the power of the labor and the power of orgasm. Now I think that I wasn’t really able to let go in my body, I was just guarding it very close. I wasn’t ready to unleash all that. Knowing what I know about women’s labor, I knew that in my body there is this uncontrollable force. The possibility of combining this with orgasm was too scary. What if you let go and you have this thing that is going on, and who knows how long it is going to last and

how intense it will be. At the time I couldn't figure it out, just intuitively didn't want to go there.

Feelings towards the Birth Experience

While many women in our society feel that birth is a necessary evil to go through if one wants a baby (Goer, 1999), the women in this research perceived their sexual birth as an amazingly positive experience. When asked to express their feelings around their sexual birth experience they used words such as: integrated, intimate, ecstasy, power, satisfaction, knowing that this is the way it is supposed to be, very sensual, erotic, safe, delicious, elated, pure joy, happiness, grateful, grace, fullness, pride, awe, exhilaration, wholeness, strength, completeness, centered, relaxation, fire in my belly, the word YES!

Delivering the message to other women

Participants in the research expressed their desire to spread the word and educate other women about how birth can be passionate and orgasmic. Beverly:

It changed my life and I wouldn't be doing the work that I am doing if I didn't have this experience. I remember just a few minutes after he was born saying to my midwife "Oh my God I have to tell women they can have orgasms."

Cathy: "I feel that birth is amazing and so sexual, I am so sorry that many women do not go there."

Alex:

I so admire your work, I mean it can't be said enough – women need to be educated about what their body is capable of, and be supported for that. There is not enough that can be said about the importance of support to women in different phases of women's lives. Support is a necessity. The experiences that women have during

childbirth are the experiences that they will carry all their lives and that they will pass on to their daughters.

Connecting Birth and Sexuality

I believe it is time to begin to make the connection between childbirth and sexuality and allow women to fully express their sexuality. Moreover, sexual expression during pregnancy and birth is a great way to help the mother relax and fill her body with love and pleasure-promoting hormones. This might allow her to perceive this time of her life as a time of well being, passion, and ecstasy. The combination of oxytocin, the hormone of love and an endorphin which is considered to be our “reward system” (Odent, 2001) are passed to the baby. Nourishing the baby with this blissful flow of hormones may result in a new generation of happier and content human beings. The message that we can change the face of our culture by changing the practices of how babies are brought to the world is addressed in depth by Michel Odent in *The Scientification of Love*. It is also engraved in the words of one of the fathers of sexology, Wilhelm Reich (1953): “Civilizations will start on the day when the well being of newborns babies will prevail over other considerations.”

Chapter 6

FUTURE RESEARCH

This exploratory research aims to describe, understand, and define women's sexual experiences during childbirth. Many aspects of sexual childbirth are still unknown and this research offers a preliminary jumping off point for further explorations. Further research is needed to understand (a) How large is this phenomenon within the entire population? (b) Who are the women who experience unexpected birthgasm? Do they have unique anatomy that allowed this experience to happen? Is there some correlation between the ability to experience vaginal orgasm and unexpected birthgasms? (c) Are there any possible benefits such as shorter labors, less painful labors or fewer perineal tears to women who tap into their sexuality during childbirth? (d) Are there possible benefits post-partum, such as lower frequencies of postpartum depression and easier recovery? (e) Are there universal benefits to the mother-baby relationship and attachment? Are mothers who are in touch with their sexuality during birth more likely to breastfeed their babies? (f) Does connecting on such a deep level during birth enhance higher levels of intimacy to the couples and allow them to create more balance in their different roles as parents and lovers? (g) Does passionate birth enhance women's self esteem, self perception, and positive body image and therefore enhance their well being? (h) Can every woman prepare herself for a passionate childbirth?

Chapter 7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This research describes women's sexual experiences during childbirth. Two major scenarios emerged while analyzing the data. The terms I have coined to describe them are "Unexpected Birthgasm" and "Passionate Birth".

Unexpected birthgasms were described as surprising orgasms while pushing out or delivering the baby. The unique characteristics of women who experienced them are not fully understood. Unexpected birthgasms occurred during non-medicated births as well as medicated ones, in home birth settings as well as hospitals, and in first births as well as subsequent ones. They occurred without any sexual stimulation or use of fantasy, and were not perceived by the women in this sample as erotic or "sexual" in nature. Whipple et al. (1989) suggested a physiological rationale to such an experience: when the baby's head descends into the birth canal it puts pressure on two important nerve systems: the hypogastric and the pelvic. This can induce orgasms in laboring women.

