Understanding the Varieties of Sexual Experiences

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**Emotional/Psychological Aspects of Sexuality**

Sexuality is a complex psychological structure which includes some core components. Each component represents a potential range, a spectrum with polarity.

If we look at the components and their polar opposites we discover that most or all of the varieties of sexual experience can be identified by the combinations created by “turning” one or more of the components into its polar opposite while leaving others in their “normal” position.

Here are the psychological components of a sexual experience and their opposites:

**S**afety (S) vs Risk and Danger (RD)

**T**rust (T) vs Invulnerability & Control (IC)

**I**ntimacy (I) vs Distance, Exposure (DE)

**E**nmeshment (E) vs Detachment & Uncaring (DU)

Feeling **L**oved (L) vs Feeling Used or Exploited (FE)

Feeling **U**nique or Special (U) vs Feeling like a thing , object or (TO)

commodity

Feeling **P**leasure (P) vs Feeling Pain, Terror (PT)

Feeling Unashamed and **G**uiltless (G) vs Feeling Humiliation, Shame, (HS)

Punishment or Guilt

**Examples of different combinations of these essential components**

**S IC DE E L U FP HS**

*SAFETY, CONTROL, DISTANCE/EXPOSURE, ENMESHMENT, LOVED, UNIQUE, PAIN, HUMILIATION/GUILT*

*“I love and care about you passionately, but sexual fulfillment for us can never be – we can never be together, but must love in secret and from afar. We must control our passions and emotions and maintain distance, no matter how painful this is.”*

**RD IC I DU L TOC P HS**

*RISK/DANGER, INVULNERABILITY/CONTROL, INTIMACY, DETACHMENT/UNCARING, LOVED, THING/OBJECT, PLEASURE, HUMILIATION, SHAME*

*“Even though it risks my marriage, career, and reputation I feel an enormous guilty pleasure having sex with prostitutes – no one in particular, I don’t really give a damn about them, I just feel so powerful and invincible and in control – it’s a thrill.”*

**S T I E L TOC FP G**

*SAFETY, TRUST, INTIMACY, ENMESHMENT, LOVED, THING/OBJECT, PAIN, UNASHAMED/NO GUILT*

*“I enjoy S & M sex with my lover. We only do this with each other; I wouldn’t want to do it with anyone else because it requires such a high degree of trust. We have strict safety rules. It’s a thrill to feel him treat me like his sex slave and playfully spank me or have rough, rather painful sex with me. I feel good we found this exciting way to be together.”*

**Further comments**

The components may differ for each partner – in the last example above, the woman’s partner may focus on Control rather than Trust, and Pleasure rather than Pain; in fact he may feel exactly opposite to her on ALL the aspects. **Shared experiences (forms) often do not have identical shared meanings.**

**There is also not necessarily a single “best” or preferred way. In general, the left-hand components are seen as culturally appropriate and beneficial, and meet our expectations about what sex should be. Therefore, the more of these are involved, the more there will be harmony between your sexual activity and the accepted standards.**

Conversely, the more the right-hand components of the aspects dominate the pattern, the more your sexual behaviors will be seen as immoral, exploitative, or otherwise negative.

As with any set of choices, there will be exceptional circumstances culturally in which even sexual behavior entirely comprised of right-hand components will become the right choice, even as throwing oneself into the line of fire to protect a child or a President is seen as heroic, not suicide, and killing Osama Bin Laden or Hitler is good rather than an atrocious act of murder.

Anyone exploring their sexuality would be well advised to consider how important each of the components is to them and keep intact those which seem most essential. Those seen as less essential offer the easiest opportunities for exploring variations.

If a person knows themselves to have had a traumatic experience regarding one of the components, they should be aware that the less-culturally accepted polarity there may become a compelling aspect of their sexuality. This is neither necessarily good nor bad, but it does bear cognitive and conscious efforts to sort out whether engaging in sexuality with this dimension is ultimately helpful or hurtful to your psychological health.

Sex is one of the most powerful tools we have as human beings, being capable of remarkably intense and powerful extremes, both positive and negative. As such it is commonly used as a coping tool for placing the power of trauma into a more controllable venue – as a substitute way, an avatar, for dealing with the trauma issues. This can be helpful, but ultimately the trauma issues need to be dealt with on their own. No amount of working things through sexually can substitute for that; trying to do so runs the risk of the trauma never becoming incorporated into one’s psychological reality, which results in a host of difficulties which could otherwise be avoided, as well as preventing full use of the power the trauma brings that empowers positive choices.

Conversely, if you find yourself strongly attracted to a sexual variation and don’t understand why, it is usually worth some exploration. Our actions and choices make sense, so if you can’t make sense of them it may indicate a hidden issue.

Having said that, let me reiterate that there is no rational reason to eliminate any of the possible choices as inherently wrong or bad. Key to that is an overarching principle however: deep respect of those involved for each other. There are necessary limits on BOTH sides of each spectrum. A focus on too much intimacy can blur the necessary individuality of each person, creating demands for sameness. A focus on too much pleasure can lead to pleasure-enhancing techniques which are dangerous, or an inability to enjoy sex if ultimate pleasure levels are not achieved.

Finally, this may serve as a jumping-off point for conversations with a sexual partner regarding the shared experience. Whether to identify the area which may be causing a problem or an area where the experience might be enhanced, discussing the components can lead to more satisfying interactions for all participants.

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