Passionate birth was experienced by the women in the sample who chose to incorporate their sexuality openly and intentionally in the birth process, and who allowed themselves to fully explore it. They made love, vocalized, kissed passionately, and some of them masturbated to ease the pain. The women who experienced passionate birth prepared for this kind of experience, felt comfortable with their sexuality, and believed that birth and sexuality are interrelated. These women mentioned several factors that allowed them to express their sexuality during the birthing experience:

a) Knowledge and understanding of birth physiology, birth psychology, the birth process, and how sexuality is intertwined with childbirth.

b) Preparation for a sexual birth and a desire to include their sexuality in childbirth.

c) Creating a safe, private, and intimate environment. They chose to give birth at home where they had the freedom to make their own decisions, including who was going to be present in their birth and how private the birth would be.

d) Their partners took an important role in supporting and creating their passionate birth experience.

e) They felt good about their bodies and their sexuality.

f) They accepted the intensity of the contractions and did not experience them as pain.

g) They used sexual stimulation to reduce pain.

h) They experienced birth as part of their sexual exploration and growth as women.

Some of these women felt an increase in their awareness of their bodies, and found that their sexual responsiveness changed after the experience. They might have begun experiencing G-Spot orgasms if they hadn't before. Or they might have begun feeling the effects of their monthly cycles more distinctly.

When asked about their sexuality before their sexual birth experience, more than half of the women in both groups perceived themselves as more sexual than the average woman. The majority of the women experienced and enjoyed vaginal orgasms prior to their sexual birth.

For all the women in the sample, body image played a role in their feeling sexual and attractive after their sexual birth. Some of them felt more womanly, ripe, and

appreciative of their bodies' ability to deliver the baby so beautifully. Others were self-conscious, and felt overweight and unattractive. Nevertheless, the birth experience had a positive effect on their overall self esteem.

Some of the women in this sample experienced their birthgasm as similar to their clitoral orgasms during masturbation or partner sex, while others experienced them as full body orgasms or even transcendental events. Some women referred to their births as one of the most intimate experiences they shared with their partners, and carried this intimate feeling over to their relationships after birth.

All the women in this sample who had non-medicated births were exhilarated about their birth experiences. They wanted to deliver the message to other women, to introduce the option of having a passionate or even orgasmic birth.

The overall contribution of this research is to expand the definition of women's orgasm to include experiences during childbirth. Our society has alienated childbirth and separated it from nature, sex, and women's power and pleasure. Most women are terrified of the idea of giving birth, and cannot even imagine how birth can be connected with their sexuality. Women in this sample stand out not only in their ability to be sexual during their birth experiences, but also in their ability to acknowledge it and talk about it while withstanding the negative messages and beliefs of our culture. While their demographic characteristics such as religious background, cultural upbringing, and place of residence do not stand out as unique or special, women in this study are unique in their sex-positive attitudes before birth. As noted above, more than half of the women described themselves as "more sexual than the average woman," with the majority reporting experiencing vaginal orgasms prior to their sexual birth experience.

Even though this is a small sample of extraordinary women - a sample that does not represent the culture at large - it offers an important lesson to other women. The experiences of the women in this study demonstrate that childbirth and sexuality are interrelated, and that the sexual energy that conceives a baby can be harnessed for helping to bring a baby into the world.

I believe that it is time for women and childbirth professionals to acknowledge the connection between sexuality and childbirth and encourage women to express their sexuality while giving birth. This will add to the flow of love and reward hormones, the oxytocin and endorphins that are naturally released during birth, and will bring babies to a world where ecstatic mothers are eagerly waiting, ready to fall in love.

Table 1**DEMOGRAPHICS**

	Ashley	Faith	Cathy	Beverly
City and State of residence	San Jose, CA	Eugene, OR	Olympic Peninsula, WA (very rural area)	Portland, OR
Age	37	44	54	54
Current relationship status	Married	Cohabiting	Married	Single
Highest grade education level completed	High School	Masters	High school	Post Graduate
Primary ethnic group	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Occupation	Mom and Childbirth Educator	Local community services educator, prenatal counseling, and midwifery.	Midwife	Nurse educator and midwife.
Religious background	Raised Catholic. Practicing	Raised Catholic. Currently neo-pagan.	Raised Christian. Practicing.	Raised Protestant. Converted to Judaism and then converted back to non denominational Christianity.
Number of pregnancies	8	10	10	6
Number of births	5	3	7	3
Where was the birth	Home	Home	Home	Home
Interventions at birth	None	None	None	None
The orgasmic birth was birth number	4	3	6	2
When was the sexual birth?	2003	2000	1991	1985

Table I Continued

	Alex	Janet	Christine	Jennifer
City and State of residence	Vancouver WA	Queensland Australia	Mountain View, CA	Lebanon OH
Age	36	36	35	36
Current relationship status	Married	Married	Married	Married
Highest grade education level completed	Sophomore in college	Tertiary – university degree and diploma	Masters in Education	Masters
Primary ethnic group	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Occupation	Full time mother	Homemaker, previously teacher	Teacher. Now stay at home mom	Homemaker
Religious background	Raised Catholic. Currently mixed Catholicism, Buddhist, and Zen.	Raised Catholic. Currently no religion	Raised Catholic. Currently, not practicing	Raised Christian. Currently not practicing
Number of pregnancies	10	4	2	4
Number of births	4	4	2	2
Where was the birth	#2 - hospital #3 - home	Birthing center	Home	Hospital
Interventions at birth	Prostaglandin gel to begin her third birth	None	None	None
The orgasmic birth was birth number	2 and 3	1	1	1
When was the sexual birth?	2001, 2003	2000	2002	2001

Table I Continued

	Margaret	Sage	May
City and State of residence	Melbourne, Victoria, Australia	Columbus Ohio	Escondido, CA
Age	60	36	55
Current relationship status	Married	Married	Married
Highest grade education level completed	Intermediate	BA	Some college
Primary ethnic group	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Occupation	Volunteer, retired secretary, computer operator, and Israeli dance teacher.	Mom	Works at a group home giving support services– no degree
Religious background	Raised Catholic. Currently Practicing	Raised Catholic. Currently practicing	Raised Jewish. Currently pagan
Number of pregnancies	2	2	3
Number of births	2	2	2
Where was the birth	Hospital	Hospital	Hospital
Interventions at birth	None	Pit, epidural, c-section	None
The sexual birth was birth number	1	1	2
When was the sexual birth?	1970	2002	1978

Appendix A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographics

- ♥ City and State of residence
- ♥ Age
- ♥ Current relationship status
- ♥ Highest grade level completed
- ♥ Primary ethnic group
- ♥ Occupation
- ♥ Religious background
- ♥ Number of pregnancies
- ♥ Number of births
- ♥ Focus on the birth that felt sexual to you - how was the baby conceived?
- ♥ Was this baby planned?

Sexuality when you were a child/teen

- ♥ What kind of messages did you get at home about sexuality?
- ♥ Did you experience childhood sexual abuse, molestation?
- ♥ When did you first experience an orgasm? How did it feel? How did you know that it was an orgasm?

Sexuality a year before you conceived

- ♥ How often did you feel sexual and wanted to have sex?

- ♥ How often did you experience an orgasm? Alone? With partner sex? How do you know that you had an orgasm?
- ♥ Please tell me about your orgasms, where do you feel them? (vaginal, uterine, clitoral, ejaculation, anal, extra genital, throat, all over, emotionally, spiritually).
- ♥ How do you stimulate yourself to orgasm? Where is the focus of stimulation (vaginal? clitoral? anal? breast? fantasy?)
- ♥ Did you experience spontaneous orgasms while you were sleeping? How often?

Sexuality during the pregnancy that preceded the sexual birth

- ♥ How would you describe your sexuality during your pregnancy that preceded the sexual birth experience? Did you experience spontaneous orgasms while you were sleeping? How often?
- ♥ How often did you masturbate?
- ♥ How often did you have orgasms during partner sex?
- ♥ Did you have any tantric experience, practicing sexuality as a spiritual path?
- ♥ Did you practice breathing to enhance sexuality?

Preparation and attitudes towards childbirth

- ♥ Did you have any childbirth preparation?
- ♥ What were your beliefs about childbirth before this birth experience?
- ♥ Did you practice yoga and/or breathing exercises while pregnant?

The birth story – focus on the birth that felt most orgasmic to you

- ♥ Please tell me your birth story in your words
- ♥ Where did you give birth? (home/hospital/birth center)
- ♥ When was the birth?

- ♥ Was your partner/baby's father there with you?
- ♥ Who else attended your birth? How did you feel about the people who were with you when you gave birth?
- ♥ How did you experience the contractions?
- ♥ How long was your labor?
- ♥ Did you have to use any augmentation of labor at any time?
- ♥ What kind of pain management tools did you use? (from epidural to movement, water and different positions)
- ♥ What kind of medical interventions were used?
- ♥ Did you have an episiotomy? Tears? What degree?
- ♥ Were you directed to push? Did you push when you felt the urge to push?
- ♥ In what positions did you push?
- ♥ What was the actual moment of birth like for you?

Thinking back about when you felt sexual arousal and maybe an orgasm during birth, can you tell me the story of that experience?

- ♥ When you think about your childbirth experience what emotions do you feel?
- ♥ What do you feel in your body?
- ♥ What did the experience mean to you?
- ♥ What do you think allowed this experience to happen?
- ♥ When during the birth did you have sexual feelings/arousal/excitement/a rush of sexual energy, etc?
- ♥ In what way did it feel sexual or orgasmic?
- ♥ How did it compare to masturbation or a partner sex experience?

- ♥ How did you feel when sexual feelings and sensation arose?
- ♥ Did you share it with someone in the room? If yes, how did it feel and how did they respond? How did you feel about their response? If no, why, and how did it feel not to share it with anyone else?
- ♥ Did you do something to arouse yourself sexually during childbirth?
- ♥ Did you use fantasy/guided imagery?
- ♥ Were you surprised by the sexual arousal/experience you felt?
- ♥ Did you believe the sexual arousal/experience you felt?
- ♥ Did this experience interfere with the intensity and pain of contractions? In what way?

Sexuality after childbirth

- ♥ How did your sexuality compare before and after childbirth?
- ♥ When did you want to be sexual after the birth?
- ♥ When were you sexual again? Was it alone? With a partner?
- ♥ How did your sexual response compare before and after childbirth?
- ♥ How did your desire compare?
- ♥ How did you feel about yourself as a woman after the sexual birth?

Closure

- ♥ What has it been like talking about your experience?
- ♥ Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY OF HUMAN SEXUALITY

Study Information Sheet

SEXUAL EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN DURING CHILDBIRTH

You are invited to participate in this research study for a Ph.D. thesis. The main purpose of the study is to learn about the sexual experiences of women during childbirth and determine whether, if at all, their sexual childbirth experience influenced their sexuality after childbirth.

INFORMATION

The study will consist of up to 20 interviews with mothers who identified themselves as ones who experienced sexual arousal and/or orgasm during childbirth. The interview will take between 1-2 hours and will be conducted face to face or over the phone. All the interviews will be taped, but the identifying information will be kept separately in a coded and secure file.

During the interview and the questionnaire, you may be asked to discuss or answer questions on the following topics:

- a. Your birth experience;
- b. Romantic relationships;
- c. Sexuality and your body;
- d. Your parenting experience.

You may be contacted in the future to follow up on this study.

BENEFITS

Your contribution will help to capture and understand in depth the experience of women who experience sexual arousal during childbirth. There are no direct benefits to you, but participating in this research will give you an opportunity to share your story and contribute to the advent of knowledge in this field.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your participation in this study is strictly anonymous. Your responses will be treated confidentially and stored securely; only research personnel will have access to them. The interviews do not ask for any data by which you might be identified. If there are remarks by which you might be recognized, they will not be available to anyone outside the research project. Your contact information (email, phone, address, etc.) will be destroyed after contacting you and after conducting and analyzing the information. If you ask for an abstract of the study sent to you via email, your email address will be destroyed after e-mailing the abstract to you. The tapes used to tape the interview will be destroyed after transcribing and analyzing the information.

COMPENSATION

There is no compensation offered for participating in this study.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about this study, you are invited to contact the researcher, Danielle Harel, at 1602 Goldfinch Way, Sunnyvale, CA 94087, E-mail: Danielle@DanielleHarel.com, phone: (408) 469-1989.

If you feel you have not been treated according to the above description, or your rights as a participant in this research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the Office of the Dean, Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, 1523 Franklin Street, San Francisco, CA 94109, phone: (415) 928 1133, E-mail: iashs@iashs.edu.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may refuse to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you may be otherwise entitled.

Information Sheet date: 09/03/06

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